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CG drawing based on 'A Visit to the Witch'
by Edward Frederick Brewtnall, 1882

Our modern conventions tend to view the realms of fairies and witches separately. Witches have been viewed as evil, while fairies are seen as benevolent, cute, and kind. As scholars reevaluate witch trials and the confessions of those accused, we are coming to new conclusions on accused witches. One subject that has been discussed in the academic field of folklore, but has seemingly not seeped into the popular consciousness, is the connection between fairies and witches.



*'The Fairy Dance' - circa 1904,
Robert Alexander Hillingford*

Like so many of our contemporary notions, the image of the fairy is heavily influenced by Victorian representations. The conception of the fairy from previous ages was completely stripped and buried, while the image of childlike, sweet, innocent, and playful sprites was popularized. As an analogy, consider that many have observed a similar phenomenon with angels. Biblical angels are warriors. They are imposing and intimidating figures. The Victorian era stripped angels of their image of strength and imposed a soft, dainty, infantile nature to them. Similarly, fairies had a much different image prior to the Victorian age. They were often seen as dangerous and viewed with suspicion. They could be beautiful or very ugly. Sometimes fairies were construed with other creatures, such as the trows (hideous trollish creatures) of Orkney (Emerick, p19).

Just as the Victorian era influenced the perceptions of the time, the concept of the fairy was altered by trends and cultural movements of previous eras. To be sure, fairy and other lore did (and indeed still does) continue to thrive in the British Isles, but it is difficult to fully understand

the pre-Christian conception of these creatures due to the islands' very early conversion. In his heavily researched book called *Elves, Wights, and Trolls*, Kvedulf Gundarsson mentions that Scandinavian *alfs* (from whence we get the English word elf) and the Celtic *sidhe* were both initially related to the Neolithic practice of the worship of the dead buried in mounds. He says that at the time of the late Stone Age "the material cultures [of the Norse and Celts] were virtually identical: it is possible that the *sidhe* and some of the *alfs* may once have been related" however as time progressed and they became separate and distinct figures, they developed different connotations within each respective culture. Within folkloric traditions "Nordic mound-*alfs* feel welcoming to their kin; the *sidhe* feel indifferent" (Gundarsson, 2). He goes on to say that while "some of the characteristics and dangers of *sidhe* and *alfs* may be the same... *alfs* are much better-disposed towards humankind... they are far less inclined towards casual malice or deliberate entrapment than are the *sidhe*" (Gundarsson, 3). However "in later texts, the *alfs* often appear as malicious beings" (Gundarsson, 59).

The late sagas Gundarsson goes on to mention are written after conversion to Christianity, so we see a shift in the way *alfs* are viewed by the Norse during pre and post conversion periods. It stands to reason a similar shift would have occurred in the Celtic conception of such beings. The fact that Christianity came to Britain very early means that beliefs in these spirits would have been altered much earlier than in areas where indigenous beliefs continued to flourish for centuries.

We do know that local folklore and customs were allowed to continue under initial conversion to Catholicism. In fact, there are records that demonstrate the tactic of the Church was to simply whitewash pagan customs with a Christian veneer. A letter from Pope Gregory I to Abbot Mellitus in the late 6th century directly instructs English church leaders to keep the

pagan houses of worship in their original place, simply remove the idols and replace them with relics of saints:

Tell Augustine that he should be no means destroy the temples of the gods but rather the idols within those temples. Let him, after he has purified them with holy water, place altars and relics of the saints in them. For, if those temples are well built, they should be converted from the worship of demons to the service of the true God...

Note the use of the word "demons" to describe the indigenous European gods; we will circle back to this. Gregory I goes on to explain that pagan holy days and customs should be continued but with minor alterations:

Further, since it has been their custom to slaughter oxen in sacrifice, they should receive some solemnity in exchange. Let them therefore, on the day of the dedication of their churches, or on the feast of the martyrs whose relics are preserved in them, build themselves huts around their one-time temples and celebrate the occasion with religious feasting. They will sacrifice and eat the animals not any more as an offering to the devil, but for the glory of God... (Gregory I)

So here we see two things that are relevant to understanding the connection between fairies and the devil: the old gods are equated with demons in the eyes of the church, and folk religion (a fusion of the old beliefs with the new) has been allowed to carry on under Catholic domination.

Gundarsson also discusses the conflation of elves with demons. He says that "as the English grew further away from their native culture and Latin education spread... the 'demonic' terminology came to define the aelf-word to some degree." There was no word for

or concept of demons to the Anglo-Saxons, so “*aelf* was probably as close as the Anglo-Saxon language and culture could come to expressing the sense of a supernatural being which could interfere directly with human consciousness” (Gundarsson, 69). Ergo, when the new belief system was placed over the old, the two systems became blurred.

When we move forward in time to the Reformation, however, we see another shift in popular belief. In his paper published in the academic journal “Folklore” in 1921, “Mingling of Fairy and Witch Beliefs,” J.A. MacCulloch (author of the still popular book *The Religion of the Ancient Celts*) discusses the view of fairies held by Scottish witch hunters and demonologists during and after the Reformation. Although the Inquisition was a decidedly Catholic endeavor,

MacCulloch points out that it “never reached Scotland” and that pre-Reformation “trials for sorcery were few in number... Regular trials for witchcraft came in with the Reformation.”

