KATHARINE BRIGGS: COLLECTED WORKS

THE FAIRIES IN TRADITION AND LITERATURE

Katharine Briggs

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VOLUME IV

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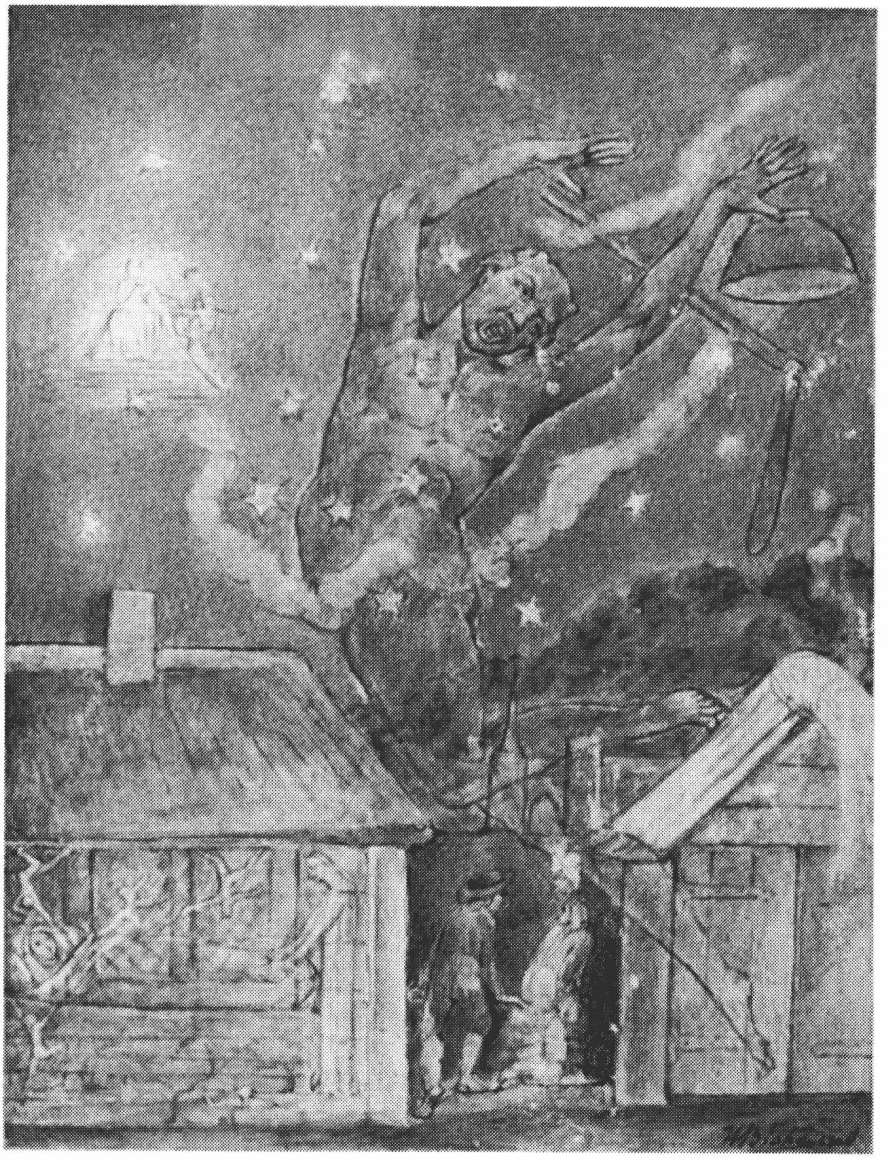

1 William Blake's illustration to Milton's L'Allegro. We have here the drudging goblin, the woman pinched and pulled by fairies and the Will o' the Wisp

THE FAIRIES

in tradition and literature

K. M. BRIGGS

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PREFACE

THIS book is a continuation of *The Anatomy of Puck*, which dealt with the fairy beliefs used by Shakespeare, his contemporaries and his immediate successors. In the course of working on it I found so many accounts of the fairies that belonged to later times that it seemed to me worth pursuing the subject and examining the survival of fairy beliefs and the various fashions in the literary treatment of fairies, from Shakespeare's time to the present day.

