

TOLKIEN AND THE FAIRIES OF BRITISH FOLK TRADITION

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Let me begin by asking a question: when somebody uses the word 'fairy', what do you immediately think of? Is it something like this?

'O then I see Queen Mab hath been with you.  
 She is the fairies' midwife; and she comes  
 In shape no bigger than an agate stone  
 On the forefinger of an alderman,  
 Drawn with a team of little atomies  
 Athwart men's noses as they lie asleep.'

This passage drawn from 'Romeo and Juliet' continues for quite a while, but I think I have given enough to show a good example of a 'literary fairy', that is, the little gossamer-winged moonlight-and-cobwebs creations of almost every English author from Shakespeare to Enid Blyton. It is unfortunate that this has become the accepted picture of a fairy for the realms of Faerie contain more wonderous races than the average person even guesses at. There are people akin to Shakespeares fairies. The Cornish pixies are the most well-known example of this, but there are also the hearthside brownies and hobs (the last of the hobbits?) These little creatures usually went naked or at the very most clad only in rags, but were only too glad to help with the housework. Then there is the strange that visited Herla, King of the ancient Britons. These were about half the size of a man and they had goats' legs and hooves. Indeed their King rode on a goat, which is a far cry from Mab's hazel-nut chariot. There were even human-sized fairies. One of them married Wild Edric, hero of the Shropshire Marches.

But to my mind, the most glorious of all the fairy races were the Tuatha de Daanan of Celtic Ireland. These could serve as a model (if any were needed) for Tolkien's High Elves. They were human-sized, skilled craftsmen, skilled singers (One of them sang a lullaby so sweetly that he put even St. Patrick to sleep) but more important than all this they were considered to have brought light and knowledge to Ireland which seems rather similar to Tolkien's Elves fighting for the forces of light in the years of darkness.

This is only a partial list of the fairy races but it should serve to show that the characteristics of 'a fairy' can be wide and varied, but in writing this article I am naturally forced to generalise so that I can more easily present the comparisons and contrasts between the fairies and Tolkien's elves. The generalisations can obviously be criticised by citing specific examples to the contrary, but on the whole, they appear to me to be true.

Bearing this in mind let us consider Tolkien's Wood-elves. These lived in an underground castle as do many of the English fairies. Some of the latter just lived under hills like the Wood-elves. One such fairy hill is Elboton near Burnsall in Yorkshire. But more often there were more sinister associations since the fairy mounds were ancient burial mounds. Even the Danaans had a palace at the tumuli at New Grange on the river Boyne in Ireland. This may make the fairies sound more like Barrow-wights than elves, but actually the fairies are connected not to the Barrow-wights but to the underground divinities of Greece and Rome. In Chaucer, for instance, we read that:

'Full often time he Pluto and his quene  
 Prosperine, and alle his faerie  
 Disporten hem.'

This may explain why it is generally considered dangerous to eat the food of the fairies. Childe Rowland was warned by Merlin not to eat the food of the fairies or else he would stay in fairyland forever. This to me seems similar to the legend of Pluto and Persephone where Persephone was compelled to spend a month each year in the underworld for each of the six orange pips that she ate after Pluto kidnapped her.

But in general it was not easy to come across fairy food. The few unfortunates that came across the fairies at their feasting usually met up with a similar fate to that which befell Bilbo and the Dwarves when they interrupted the Wood-elves' revels. Daniel Wadilove for instance spent the night being chased round Elboton by Puck and the others, and to make matters worse he was following the lights of the will-o'-wisps which led him through bogs and brambles. Such homely feasts as Elrond's were never seen among our fairy folk except as a snare for unsuspecting travellers, or as a trap for unwary heroes, like the drinking of the stream in Mirkwood.