Sadly, things that “were matters of everyday experience in Europe,” i.e. elements of folk religion, which were “never in question before the beginning of the sixteenth century” were now illegal and doggedly hunted by prosecutors (or persecutors) of witches (pp. 233-234).

To summarize the notions of fairies held by the new Protestant world view, he says “Fairyland and its denizens had become a real part of Satan’s kingdom of darkness” (p231). In other words, common folk beliefs of fairies had become combined with Christian beliefs of Satan, hell, and demons. Therefore, any person found to be communicating with a fairy (a folk



Joseph Noel Paton, ‘Puck and Fairies’ - from *A Midsummer Nights Dream*, 1850

occurrence that had been common for centuries if not longer) was suddenly considered Satanic.

Mainland Europe's Calvinism, called "Calvin's gloomy creed" by MacCulloch, had been adopted with great zeal in Scotland (p234). However, Scotland had zealots of her own pushing puritanical ideologies which bordered on obsession. John Knox was a well-known hunter of witches. Ironically the fervor became so intense that no one was safe, and he himself was accused (McQuiston, 23). But one of the most adamant of them all was the famous King James. Known as King James I when he inherited the English throne, he was previously titled James VI in Scotland. When monarchs make religious zealotry a component of their reign, it generally translates into the suffering of their subjects. Thus James VI's obsession with witches and demons brought the terror of witch hunting to Scotland.

Before commissioning his famous King James Bible, James VI literally wrote the book on demons. He read the many other books on demonology available at the time before penning his own "Demonologie." His volume very clearly demonstrates "the tendency to make fairyland a province of Satan's kingdom" (MacCulloch, 239). James apparently had an obsession with witches, as he was known to attend witch trials and made their persecution a hallmark of his reign. James discusses the evils of fairies (spelled "Phairie" in his text) in Chapter V of his "Demonologie":

That fourth kinde of spirites, which by the Gentiles was called Diana, and her wandring court, and amongst vs was called the Phairie (as I tould you) or our good neighboures, was one of the sortes of illusiones that was rifest in the time of Papietrie: for although it was holden odious to Propheisie by the devill, yet whome these kinde of Spirites carryed awaie, and informed, they were thought to be sonsiest and of best life.

He writes in question and answer form, and goes on to ask why witches who interact with fairies ought to be put to death:

But how can it be then, that sundrie Witches have gone to death with that confession, that they have been transported with the Phairie to such a hill, which opening, they went in, and there saw a faire Queene, who being now lighter, gave them a stone that had sundrie vertues, which at sundrie times hath bene produced in judgement?

I say that, even as I said before of that imaginary ravishing of the spirite foorth of the bodie. For may not the devil object to their fantasie, their senses being dulled, and as it were a sleepe, such hilles & houses within them, such glistering courts and traines, and whatsoever such like wherewith he pleaseth to delude them. And in the meane time their bodies being senselesse, to convey in their hande any stone or such like thing, which he makes them to imagine to have received in such a place (James VI, p74).

James insists that any person's experiences in fairyland are delusions of the devil. Having willingly entered into an interaction with the devil is grounds for execution. Ergo, having a conversation with the fairies (albeit in a dream or hallucination, or sometimes even an odd looking stranger could be thought to be a fairy man) was punishable by death. This is the political climate of the late 16th and early 17th centuries in Scotland, and we can see that it is a complete reversal of the approach taken by the Roman Catholic Church during the previous millennium.

Another spirit often entwined with fairies were familiars. Emma Wilby, a modern scholar who has dedicated intensive study to Scottish and English witch trials, explains that fairies were often confused with witch's familiars in her article "The Witch's Familiar and the Fairy in Early Modern England and Scotland." She asserts that "the evidence suggests that for those with a particularly obscure grasp of Christian

teaching the cosmos would have been peopled by a medley of supernatural figures, of both Christian and pre-Christian origin, with little or no discrimination being made between them...” (p301). In other words, since the general public was largely illiterate and only knew bits and pieces of religion based on what was heard in church, the common people’s folk beliefs were a mixture of the old and new. But, as Wilby explains, it seems both commoners as well as church leaders and elites had no conception of which beliefs were old and which were new during this period. In effect, it was a confusing mess of pre-Christian religion becoming distorted and misinterpreted by a now Christian population who clearly did not understand either religion very well.

Today, we see the image of both witches and fairies changing yet again. The neo-pagan and pagan re-constructionist movements are making strides to revive (or re-invent) the indigenous religions of our ancestors. There is a renewed interest in understanding folklore that involves

communing with nature spirits. These movements as well as scholarship in the academic arena are re-shaping the conventional view of witches. We now understand that accused witches were often the innocent victims of political motives or jealous neighbors. However, there is strong evidence that at least some of the accused were people carrying on traditions of healing, herbalism, and possibly shamanic practices from the pre-Christian era. Communing with the spirits of the land and ancestors is a practice almost universal in indigenous world cultures. Fairies and other nature spirits were a remnant from a distant past – a past that threatened the new Protestant world view. Protestant reformers were absolutely correct in their assessment that Catholicism had allowed elements of paganism to continue. And from a folklorist’s perspective, thank goodness it did! A puritanical world devoid of imagination, stories of fairies, elves, and brownies seems like a very grim world, indeed.

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‘The Magic Circle’
John William Waterhouse, 1885