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Abstract

Discusses various theories for the origins of fairies (and tales about them) in myth, history, and religion.

Additional Keywords

Faerie—Origins; Fairy tales—Origins; Fairy tales—Relation to Myth; Bg Callahan

LAND OF FAERIE:

THE DISAPPEARING MYTH

by Caroline Geer

So an age ended, and its last deliverer died
In bed, grown idle and unhappy; they were safe:
The sudden shadow of a giant's enormous calf
Would fall no more at dusk across their lawns outside.

They slept in peace: in marshes here and there no doubt
A sterile dragon lingered to a natural death,
But in a year the spoor had vanished from the heath:
A kobold's knocking in the mountain petered out.

Only the sculptors and the poets were half sad,
And the pert retinue from the magician's house
Grumbled and went elsewhere. The vanquished powers
were glad

To be invisible and free; without remorse
Struck down the sons who strayed into their course,
And ravished the daughters, and drove the fathers mad.

A New Age
W.H. Auden

Faerie has been diversely defined, sought after, disbelieved, and mocked; nevertheless, it pervades not a small part of mankind's earliest folklore. Its magic lingers here and there even in our time, though as faintly as a glimmer of light on a gray sea. Unfortunately, fairy stories have been relegated in the main part to children in the form of nursery tales. Yet we must ask what is written in these fairy tales, and is something there that can be labeled true Faerie?

In turning to *Funk and Wagnall's Standard Dictionary of Folklore*, one finds "fairy" defined as a term used to distinguish a particular supernatural being; or more specifically from the Middle English root, it means either simply "enchantment," or the dwelling place of enchanted beings or even the "collective inhabitants of such a land: these latter should properly be called *fays*."¹ The Celts seem to be responsible for the idea of "communal fairies," probably because they envisioned their fairies as dwelling in hills, or mounds. There are, certainly, other concepts of "fairy;" however, in order for the scope of this paper to be realistic, the discussion will be confined to English fairy lore, and that specifically dealing with that tradition and legend which borders upon myth. The origin of this concept of fairy, and of mythology in this sense also, has led to various contradicting theories. According to Herbert Skinner in *Readings in Folklore*, there appear to be at least four schools of thought concerning the advent of the supernatural into legend and saga: 1) through the Euhemerists who believed Faerie was a legend begun in fact but exaggerated through the oral tradition; 2) through those who maintain that pagan mythology is but a corruption of the "true religion originally revealed to man;" 3) through others who feel that the figures of myth are symbols, though there is no agreement on the specific meaning; and 4) through more modern "critics of great eminence" who maintain that the figures of myth are merely the symbolization of the physical forces of nature.² There is a partial truth in all of these statements, and it seems that a part of each viewpoint must be found in the final syncretic definition. J.R.R. Tolkien's viewpoint would fit most nearly in the second group who feel that pagan mythology is a corruption, or at least a distortion, of Truth. And Stith Thompson, though he does not feel that it is "safe to posit any single origin" for the mythology "even of a particular people,"³ does agree that myth and fairy tale "continually flow into each other."⁴

Tolkien, however, asserts that "history often resembles 'myth,' because they are both ultimately of the same stuff."⁵ That "stuff" must be reality, or the truth that strikes us when we recognize something as truly real, even though it may seem to be highly improbable, given our present circumstances.

Almost every source one may consult on the subject of fairy tales, except Tolkien's "On Fairy-Stories", refers eventually to our "primitive and savage ancestors" as the originators of such tales, and even mythology in general. And often, such as in MacLeod Yearsley's *The Folklore of Fairy-Tales*, these tales are referred to as the childhood of fiction, or stories from mankind's childhood.⁶ This viewpoint offers definite problems to a thoughtful scholar such as Tolkien. Mankind has certainly developed both technically and scientifically since prehistoric times; yet it is only in the last four hundred years or so that it has become almost a necessity for a man to specialize in a certain field because the quantity of knowledge available is so great that one man can no longer conceivably know, much less understand, everything there is to know. Tolkien interjects this query, "But do we really know much about these 'naked ancestors' except that they were certainly not naked? Our fairy-stories, however old certain elements in them may be, are certainly not the same as theirs. Yet if it is assumed that we have fairy-stories because they did, then probably we have history, geography, poetry, and arithmetic because they liked these things too, as far as they had yet separated the many branches of their general interest in everything."⁷ Modern culture may not be so sophisticated as one might like to believe, despite the harm such a thought might bring to our cultural ego.

