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TEXT EDITION

Editions or translations of primary texts with scholarly apparatus of annotations and introduction.

Of Fairies: An Excerpt from a Seventeenth-Century Magical Manuscript

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Abstract

Bodleian MS Douce 116, dating to the seventeenth century, provides us with a passage detailing beliefs about fairies written by an anonymous author. This article presents the text of the passage, along with commentary on the manuscript and a comparison of its typology of fairies with those in other period sources.

Introduction

The search for early modern beliefs in fairies, elves, and other beings intermediary between humans and angels one recent author has said, leads us to ‘a nymph-haunted forest pool, reed-bordered and shallow’, largely constituted of ‘allusions, illustrative examples, metaphors, [and] asides’ (Ostling 2017, 2). These sources, ranging from cheap pamphlets to trial records to theatrical productions to works of religious polemic, have provided insights into a range of beliefs and uses, including the correlation of fairy appearances with major life transitions and personal loss (Purkiss 2000, 85-115), their role as successors to the spirit helpers of shamanic cultures (Wilby 2005), and their usage in the theatrical critique of gender and class norms (Buccola 2006). Yet, as Ronald Hutton notes in his own exploration, this recent renewal of scholarly attention has not been accompanied by the discovery of new sources that expand our knowledge of the period (Hutton 2014, 1137). Further, contemporary sources that address—instead of allude to—such beliefs are rare, as are those in which the purported author

and transmitters are sympathetic to these beliefs, rather than seeing them as cause for polemics, mockery, or condemnation.

Works on magic involving fairies floresce from around the mid sixteenth to the seventeenth centuries (Klaassen 2012, 175–76). On occasion, such magical operations appear in works printed in Britain, including ~~the~~ the *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* and the spurious ‘Fourth Book’ of Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486-1535), Reginald Scot’s (c.1538-1599) *Discoverie of Witchcraft*, and the 1665 edition of Scot’s work that expanded its collection of magical sources, by an anonymous editor known as ‘Anti-Scot’ (Agrippa von Nettesheim 1651, 450; Agrippa von Nettesheim 1655, 68–69; Scot 1584, 401–10; Scot 1665, 281. Beyond these are a wide selection of manuscripts on the topic of ritual magic which include operations that occasionally overlap with the contents of the printed editions, but mostly provide a wealth of material not found therein (Bain 2012; Klaassen and Bens 2013; Harms 2018). Such manuscripts have not gone entirely unnoticed; notably, Katharine Briggs herself recognized their significance in forming a picture of early modern attitudes toward these beings (Briggs 1953; 1959, 99–116, 248–61). Nonetheless, a closer examination of this and other texts might provide us with new insights into those attitudes.

The following excerpt, ‘Of Fairies’, comes from a manuscript at the Bodleian Library, Douce 116, part of a collection left to the library by Francis Douce (1757-1834), an antiquary, editor, and former Keeper of Manuscripts at the British Museum. Robert Cross Smith (1795-1832), the first of the astrologers who published under the name ‘Raphael’ (Howe 1964), inserted two leaves in 1825, and the work might have passed to him from the occultist and author Ebenezer Sibley (1751-c.1799). Based upon the hand and the presence of material from the *Fourth Book of Occult Philosophy* of 1655 (Agrippa von Nettesheim 1655), the manuscript can be reliably dated to the latter half of the seventeenth century. The work is a magical miscellany, covering the days and hours of the angels and planets, magical remedies for different maladies, calls to spirits in crystals, and other similar operations, along with astrological and alchemical procedures. Two hands, most likely one eighteenth- and one nineteenth-century, have made minor amendments to the text, but the section reproduced below is free of their markings (Pope 2013). Elsewhere the work includes operations to call spirits with fairy names such as ‘Oberion’ and ‘Sybilla’, indicating that our passage may signify more than an academic interest (Pope 2013, 134-36, 174-78).

