

# **The Anatomy of Puck**

An Examination of Fairy Beliefs among  
Shakespeare's Contemporaries and  
Successors

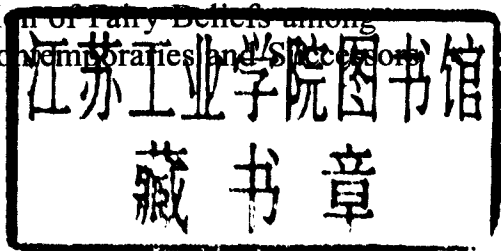
**Katharine Briggs**

# KATHARINE BRIGGS COLLECTED WORKS

VOLUME I

## THE ANATOMY OF PUCK

An Examination of Fairy Beliefs among  
Shakespeare's Contemporaries and Successors



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**Publisher's Note**

The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original book may be apparent.

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## *Author's Note*

The cryptic letters which appear before the fairy stories in Appendix II, and among the footnotes, relate to two books. The first is *The Types of the Folk-Tale*, by Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson. Professor Aarne's method of classification, although not in all ways satisfactory, is widely accepted; but it is necessarily limited, and there are many types of story which it does not include. The letters 'Mt' followed by figures relate to this book. Professor Stith Thompson's *Motif Index of Folk Literature* is a more inclusive work, and I have employed it to supplement the other. The word 'Motif' prefaces the numbers which apply to this book. Naturally neither classification covers all known stories.

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## *One*

# THE AIR THEY BREATHED

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THE first half of the seventeenth century is of special interest to us in these days because it is at once so like to our time and so different from it. In few periods except our own have fundamental beliefs changed so rapidly. The more obvious external changes belonged to the sixteenth century; it was then that the Commonwealth of Europe was broken and religious dissension brought a new bitterness into warfare, that nationality and sovereignty assumed another aspect, and that the navigators discovered a new continent. But there was a moral and intellectual time-lag; and, just as in many twentieth-century sceptics the ethical standards of Christianity have survived like cut flowers, unrooted but in water, so in most places, and more particularly in England, the fundamental assumptions of medieval times remained unquestioned until the beginning of the seventeenth century. Then everything went into the melting-pot.

In a century when everything was being reconsidered, when the foundations of old beliefs were shaking and a new science was being hammered out, it was natural that fundamental assumptions should come up into consciousness and should be questioned. It is this questioning of fundamentals which gives so poignant an interest to seventeenth-century literature. It was a period, like our own, at once sceptical and credulous. Fascinated though it might be by the new science, the age yet held with a drowning man's grip to the assumptions which it felt to be slipping away from it. It was characteristic of this period that the

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Puritans carried through one of the most sweeping revolutions in the history of Europe by talking passionately of 'the good old cause'. This combination of a radical change of outlook with an affection for deep-rooted traditions makes one feel at times that one hears the voice of the modern man, describing and pronouncing upon beliefs and customs which we can now never know at first hand.

We feel this note of modernity everywhere in the seventeenth century. In the drama we come every now and then upon a turn of phrase and thought that might be our own. It seems no accident that in this period the modern pattern of costume—coat waistcoat and breeches—first appears, and that, different though the meals were, they began to be spaced as ours are into breakfast, luncheon and dinner. Tobacco, potatoes, coffee and tea, the normal background of our food habits, first came into common use at this time. Four-wheeled traffic only waited for better roads to gain its modern ascendancy. People sought eagerly after new inventions, though they might be no more than mechanical statues and water clocks. Everywhere there was an eager breath of curiosity. Most important of all, this was the time when the medieval universality finally disappeared, and when the study of individual characters became of absorbing interest. Never till then had so many different fundamental assumptions jostled each other as in the seventeenth century. The Parliamentary Army would have served a philosopher as a zoo of beliefs. Quirks, oddities, humours were almost called into existence by the delight which hailed them. Plays like Ben Jonson's *Silent Woman* seem to us now schoolboyish in their labouring of individual oddities, till we realize that they are indeed schoolboy efforts; it is almost the first time that that type of social satire had been attempted.