Literary fashions change, but on the whole the fairy beliefs have remained pretty constant. As in my earlier books, I have had no special axe to grind. This is not an attempt to prove that fairies are real. My intention has been to report objectively what people believed themselves to have seen. My standard has been truth to tradition rather than truth to fact, and I have discussed the fairy standards and practices seriously, as one discusses characters in a good book; my credence has been given rather to aesthetic truth than to fact. As far as my personal belief goes the most I can say is that I am agnostic on the subject. For the sake of fairness, however, I have included in the Appendix an account of the Cottingley Fairies, whose photographs have never been proved to be fraudulent, though they fail to command aesthetic credence.

K. M. BRIGGS

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THE FAIRY PEOPLES

One

HISTORIC SURVEY

THE famous pronouncement of Friar Bacon's Brazen Head—'Time is, Time was, Time is past'—might well be taken to apply to English fairy beliefs, which from Chaucer's time onwards have been supposed to belong to the last generation and to be lost to the present one. The strange thing is that rare, tenuous and fragile as it is, the tradition is still there, and lingers on from generation to generation substantially unchanged. Every now and then poets and writers draw on the tradition, and make out of it something suitable to the spirit of their age. Sometimes this passes back into tradition, and perhaps alters it a little, it may be less than the critics and folklorists contend. For instance, there is a school of thought that believes that we owe the race of tiny English fairies to the literary fancies of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. This is not so, for some of our earliest fairies, the Portunes, are said by Gervase of Tilbury to be only half an inch in height. The mentions of fairies in medieval manuscripts are, indeed, sparse, but they cover most of the types that we shall come across later. We have the child-sized fairies whose kingdom Elidor visited, the fairy bride of human size and more than human beauty, the wild hunt, the miraculous passage of time in Fairyland, the fairy who needs a human midwife and is invisible except by the help of a magic ointment, the changeling, the misleading night fairy, the bogey-beast and the Love-Talker or Incubus. And we have giants and dragons as well. Even down to the last generation, before the

First World War, all of these types were still to be found, and I have little doubt that most of them could be found now if the secrecy which the fairies enjoin did not still bind the tongues of the scattered and obscure people who believe in them.

And yet all this talk of the residual nature of the fairy beliefs is true enough, though the flourishing time of fairy belief must be pushed back to the earliest historic times on these Islands, almost to the verge of pre-history.

Kipling's Puck calls the lost heathen gods who took their place among the fairy people 'the old things', and there is little doubt that they can claim their part in the building of the fairy tradition as well as the half-deified spirits of the dead and the spirits of woods and wells and vegetation.

The earliest written mentions of fairies of any kind in England occur in the Anglo-Saxon charms against elf-shot, but the fairy ladies of the medieval romances of the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries may well have an origin as old. Morgan le Fay or Fata Morgana and her kind probably show a mingling of Celtic and classical tradition, or perhaps stem from beliefs older than either. In the later Romances it is clear that most of the fairy ladies belong to the human race, and owe their great powers to their knowledge of magic. Nimue, the Lady of the Lake, in *Lancelot du Lac*, the thirteenth-century Prose Romance, lived in a wooded country covered by a magical cloud which gave it the appearance of a lake. The unknown author of this romance was a determined euhemeriser. When he introduces the Lake he calls it The Lake of Diana, and explains: 'Now Diana was queen of Sicily, and she reigned in the time of Virgil, the great author, and the foolish heathen folk held her for a goddess. And there was no lady in the world that more loved woodland pleasures, and every day she went to the chase, and the foolish heathen folk called her the goddess of the woods.'[1]

The fairies are treated to a similar rationalization.

> Now the story saith that the Damsel that carried Lancelot into the Lake was a fay. In those days all maidens that knew enchantments or charms were called fays, and there were many of them at this time, and more in Great Britain than in other lands.

[1] *Sir Lancelot of the Lake.* A French Prose Romance of the Thirteenth Century. Translated by Lucy Allen Paton (London, 1929), p. 66.