The compiler of the manuscript took this excerpt from an anonymous treatise written by an educated individual interested in fairies and keen to prove that they were fallen angels and not a separate species of people, contrary to the position of authorities such as Girolamo

Cardano, Agrippa von Nettesheim, ‘Anti-Scot’, and the Reverend Kirk (Cardano 2013, 2: 957–58; Kirk 2001; Scot 1665, 2: 56–59; Pócs 2017). Our author discusses his conversations with a man known to speak with the fairies, whom he consulted in order to gather information to bolster his point. At other points, he provides charms and remedies for those who believe the fairies have stricken them. Based upon internal evidence, the passage in question appears to have been taken from a longer work, or multiple works, dealing with magical remedies for fairy-induced illnesses. For example, we have references to procedures— including the ‘measure of the staff’ and a prayer—not present in the manuscript.

Given that the text includes mentions of the Mass and a call to the Trinity in Latin, we might ask whether the author could have been Catholic. Such a determination is quite difficult. On occasion, a manuscript of seventeenth-century magic does make minor amendments to account for Protestant doctrine or worldview, but for the most part the rituals and procedures remain consistent with pre-Reformation practices (Klaassen 2012, 169–70). Given the anonymous nature of many of these manuscripts, the connection between Catholic terms and the copyists’ beliefs remains uncertain. If we examine the magical literature of other periods, however (e.g. Shandruk 2012 for Hellenistic Egypt), we find that the usage in magic of names and practices from one faith does not preclude magicians or clients of other faiths.

One particular aspect of the fairies described herein stands out: their subdivision into the categories of white, black, red, and green. This brings to mind the account given of the interrogation of the cunning-man John Walsh (or Welsh) of Dorset on 20 August 1566. Before the commissary of the Bishop of Exeter, Walsh claimed to have dealings with white, green, and black fairies, with the latter being the most dangerous (Anon. 1566; critical edition of the text in Gibson 2000).

Another contemporary reference to fairies falling into categories based upon colour appears in William Camden’s *Britannia* (first published in 1586), in its section describing the land and cultures of Ireland. One passage refers to a cunning-woman’s charm used when a person has fallen ill after falling down. The incantation refers to ‘a nymphis sylvestribus, albis, rufis, nigris, & c.’ or as rendered in the English translation, ‘from . . . the wilde wood-fayries, white redde, blacke, & c.’ (Camden 1586, 523; Camden 1610, [section 2]: 147). The Latin does not give a source, but the English translation refers to one ‘I. Good’, an Oxford-educated priest who taught at Limerick around 1566 (Camden 1610, [section 2]: 140). This seems to refer to William Good, who corresponds in every detail save the first initial to this description, including his teaching at a school in Limerick in 1565 (McCoog 1996, 63–65; McCoog 2017).

The four-fold division of fairies, with two categories bearing the labels of ‘aery’ and ‘tarrestiall’, calls to mind the treatise *De Nymphis, sylvanis, pygmaeis, salamandris, & gigantibus, & c.* (Of nymphs, wood spirits, pygmies, salamanders, and giants, etc.) attributed to the unorthodox sixteenth-century Swiss physician Paracelsus. Paracelsus’ description of four categories of spirits, each corresponding to one of the classical elements—air, earth, fire, and water—was so influential that the doctrine of ‘elementals’ is still prevalent in mysticism and occultism today. It should be noted, however, that the earliest mention of Paracelsus’ work comes with its first publication in Silesia in 1566, the same year as John Walsh’s interrogation in Dorset and the year after Good’s teaching at Limerick began. It is possible that Paracelsus’ influence might have led to later refinement of the system outlined therein, whether by expansion to four categories or the attribution of some categories of fairies to particular elements. If Paracelsus did have an impact, the idea that these were some sort of intermediate creatures and not fallen angels seems to have fallen by the wayside (Sigerist 1941).

The Text

The text below maintains the spelling, capitalization, and punctuation of the original, as closely as it can be followed. Abbreviations have been expanded for ease of reading, and letters in brackets added when the meaning would be obscure otherwise.