Perhaps it is like chasing the wind to try to attach an exact origin onto fairy-tales. Such questions as, "When did the Land of Faerie become a part of our world; a part and yet still apart?" continue to persist in our thoughtful consideration. Stith Thompson has suggested that "the ultimate origin of nearly all folktales and myths must remain a mystery. There is of course nothing mystical about it: it is merely impossible to recapture the needed facts."⁸ "Impossible" here seems a bit harsh. Perhaps we have access to the facts but do not desire to follow where they may lead us because of our own prejudice concerning man's origin. On the whole, speculation seems to center in only two camps. One side asserts that fairies are identical or similar to the dead;⁹ the other side counters that they are figures in whom is preserved the memory of the conquered inhabitants of England.¹⁰ Christina Hole proposes in *English Folklore* that "these people [fairies] were small and dark, the men being about five feet five inches or less, and the women shorter. They lived in round huts, whose floors were sunk two or three feet below ground level, and which, when covered with turf, looked very like hillocks or green mounds. Their culture was primitive, and successive waves of taller and more advanced invaders had little difficulty in disposing them." These peoples' mode of living gives us some insight into how they became associated with fairy mounds or spirits from the dead. Yearsley is a little more straightforward in his analysis as he deplors "the absurdity of depicting fairies as tiny people with butterfly wings. [It] is rendered the more ridiculous, especially as the fays of Celtic folklore are of normal height. This does not, however, invalidate the theory that the dwarfish goblins, elves, and gnomes may have been derived from a smaller race of conquered aboriginals."¹¹ Both speculations are plausible and possible. It is also not unlikely that fairies may be embodiments of fallen or dethroned gods; especially since fairies on the whole are depicted as being benevolent

toward men, aside from the accounts of their revengefulness in response to man's provocation. Yearsley further observes that the northern races have their *White Elves*, who are friendly to man, and their *Black Elves*, who are the dwarfs and trolls of the hills and mounds.¹² It seems plausible, according to Mody Boatwright, that since there is a distinction between the good and the evil, there exists a real quality of Faery that has its roots deep in mankind's consciousness.¹³ The roots for the Land of Faery may even be in Eden itself; and if so, the creatures may indeed be angels. Mankind, especially after the event that closed the gates of Eden permanently to him, would remember angels, since they are always in the company of God as well as, according to the Bible, "ministering spirits" to men.⁴ In addition, those angels who rebelled against God and followed Lucifer worked evil in the world among men, of which mankind has become increasingly aware since his own downfall. This is not to suggest that such roots are the ultimate origin of both fairies and their land; it is merely offered as another alternative based on several parallels found in history, including biblical history.

In looking at some of the qualities of the Land of Faerie, we find that 1) it is usually located underground, 2) it is outside the realm of time, or at least, it is controlled separately from our own time, 3) it is organized in a tribal system much as man's organizational society, 4) it is a land of wealth, both in cattle and metals or jewels, and 5) its inhabitants, fairies, frequent particular spots more than other spots though they are not bound to any one place such as ghosts purportedly are.¹⁵ Fairies are moral beings, and in dealing with them men are warned to always be honest. There appear to be many instances of interchange between the fairies and mankind. Fairies often require the aid of midwives, they abduct maidens, and they even exchange babies. They also reward those men generously who come to their aid, and accordingly punish them for breaking the laws of Faery when men are so foolish as to intrude. However, in keeping with the text of this discussion, the true Fairy-Story concerns mankind's adventures in the Realm of Faerie, rather than fairies' adventures in the human realm. Yearsley observes that "in many stories the hero who visits the fairy kingdom is warned against tasting the food offered to him there, lest he become subject to the fairy power, and so impotent to leave it." We do not seem to have any such power to detain fairies who wander into our world. Sidney Hartland agrees with Yearsley and states further that "he who enters Fairyland and partakes of fairy food is spell-bound: he cannot return—at least for many years, perhaps forever—to the land of men."¹⁶

However, there are stories of those privileged few who have ventured freely into the world of Faerie and back again. The two worlds appear to exist simultaneously, though not in the same context of time nor even of space—the one being finite and always visible; the other, infinite and usually invisible. The definitive establishment of the real existence of Faerie, i.e., where it has being, is not one of the objectives of this paper. We are here more concerned with the effect of Faerie's existence on our world-view, and in this respect, we are dealing more with tradition than literature.