> They knew, as the story saith, the virtue of herbs and of stones and of charms, whereby they might be kept in plenty and in the great wealth that they possessed. . . . The Lady that nourished him abided only in woods and in forests that were vast and dense, and the lake whereinto she sprang with the child was naught but enchantment, and it was in the plain at the foot of a hill that was lower than that whereon King Ban had died. In the part where the lake seemed widest and deepest the Lady had many fair and noble dwellings, and in the plain below there flowed a little stream, that abounded in fish. And her abode was so hidden that none might find it, for the semblance of the lake covered it so that it might not be seen.[1]

This was the line taken in the later romances, but in *Lanzelet*, the German translation of the twelfth-century poem, there is no doubt at all that Lancelot was brought up in Fairyland.

> A lady bore the child away, a wise fairy of the sea, a queen better than any in all the world to-day. In her realm she had ten thousand maidens, whereof none knew man or man's array. They wore shifts and kirtles of samite and of silk. I will not deny it, but I say not that it is sooth, the Lady's land bloomed throughout the year as it were mid-May, and her domain was fair and broad and long, and full of joy were its borders. The mountain whereon the mighty castle stood was of crystal, round as a ball. No stranger guest and no king's host was feared therein. All round about it lay the sea and a wall so strong that never a man might be bold enough to deem that he could avail aught against it, and albeit there was a gate, it was of hardest adamant. There within they bided, knowing no fear. He that wrought the castle adorned it cunningly. Without and within it was of gold, like a star. Within its moat naught grew old, or even after a hundred years was less fair.[2]

The same view of the fairies is taken by the twelfth- and thirteenth-century chroniclers. Walter Map (born about 1140) is one of the earliest. His story of *Wild Edric*, whose ghostly train was to be seen even to the nineteenth century, is one of the best-known of his tales, in which the fairy wife, who still survives in modern Welsh folklore, is described in detail.[3] The

[1] *Sir Lancelot of the Lake*, pp. 72–3.

[2] Ibid., *Lanzelet*, pp. 7–8.

[3] Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium*. Translated by F. Tupper and M. B. Ogle (London, 1924), pp. 94–5.

Fairy Wife of Brecknock Mere is still closer to modern tradition.[1] Map has a Melusine tale of a demon wife, and one of a wife rescued from the troop of the dead, which is very like later rescues from Fairyland.[2] It is from Walter Map too that we hear of the Herlething, the Band of Herla seen on the borders of Hereford and Wales in the first year of the reign of King Henry II.[3] Map was a Hereford man, but a Norman, and some of his tales come from Brittany or Normandy, as, for instance, that of Henno cum Dentibus of Normandy who married a demon wife.[4]

Map's friend, Geoffrey of Monmouth, gave us the first romantic version of the Arthurian legend, for Arthur had been little more than a name in the earlier chronicles. Giraldus Cambrensis, another contemporary, introduces us to a subterranean fairyland, without sun, moon or stars, inhabited by small people, fair-haired and beautiful, with horses and greyhounds in the same proportion. They ate neither fish nor flesh but milk-sops flavoured with saffron. They were good people, though without any ordinances of religion, very honourable and truthful. The child Elidor, who had been led into this fairyland, came and went freely among them, and would have continued to do so, but that, urged by his mother, he stole a golden ball from the King's son. On the way home with it he was tripped up by two of the little fairies and the ball taken from him. He could never again find his way into their realm.[5] The tale of *Gitto Bach* is a later, somewhat similar tale of a child's visits to Fairyland.[6] In the seventeenth century we have Bovet's *Fairy Boy of Leith*, and at about the same time the Kirk Session in Borgue records the questioning of the Boy of Borgue, who claimed intercourse with the fairies. Giraldus Cambrensis has also two poltergeist or boggart stories.

Gervase of Tilbury, who flourished about 1211, set down a remarkable amount of folklore material in Part III of *Otia Imperialia*.[7] As Chancellor of the Holy Roman Empire he was a

[1] Walter Map, ed. cit., p. 91.
[2] Ibid., p. 97. [3] Ibid., p. 223. [4] Ibid., pp. 218–20.
[5] Giraldus Cambrensis, *The Itinerary through Wales* (Bohn's Antiquarian Library), pp. 390–1.
[6] T. Keightley, *Fairy Mythology* (London, 1900, 1st edition 1850), pp. 416–17.
[7] *Gervase of Tilbury, MS Cotton Vespasian E IV*, ed. by F. Liebrecht (Hanover, 1826).