Of fairies

But to come to the purpose concerning those Creatures, which common peoples lyke, thus of what nature & condition they be, & also what qualitys they have, hereper^o shall appeare, therefore know this, that first they were created all things of God, & having once sinned with the prince of pride, both he & they were cast down to the earth, the chief Captain went before, & they followed & as it seemeth their fault, being not so great as the rest of the punishment is the lesse, truly they are spirits & not such as some men & women imagined them to bee, who thought them to be some kind of people, which live here on earth, who are begotten & borne one of another, & eat & drink as we doe, & when they dy are buried in the earth as we are; now surely these people are much deceived in them, who call them in the name fairi-folk, which live in an

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Hereper: hereby
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isle or country of themselves having a King & Queen to governe them, who are amongst us many times invisible, & steal meat from the Butchers, bread from the Bakerr, which th[r]ough their pollicy° cannot be missed, & that faire women have been delivered of children in mens houses, which all indeed are but meer illusions, deceptions, vises, they say they can enrich a man whom they effect° & have power to hurt & kill whosoever displeaseth them, for which they came into any place w[h]ere they thought fairies use[d] to be, as gardens, meadows, w[h]ere green rings of grasse were many green trases are to be seen, which they call the fairie bord, then you used to say these words, with your leave, or with your leave fair ladys, give me leave safe to goe, & safe to come, much more you may perceiv when they still put in this prayer, which is to be said 9 times together with the measure of the staff as aforesaid for the health & help of them, that are strok therewith.

Pollicy: trick or stratagem

Effect: have affection for

If the faire° fall have stroken N. M. Almighty God bless him, now faire be they, and foule be we, & that Fathers & Mothers blessing be with them, & the sweet King of faires lead them, & the Queen of faires feed them, I leave (or lay) the same both more or lesse with all the virtus of the Masse, now God the father, God the sonne, & God the holy Ghost, 3 persons & one true God in trinity take this same grief & disease away from thee N. Amen, for sweet St. Charity.

Faire: unclear - fairy or fair?
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Furder understand 4 kind of fairies, the white which are aery & have sometime power to make men sickly & unhealthfull, yet nevertheless with them is little hurt to us; the black are tarrestiall & very malignant & deadly, for who are stroken with them doe never recover, this kind seldom or never shew themselves about the earth: the red fairis are not so evill, yet they have power to hurt & kill, whosoever they strike is hardly cured, & that per° great paines per the help of God, for they have been seen wand[e]ring up & down in severall places, but always very sadly without any myrth: The green faires doe commonly frequent houses, gardens, green meddows & such places having power to doe good & evill to men or women as to enrich or to imperish, to hurt thoes offending them, but not so much as the former, who are stroken of these per Gods grace being taken in time are ever curable, finally these fairies which

Per: by or through

some call Elves or nymphs are clean spirits desiring to be in houses, or else w[h]ere, that are kept with cleanly people, to such they give Gifts of rewards which in respect of them brush, sweep, & garnish their roomes, setting faire & fresh water in place with faire fyer light, many times, they leave them mony which they find on the harth of the chimney, or in their shoes or other places, as it hath been reported, they are very familiar with whom they shew themselves to, & very desirous of their company, filling their ear with rare musick, they are to shew themselves with sweet & mild behaviour, with Dances, much myrth, their statue like little children most beautified & faire, using many illusions farther a certain friend of mine, who in his youth was much conversant with them, & beloved of them, signified unto me as farre as I could perceive, that their stature was about 5 quarters° high, he said they were a people living on the earth invisible as he supposed; I asked if they were of flesh & blood & bone, as we are, he said noe, then I asked they did eat such meal, & drink such drink as we doe, he said noe, but that they eat some kind of food, to this I conclude they were spirits, but he would often say, God save us & feare fall them I asked if he were a fraid of them he answered no then I reply'd why say you so, because quoth^{he} we are not to talk of them, thus you may partly perceave their qualities, what they be & how some are illuded°: to be brief, those which are those, that are stroken, say a prayer to help them thus, in nomine Patris et filii et Spiritus sancti. Amen, I ask health of body & limbe for N. the which prayer you shall find hereafter in this book. Also if any one be hurt in leg, foot, or arme, then first make the sighn of the Crosse on the ground, with your hand, saying in nomine Patris et filii et Spiritus sancti. Amen then againe the same on the sore, & grieved place, say a[s] followeth, stroking the grieffe still, downwards often with your righ[t] hand, in the name of the father, & of the soone, & of the holy Ghost, from the ground thou cam'st & to & to [sic] the ground thou shalt vanish in Gods name, doe so often & apply on the place a Plaster or Pultas°, made with pure oatmel, sheeps suet, & sage & red cows milk, & the party shall be hole per Gods help shortly.

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5 quarters: this measure has changed over time, but 114.5 cm seems likely.

Illuded: deceived.

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Pultas: poultice.

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