In the Land of Faerie, magic plays a definite part. But because it is assumed to be present, and accepted seriously, though not always openly remarked, we will not delve deeply into this aspect of the Land of Faerie. We may just notice in passing, however, the effect of the presence of magic in the Fairy-Story. It brings an aura to the tale which one immediately recognizes as belonging to Faerie—a special veil that reveals just enough, and no more. Tolkien observes in his essay that "fantasy, the making or glimpsing of Other-worlds, was the heart of the desire of Faerie."¹⁷ Fantasy in this sense is the positive, constructive exertion of imagination within the bounds assigned it. Tolkien continues this thought by stating, "For creative Fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it... Fantasy remains a human right: we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker."¹⁸ In Faerie, we seem to see things for the first time, or in a fresh light. The Adventurer in Faerie never

tires of the beauty there, for Beauty is certainly a part of that Land also, even a part of its very being. In Tolkien's own words, "Fantasy is made out of the Primary world, but a good craftsman loves his material, and has a knowledge and feeling for clay, stone and wood which only the art of making can give... And actually fairy stories deal largely, or (the better ones) mainly, with simple or fundamental things, untouched by Fantasy, but these simplicities are made all the more luminous by their setting. For the story-maker who allows himself to be 'free with' Nature can be her lover not her slave. It was in fairy-stories that I first divined the potency of words, and the wonder of things, such as stone, and wood, and iron; tree and grass; house and fire; bread and wine."¹⁹ It is in this sense that Faerie flows into myth. C.S. Lewis elaborates on myth in his essay "Myth Became Fact" in the same vein as Tolkien's discussion of fantasy. Lewis states, "In the enjoyment of a great myth we come nearest to experiencing as a concrete what can otherwise be understood only as an abstraction. What flows into you from the myth is not truth but reality (truth is always about something, but reality is that about which truth is), and therefore, every myth becomes the father of innumerable truths on the abstract level... It is not, like truth, abstract; nor is it like direct experience, bound to the particular."²⁰ So in this sense, in a true Fairy-Story, we see and experience clearly what is only vague to us otherwise. We become keenly aware of an order and dignity about things; we enjoy intimacy with animals and other living things; we come away in awe and wonder and find more significance in each day for having participated in Faerie. That joy is another essential element of Faerie, and we enjoy it partly because somewhere within us there is a longing for more intimacy with the beasts, living creatures other than humans.

Fairy-Stories have come to us from pre-history. Even the Arthurian legends of the early Middle Ages have elements of antiquity within them that we recognize as Faerie. Perhaps in the story-telling of old, men dreamed of and longed for the time before the spoiling of creation. Yet almost as soon as they were written down, the stories of Faerie began to fade. Man's advancing technology produced iron. A fairy spell could be broken with iron, and later the presence of steel took on the same quality of spell-breaking. Technology could break the magic of Faerie. Boatwright asserts that "if myth functions in primitive cultures, it should also flourish today."²¹ He is at least partially correct. However, that part of myth which is Faerie cannot exist in conjunction with machines. All modern tales in the tradition of Faerie "revert" as it were to an ancient time and place, before machines dominated our lives. The modern antithesis of Faerie may be Science Fiction, which does not exist without machines. Yet as is true with much of Science Fiction, Faerie is but a shadow of reality—the myth that reveals things as they might be rather than things as they are. For example, Lewis pinpoints a particular myth that became a part of our history, "the old myth of the Dying God, without ceasing to be myth, comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history. It happens—at a particular date, in a particular place, followed by definable historical consequences. We pass from a Balder, dying nobody knows when or where, to a historical Person crucified (it is all in order) under Pontius Pilate. By becoming fact it does not cease to be myth: that is the miracle... What became Fact was a Myth, that it carries with it into the world of Fact all the properties of a myth. God is more than a god, not less; Christ is more than Balder, not less... 'Parallels' and 'Pagan Christs'...ought to be there—it would be a stumbling block if they weren't... For this is the marriage of heaven and earth: Perfect Myth and Perfect Fact: claiming not only our love and our obedience, but also our wonder and delight, addressed to the savage, the child, and the poet in each one of us no less than to the moralist, the scholar, and the philosopher."²² Faerie, rather than a primitive form of man's literary development, is more the creation of child-like innocence through the joy of the human creature close to the earth and to his Maker and full of longing for a lost intimacy whose restoration has been promised. Such an attitude of wonder and delight is almost a requisite for the right understanding and discovery of Faerie. Deceit never found a way into Faerie, though there was always mischief. And in the future, the childish