Perhaps Elrond's 'trap' was more subtle, and more friendly. With all the comforts of Rivendell 'Bilbo would gladly have stopped there for ever and ever - even supposing a wish would have taken him right back to his hobbit-hole without trouble.' 'Ever and ever' should be taken quite literally for, as Bilbo says, 'Time doesn't seem to pass here: it just is.' This is equally true of other fairy worlds. Time passes much more slowly for those who visit the land of the fairies. The most famous of these is probably Oisín, one of the Fianna or heroes of Celtic Ireland. He was taken away by Niam, a fairy maiden, and spent the next three weeks in the land of youth before he desired to return to his people. Niam gave him a horse for the return journey but warned him that, on no account, must he dismount or he would never be able to return to fairyland. So Oisín rode back to Ireland but the halls of the Fianna were overgrown deserted ruins and the people were weak and puny, not at all like the mighty Fianna. He wandered about the countryside looking for his friends till at last he came to a group of villagers trying to move a huge boulder and, forgetting Niam's warning, he dismounted to help them move it. Instantly he was transformed into an old man and his silken tunic turned to homespun wool. The villagers took the old man to St. Patrick from whom he learnt that the last of the Fianna had died over three hundred years before. And Oisín's experience is by no means unique. The fairies visited King Herla for his wedding feast, and when the King of the fairies was to be married he invited King Herla and his retinue to the ceremony. The Britons spent three days in fairyland and on their departure were given a small dog with instructions not to dismount till the dog jumped down from King Herla's horse. King Herla returned to his Kingdom and on asking for news of his queen found that she had been dead for two hundred years and that the Saxons had taken over his lands. Some of his men then tried to dismount but instantly turned to dust no the moment that they touched the ground. Herla then forbade anyone else to dismount until the dog jumped down from his horse. This it has not yet done and Herla can still be seen riding round his old Kingdom seeking a way to escape his curse.

Oisín's experience is also typical of another facet of fairy lore. All those who take a fairy bride do so on some condition which they usually break and the union is dissolved. Oisín was warned not to dismount but he did so he lost his bride. Wild Edric caught a fairy and forced her to marry him - which she did on condition that he should never mention her connection with the fairies. One day she was missing for a while and on her return Edric reproached her for spending time with her sisters in fairyland. Instantly she vanished, never to be seen again.

Such unions rarely seem to be happy ones, so the marriage of Aragorn and Arwen can be seen as something of an exception to the rule. However, fairy marriages sometimes lasted long enough to produce children and apparently for them the correct armorial bearings would be the leopard, since the marriage between a mortal and a fairy is an adulterous one and the leopard is the result of an adulterous union between a pard and a lioness. Tolkien himself does not use this symbol but prefers to concentrate on the emotional difficulties raised by this 'adulterous union' between a mortal and an immortal. The 'Tale of Aragorn and Arwen' is marked by the number of obstructions which Aragorn must overcome before he can win the hand of Arwen, and even after all this Arwen must give up her immortality and accept the 'Doom of Men'