Yet the modernity of this scrutiny, this eager curiosity about every object presented to Man, and about Man himself, must not blind us to the very unmodern atmosphere in which the investigations were carried out. They breathed another air from us then, and our absent-minded assumptions are very different from theirs. We inherit the nineteenth century's doctrine of progress; and, however much events may have disillusioned us about it, most people instinctively feel that if the present things are bad those in the past must have been worse, and those

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in the remote past worse still. That mythical character, the cave man, is a case in point. Where nothing can be known it is an equal possibility that the most primitive men were gentle, berry-picking creatures, monotheistic in religion and ignorant of war; but this supposition will not stick in a modern man's head. The doctrine of automatic progress makes him certain that primitive man was a savage and nasty creature, morally worse than most animals though intellectually their superior. We have our credulities no less than our ancestors; most of us believe in authority as blindly as the people of any age, but it is the authority of the scientists, and the newer continually supersedes the older. The majority of us use modern inventions as a caterpillar uses a highroad—for convenience—and know nearly as little as the caterpillar of their intellectual foundation. The enormous growth of knowledge has necessarily resulted in specialization, so that not even a scientist attempts to know more than one or two branches of science. We are delivered into the hands of the specialists, and in spite of popular outlines, which often claim a larger field for science than the responsible scientist would do, it is very difficult for the average man to form a comprehensive picture of the Universe. The pronouncements upon ethics and upon aesthetic values are particularly wavering and unrooted. There are signs that we are on our way to co-ordination and coherence, but at present the whole picture is confused and blurred.

It is obvious how different the whole ground of argument would be if everyone presupposed a theocentric universe, and Man was felt to be fallen from a primitive state of virtue, knowledge and strength. Then the authority of the past would have a sanctity which we could hardly conceive, and a quotation would be an argument. All past knowledge would be felt to be more or less the result of inspiration. To take a small example, the name of a thing would be more than a convenient label, it would have a divine, hidden connection with the thing itself. We touch here on a deep-rooted folk belief upon which all magic incantation was founded, but also on the reason why a pun had then more serious intellectual significance than it has today.

The science of the early sixteenth century was founded on this theocentric conception. Only in the darkest times did men believe in a flat world, but the conception which had been in-



herited by the educated Jacobean, and therefore came naturally to him, was that of the Ptolemaic universe, a series of concentric globes, nine spheres, with the Primum Mobile without, then the fixed stars, the seven planets and the moon, with the Earth as its small and rotten core, which hung in chaos, suspended by a golden chain from the throne of God. In the sub-lunary regions Satan and his rebel angels were confined, but each sphere above that was governed by one order of angels, and as the crystalline orb revolved the music of the spheres rang out. Even a poet so careful of truth as Milton could not help using the Ptolemaic conception, though he introduced a passage on the new Copernican theory into the body of the poem.

According to this conception the whole universe was inter-locked and interacting, the aspect of the stars influenced man and vegetation alike, and visible judgements could be descried everywhere by the discerning eye. Not only was the universe interacting but it was arranged in a strict hierarchy. Each order of being had a primate, Man among earthly creatures, the lion among beasts, the eagle among birds, and worked down in a strict order to the lowest. By the middle of the sixteenth century this carefully built structure was beginning to crack, by the seventeenth it was crumbling; but at the back of men's minds this was still the instinctive assumption; and unless we understand something of it we shall often be puzzled at the point at which argument stops in the seventeenth-century controversies and quotation begins.

Fundamental beliefs often betray themselves more by superstitions than by creeds. The superstitions of our day are for the most part wandering and unconnected atoms, like the dust from an exploded star. They are the result of our uncertainties and bewilderments, not of our certainties. The superstitions and false beliefs of the renaissance period came from a double source. Some were lingering growths of pagan times which had tangled themselves into Christian beliefs like bishop's-weed in a clump of lupins, so that one could hardly be uprooted without the other; and these were largely the beliefs of the country people. The educated man had his special superstitions and fallacies as well; these were firmly rooted in the belief in authority, and the neat, rational, graduated universe. The natural assumption of the thinking man in the sixteenth century was that upon

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the foundation of theology human reason could build up a picture of what the universe must be, without too much searching into individual facts to confirm it. Already in the sixteenth century a new knowledge of facts was pressing upon this neat, rational conception of the universe, and in the seventeenth almost every surface belief was questioned, and some of these probings went very deep. But still a solid core remained. People described as atheists in the early seventeenth century would hardly be called agnostics today. There were of course a few natural materialists, as there are at all times; but they were materialistic against a background of faith. In the wild places in the North of England, and in other outlying parts of the kingdom there were many who were virtually pagans; and there were a few—probably a very few—full and complete Satanists among the witches and devotees of magic. Most witches, however, practised their magical rites as many Irish peasants do today, side by side with their Christian observances, attempting no rational reconciliation between the two; for it is possible for most people to keep two quite irreconcilable beliefs alive at the same time. But the blank incredulity and materialism of the present day was foreign to the temper of the times.