purity of men's hearts alone will save Faerie from complete oblivion. In this sense, mankind has a power over Faerie that its magic cannot combat. Just as Iron could break a fairy spell long ago, so in modern times man's technological progress can forever keep Faerie invisible, destroying it through forgetfulness. With the loss of Faerie, mankind would lose a precious perspective on life. In Tolkien's words, "We may indeed be older now, in so far as we are heirs in enjoyment or in practice of many generations of ancestors in the arts. In this inheritance of wealth there may be a danger of boredom or of anxiety to be original, and that may lead to a distaste for fine drawing, delicate pattern, and "pretty" colours, or else to mere manipulation and over-elaboration of old material, clever and heartless... Before we reach such states, we need recovery... This recovery fairy-stories help us to make. In that sense only a taste for them may make us, or keep us, childish."²³

An encouraging step closer to us is the fairly recent tale by Peter S. Beagle entitled *The Last Unicorn*. Near the beginning of the story, the unicorn reasons to herself in effort to understand why men can no longer see her (one must remember that unicorns never die and she has been relating to mankind in one way or another for many centuries). "How can it be?" she wondered. "I suppose I could understand it if men had simply forgotten unicorns or if they had changed so that they hated all unicorns now and tried to kill them when they saw them. But not to see them at all, to look at them and see something else—what do they look like to one another, then? What do trees look like to them, or real horses, or their own children?"²⁴ Perhaps a reawakening is on the horizon for mankind, much to our childish delight.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, ed. Maria Leach (Funk and Wagnall Publishing Co., Inc., 1972), pp. 363-65.

² Herbert M. Skinner, *Readings in Folklore* (New York: American Book Co., 1893), pp. 7-8.

³ Stith Thompson, "Myth and Folktales," *Myth: A Symposium*, ed. Thomas A. Seboek (Bloomington and London: Indiana Univ. Press, 1971), p. 170.

⁴ Thompson, "Myth and Folktales," p. 174.

⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), p. 30.

⁶ MacLeod Yearsley, *The Folklore of Fairy-Tale* (London: Watts and Co., 1924; reissued Detroit, Michigan: Singing Tree Press, 1968), p. 16.

⁷ Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," pp. 39-40.

⁸ Thompson, p. 176.

⁹ Yearsley, pp. 3-5, 9; and Edwin Sidney Hartland, *The Science of Fairy Tales* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1925), p. 42.

¹⁰ Yearsley, p. 11; and Christina Hole, *English Folklore* (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1940), p. 126.

¹¹ Yearsley, p. 234.

¹² Yearsley, p. 6.

¹³ Mody Boatright, "On the Nature of Myth," *Mody Boatright, Folklorist: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Ernest B. Speck (Austin and London: Univ. of Texas Press, 1973), p. 110.

¹⁴ Bible, Hebrews 1:14.

¹⁵ Hole, p. 125.

¹⁶ Yearsley, p. 14; and Hartland, p. 336.

¹⁷ Tolkien, p. 41.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 55.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 59.

²⁰ C.S. Lewis, "Myth Became Fact," *God in the Dock*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1970), p. 66.

²¹ Boatright, p. 107.

²² Lewis, pp. 66-67.

²³ Tolkien, pp. 56-57.

²⁴ Peter S. Beagle, *The Last Unicorn* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1968), p. 9.

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