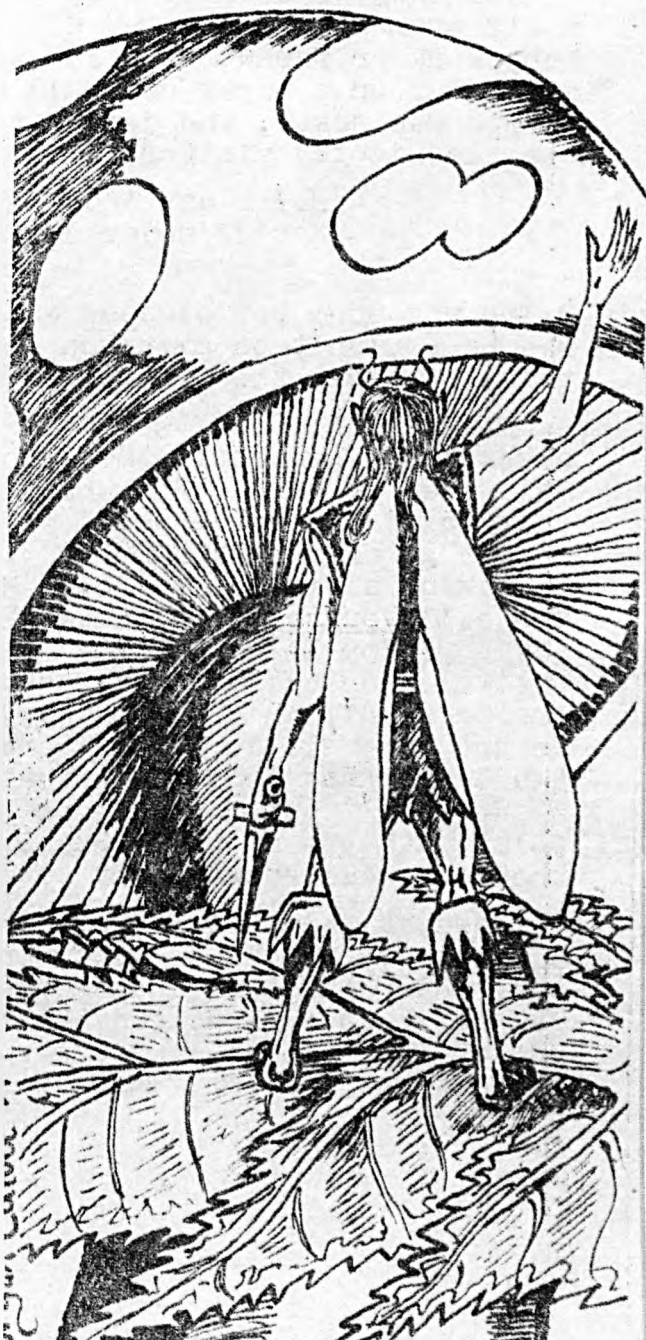
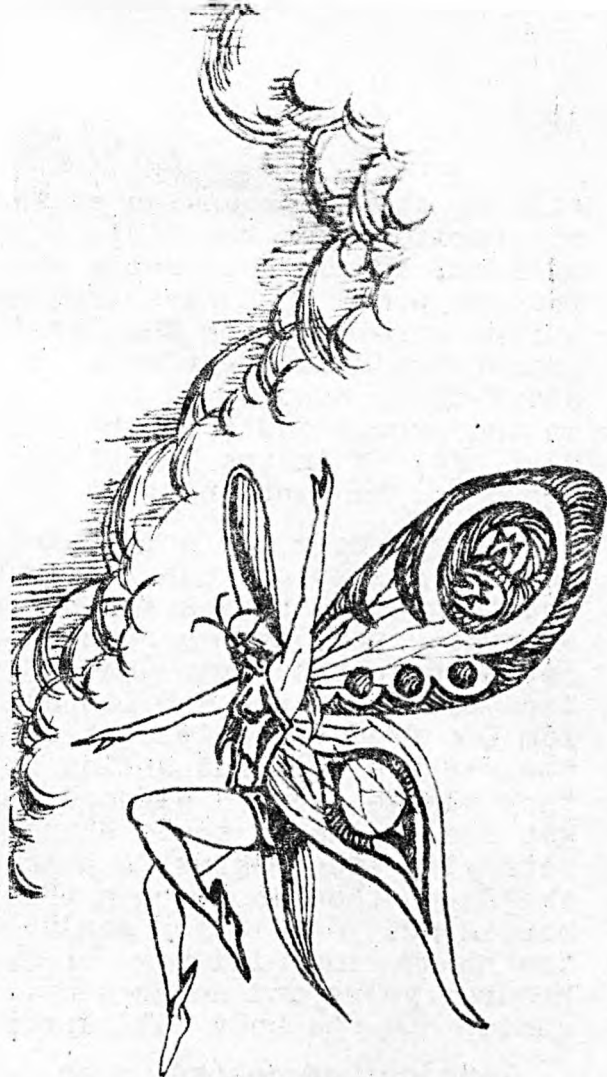
However there is, I think, another kind of immortality in store for Arwne. This is brought out in her conversation with the dying Aragorn:-

"Nay dear lord," she said, "that choice is long over. There is now no ship that would bear me hence, and I must indeed abide the Doom of Men whether I will or nil : the loss and the silence... If this is indeed, as the Eldar say, the gift of the One to Men, it is bitter to receive."

"So it seems," he said. "But let us not be overthrown at the final test, who of old renounced the Shadow and the Ring. In sorrow we must go, but not in despair. Behold! we are not bound for evr to the circles of the world, and beyond them is more than memory, Farewell!"

To me the phrase 'and beyond them is more than memory' implies that although the elves are immortal in this world, men are immortal in heaven, and that men achieve salvation whereas elves, being immortal, can never achieve salvation.

This problem also bothered the fairies of our world. One of them, a beautiful lady dressed in green, appeared to a clergyman



reading the Bible and asked what were her chances of salvation. The man replied that the Bible mentioned salvation only for the race of Adam, and at this reply she plunged screaming into the sea. This happened in Ross-shire, but there is a continental tale which offers more hope for the fairies. A river-sprite once asked a priest the same question to which he replied: "No; not before this staff in my hand shall bud and blossom." He then stuck the staff in the ground and left the fairy weeping. Later he returned that way, and, as in the Tannhäuser legend, he found that the staff had bloomed so he went and told the fairy who rejoiced greatly at this.

However there are some fairies which in my opinion appear not to deserve salvation, especially those who were in the habit of changing human babies for their own. Why they did this is a matter of some doubt. It may be connected with the idea that once every seven years the fairies had to provide a victim for sacrifice. This idea occurs in the Tam Lin ballad where Fair Janet has to rescue Tam Lin from the fairies before he becomes their victim. He, however was captured whilst an adult. If the fairies take a baby they always leave a wizened changeling in its place. The way to get rid of one of these changelings is to surprise it into betraying its origins. A common way is to arrange a circle of eggshells on the floor, upon which the changeling will ask what is happening. To this you reply: "I'm making a brewing cauldron" and the changeling will make an exclamation such as: "I've lived three hundred years and never seen a cauldron like that!" Then he will vanish and the baby will later be returned.