It is as difficult to generalize about the beliefs of that time as about our own, for there was a wide difference between the fully conscious intellectual life of the travelled and educated man, whose latinity made the whole of Western culture available to him, and the dim, unconnected notions of the wild peasant of the Yorkshire or Devon moors, who had never moved more than a few miles from his own home; but the gulf between the cultured and uncultured was hardly wider than it is in our day, except that now the proportion of educated to uneducated people may be greater. The Industrial Revolution had not yet created Disraeli's Two Nations. All Englishmen were to some extent countrymen, well rooted in traditional things. From the middle of the sixteenth century until the outbreak of the Civil War literacy grew, and the gulf between class and class became narrower. In many country schools it was possible to get a good, though limited, education, and the general study of the Bible was an education in itself. The common soldiers of the Civil War, and even some working women, such as Bunyan's sister, wrote astonishingly good and graphic letters. Among the poor

as well as the rich an intellectual ferment was stirring. We may picture our England in those days so like and so unlike to what it is today. It was a time of eager intellectual curiosity and of alert senses. People listened better than they do today, and looked better. They were far more callous to some things and more sensitive to others. There were many superstitions, and yet people lived closer to realities than we do. Death and pain were not hidden as they are now, and most people were religious.

The literary treatment of fairy beliefs at that time is of both intellectual and social interest. The fairies came in for discussion with everything else, and the shift of opinion about them is a subtle thermometer of the temper of the times. Socially the new treatment of the fairies is a small symptom of the growing influence of the yeoman class in literature. Various things contributed to make the late Elizabethan times our great period of fairy literature, but the rise of the yeoman writer was perhaps chief among them. The fays of medieval literature had been the full-sized fairies, many of them enchantresses rather than fairies, though there was an occasional trace of the nature spirit about them. Small fairies were known to tradition in the Middle Ages, for Giraldus Cambrensis, Ralph of Coggeshall and Gervase of Tilbury give us accounts of them; but fairy-lore was near to heresy, and it was unwise to exhibit too much knowledge of the fairies. When the fear of heresy lifted and the fairies became less formidable they became available for ornament and delight. Spenser used the fays of romance for his allegory, but they had already become a little bookish and faded. There was, however, an almost untouched piece of poetic machinery in the country fairies of England. The yeomen writers knew them well from their mothers and grandmothers, and their new readers knew them, and loved them because they were familiar. Well mixed with fairy-lore drawn from literature, they appealed to the Court as well as to the Country, and the fairy vogue was made. It rested upon a kind of pleasurable half-belief. The fairy poetry of Shakespeare, Drayton and Herrick was obviously meant to be taken lightly, but there was more reality behind it than there would be about such poetry written in the present day. The poets may not themselves have believed in fairies, but they knew that thousands of their fellow-countrymen

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believed in them. What were these fairies, and what was believed about them? It is difficult at any time to find what is really believed about spirit lore superstitions—we can sometimes hardly be sure of our own beliefs about them—but the discussions and questionings of that time tell us a good deal. The law courts proved an acid test for some beliefs, and the controversialists and antiquarians provided a good deal of evidence of others. It seems worth while at least to examine the soil from which some of the choicest flowers of our poetry have sprung.

## Two

# OPINIONS ON FAIRIES IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

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THE world of fairy- and folk-lore which was familiar to our childhood was different both in content and focus from that of the Jacobeans. True, the folklorists, who had arisen during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, had elevated the study of fairy-tales into a science; but the general knowledge had declined as much as the scholarly knowledge had progressed. So, though the scholars were well able to distinguish a brownie from a boggart, we find a completely different note struck in the ordinary literary allusions at the beginning of our century from that struck at the beginning of the seventeenth; nothing like these passages could be written in the Jacobean period:

King Merriwig of Euralia sat at breakfast on his castle walls. He lifted the gold cover from the gold dish in front of him, selected a trout, and conveyed it to his gold plate. He was a man of simple tastes, but when you have an aunt with a newly acquired gift of turning everything she touches into gold you must let her practise sometimes. In another age it might have been fretwork.<sup>1</sup>

The poor Queen gave a start and a scream, and the king, brave as he was, turned pale, for Malevola was a terrible fairy, and the dress she wore was not at all the kind of thing for a christening. It was made of spiders' webs matted together, dark and dank with the damp of the tomb, and the dust of dungeons. Her wings were the wings of a great bat, spiders and newts crawled round her neck; a

<sup>1</sup> A. A. Milne, *Once on a Time* (London, n.d.), p. 15.

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serpent crawled about her waist, and little snakes twisted and writhed in her lank, black hair.<sup>1</sup>

'Any soup, my dear?' shouted the King through a speaking trumpet; when suddenly the air was filled with a sound like the rustling of birds. Flitter, flitter, flutter went the noise; and when the Queen looked up, lo and behold; on every seat was a lovely fairy dressed in green, each with a *most interesting looking parcel* in her hand.<sup>2</sup>

Each of these stories has a humorous turn, they are not intended to be taken seriously; but it is interesting to notice that the kind of original they presuppose is the court fairy-story of Perrault. The fairies at the christening,<sup>3</sup> who appear again and again in modern fairy stories, do not occur at all in any of the surviving English folk-tales. They were not of course invented by Perrault, but have a long ancestry, from the Fates at the cradle of Meleager, from the Norns who visited Ogier the Dane, even from Odin and Thor, who came once to a child's birth, one benevolent and the other malicious, like the fairies after them.<sup>4</sup> But though these visitors might take part in a heathen name-giving it is rather a question what right they had at a christening.

An early example, even then somewhat sophisticated, is to be found in the works of the thirteenth-century trouvère, Adam de la Halle. In *Le Jeu Adam, ou de la Feuillie* we have a visit of three fairies, Morgue, Arsile and Maglore, which might be the model for all subsequent fairies' visits, except that it was to no christening that they came, but to a summer bower prepared for them. Maglore is discontented because no place has been laid for her.<sup>5</sup> The romance of *Huon of Bordeaux* has also a story of the fairies' gifts and a discontented fairy; though they came to Oberon's birth, not to his christening.

It is noticeable that even Andrew Lang, an eminent mythologist, gives his fairies wings. It is uncertain when they first acquired them, perhaps about the time when angels became pre-

<sup>1</sup> E. Nesbit, *Nine Unlikely Tales for Children* (London, 1910), p. 133.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Lang, *Prince Prigio*, in *My Own Fairy Book* (Bristol, n.d.), p. 8. *The Gold of Farnilee* in the same volume deals with our native fairies in a very different way.

<sup>3</sup> Motif (F.311.1).

<sup>4</sup> Motif (F.361.1.1).

<sup>5</sup> *Le Jeu Adam, ou de la Feuillie. Œuvres Complètes du Trouvère Adam de la Halle* (Paris, 1872).

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dominantly feminine, and were popularly supposed to be departed spirits rather than beings of another order. "Miss Barbary, sir," said Mrs. Rachel, "who is now among the Seraphim,"—"I hope so, I'm sure," said Mr Kenge politely.<sup>1</sup> Or if this is a little ambiguous a more indisputable and later example may be found in an American children's book: 'but angels are not the same as seraphims. Seraphims are brighter white and have bigger wings, and I think are longer dead than angels, which are just freshly dead.'<sup>2</sup>

In the seventeenth century even the lighter and more sophisticated treatment of the fairies had a different emphasis:

If ye will with *Mab* find grace,  
Set each Platter in his place:  
Rake the Fier up, and get  
Water in, ere Sun be set.  
Wash your Pailles, and clense your Dairies;  
Sluts are loathsome to the Fairies:  
Sweep your house; who doth not so,  
*Mab* will pinch her by the toe.<sup>3</sup>

Or:

At morning and at evening both  
You merry were and glad,  
So little care of sleepe and sloth  
These prettie ladies had;  
When Tom came home from labour,  
Or Ciss to milking rose,  
Then merrily merrily went their tabor,  
And nimbly went their toes.<sup>4</sup>

Or:

These make our Girles their sluttery rue,  
By pinching them both blacke and blew,  
And put a penny in their shue,  
The house for cleanly sweeping:  
And in their courses make that Round,  
In Meadowes, and in Marshes found,

<sup>1</sup> Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (London, 1853).