Tolkien, of course, does not use this motif, nor does he use a motif commonly associated with hobs and brownies. These would do housework or farmwork whilst people slept. If a curious person stayed up on a night he would be bound to notice that the brownie or hob was naked, and decide to leave out a small cloak in reward for his nightly visitor. This would be met with a remark such as:-

"Ha! a cap and a hood  
Hob'll never do mair good"

It may be remembered that Bilbo was none too pleased with his cloak either. His only comfort was he couldn't be mistaken for a dwarf as he had no beard, but this is hardly the same thing.

Finally there is the question of fairy names. Each of Tolkien's elves has a personal name, such as Gildor, Legolas, Celeborn, Galadriel or some other which is bandied about quite freely. The fairies of our world would never do this since they believed that knowledge of a real name led to power over a person. Fangorn may be making a similar point: "Hoom, hmm! Come now! Not so hasty! You call yourselves hobbits? But you should not go telling just anybody! You'll be letting out your own right names if you're not careful." or again: "'Hm, but you are a hasty folk, I see,' said Treebeard. 'I am honoured by your confidence; but you should not be too free all at once. There are Ents and Ents, you know; or there are Ents and things that look like Ents but ain't, as you might say.'" but he would be hardly likely to demonstrate his point with the story of Rumpelstiltskin which is probably for us the most well known story to illustrate the magic power of names.

However there is an English story which would also serve to demonstrate the same point. Once there was a widow and her young son, and their livelihood depended upon a large sow. This beast was about to farrow, and the widow was expecting to make a fair profit from the sale of the piglets. But one day when she went out to feed the sow she found it was dying and she did not know what to do.

Then out of the wood behind the widow's cottage came an old lady dressed in green and she said she had come to cure the pig. She went into the sty and began sprinkling water over the beast, and began muttering to herself:

"Pitter patter  
Holy water."

Immediately the beast was cured and ran over to its trough and began eating.

Now the widow was delighted at this and asked the old woman what she wanted as a reward. The old woman replied that she would have the baby boy whether the widow wanted to give him or not. The widow's only consolation was that, by fairy law, the woman was bound to give her three days grace. If, in that time, the widow could find out the old woman's name she could not take the child. On the first day the woman could do little but weep, but on the second she wandered out into the woods, where she saw the green fairy spinning and humming to herself:

"Little kens our good dame at hame  
That Whuppity Stoorie is my name."

So the widow returned home resolved to have a joke at the fairy's expense. When the old woman came to claim her reward, the widow begged that she should be the sacrifice, not her son, to which the fairy scornfully replied: "Who would meddle with the likes of thee?" This made the widow so angry that she replied with a mocking curtsy: "I might have known that I was not even fit to tie the shoelace of the high and mighty princess Whuppity Stoorie." At this the fairy jumped high in the air and ran screaming down the valley as though all the devils in hell were after her.

And with this strange tale of Whuppity Stoorie I must conclude my article on the fairies of our world and Tolkien's elves, though there is much more that could be said. It remains to be told why the fairies are afraid of iron, why they only count in fives not tens - like mortal men - and how they magically travel great distances. It remains to be told how the King of Colchester's daughter was helped by the three golden heads, how Cuchulain was recognised as champion of all Erin, and how the fairies brought the Luck to Edenhall. But all of this has little or nothing to do with Tolkien. Indeed I sometimes wonder if the comparisons I have made are really valid. If Tolkien has the power of imagination to conjure up a whole world surely he will not need to search the whole fairy mythology to find suitable characteristics for peoples and the comparisons I have made result merely from co-incidence.

#### List of works consulted

- The Hobbit by J.R.R. Tolkien. pub. George Allen and Unwin.  
 The Lord of the Rings. ditto.  
 A Dictionary of British Folk Tales, by Katherine M. Briggs. pub. by Routledge & Kegan Paul.  
 English Myths and Traditions, by Henry Bett. pub. by Batsford.  
 Myths and Legends of the Celtic Race, by T.W. Rolleston. pub Harrap.  
 The Striding Dales by Halliwell Sutcliffe. pub. by Warne.

And since the Society seems to appreciate fantasy music, I may also point out that 'Tam Lin' is on one of the Fairport Convention L.P.'s and that Tir-na-nog do a very nice version of the Oisín Saga, though I'm not sure if this is on record.