<sup>2</sup> K. D. Wiggin, *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (London, 1911).

<sup>3</sup> Robert Herrick, *Poems* (Oxford, 1915), p. 201.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Corbet, *Poems*, 4th edition (1807), p. 214. *Farewell Rewards and Fairies. To be sung to the tune of God a mercy Will.*

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Of them so call'd the *Fayrie* ground,  
Of which they have the keeping.<sup>1</sup>

These things are as lightly intended as the others, yet they come nearer to reality, and a long step nearer to peasant life than our modern convention. Something more like them is to be found among the late nineteenth-century Irish writers; who are indeed upon the same pleasant ground between belief and disbelief as our Jacobeans. Allingham is perhaps as near the seventeenth century in spirit as we shall get for a while:

The rogue was mine, beyond a doubt.  
I stared at him; he stared at me:  
'Servant, sir.' 'Humph' said he,  
And pulled a snuff-box out.  
He took a long pinch, seemed better pleased  
The queer little Lepracaun;  
Offer'd the box with a whimsical grace,—  
Pouf! he flung the dust in my face,  
And, while I sneezed,  
Was gone!<sup>2</sup>

Indeed the same thing happened to our folk-lore as to our music; we were suddenly deluged from foreign sources, which enriched our soil, but hid our landmarks. The Italian opera and the German musicians killed the tradition of Purcell and Byrd, as Perrault and Grimm and Hans Andersen buried our native fairy-tales. Twenty people know *Cinderella* and *Rumpelstilzkin* and *Bluebeard* for one that knows *Tattercoats* and *Tom Tit Tot* and *Mr. Fox*.<sup>3</sup> In music, song has ceased to be a native habit to us; the caller no longer amuses himself by picking out an air as he waits for his host, and strangers at an inn do not join in part-songs now. In the same way our country habits have changed into urban ones; and the fairies, who descended perhaps from gods older than those the Druids worshipped, who were so long lamented as lost and so slow to go, have gone, now and for ever. They may not have cared for church bells, but they liked factory horns and street lights even less; so that now the most curious of studies is that of our own native tales.

<sup>1</sup> Michael Drayton, *Nimphidia. The Works of Michael Drayton* (Oxford, 1932), Vol. III, p. 127.

<sup>2</sup> Allingham, 'The Lepracaun', *Rhymes for Young Folk* (London, n.d.), p. 48.

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix II, Nos. 9, 5, 10.



And yet perhaps they have not quite gone, but still dance before us, diminishing but never departing. For even now scattered tales come in from Ireland and the Highlands, from Yorkshire and Somerset and Shropshire. And even among the learned there are a few like Aubrey, who still collect and more than half believe.

When the Jacobean writer drew upon his native traditions for fairy ornament he had, so far as one is able to judge, four main types of fairies to choose from, and two standpoints from which he might regard them, as benevolent or as evil. The types of fairies existing in oral tradition at that time must be, to a certain extent, a matter of speculation, for the study of folk-lore was in its infancy in the seventeenth century; but we have some sources of knowledge which, when combined, enable us to make a fairly reliable estimate of the main body of the oral tradition. The first and fullest source is the body of Irish and Welsh tales of fairies, written down at differing dates from the beginning of the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century, but remarkably homogeneous in subject-matter and style. These give us a full account of the heroic fairies of Celtic legend, their way of living, their appearance, characters and habits. Much slighter are the mentions in the medieval chronicles and romances. We have further the contemporary notices of fairies by those who, like Aubrey and Kirk, were interested in folk-lore, or by those who mentioned them incidentally in the course of talk about more serious things, like Reginald Scot and the other writers on witchcraft, or those less literary and more practical mentions of fairies that occur in the witch trials. These last are a valuable if painful testimony, because, however fantastic they may seem, they bear witness to a real belief and cannot be dismissed as poetic embroidery. Nor can the traditional ballads be disregarded as a source of information, for owing to their easily memorized form they carry us back to very early traditions; but they must also be viewed with a certain suspicion, because this form readily gathers later accretions which are sometimes difficult to detect. The last source, and one of the most valuable, is the comparison of the later accounts and stories of our native fairies, orally collected by the folklorists, with the corresponding material in other countries. Without the comparison it might be urged—and indeed it has been urged