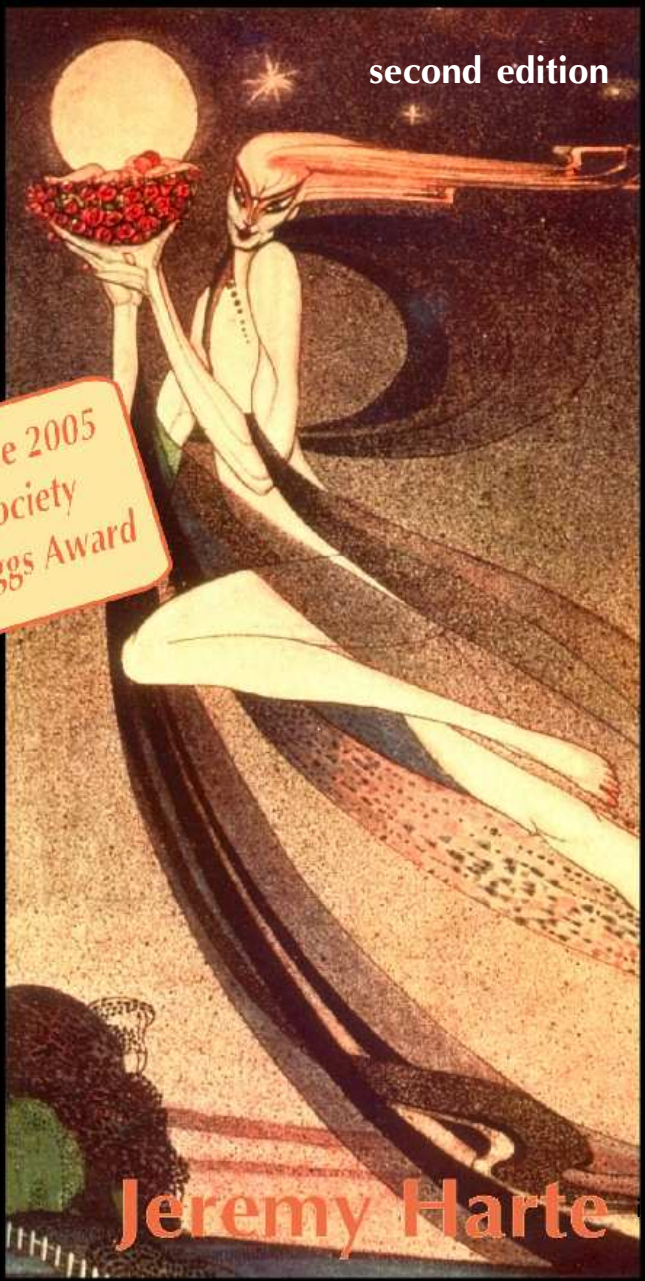
Explore Fairy Traditions

second edition



Winner of the 2005 Folklore Society Katharine Briggs Award

Jeremy Harte

This PDF edition includes an additional chapter 'Fairy Studies: An update since *Explore Fairy Traditions'*.

We are not alone. In the shadows of our countryside there lives a fairy race, older than humans, and not necessarily friendly to them. For hundreds of years, men and women have told stories about the strange people. beautiful as starlight, fierce as wolves, and heartless as ice. These are not tales for children. They reveal the fairies as a passionate, proud, brutal people.

Explore Fairy Traditions draws on legends, ballads and testimony from throughout Britain and Ireland to reveal what the fairies were really like. It looks at changelings, brownies, demon lovers, the fairy host, and abduction into the Otherworld. Stories and motifs are followed down the centuries to reveal the changing nature of fairy lore, as it was told to famous figures like W.B. Yeats and Sir Walter Scott. All the research is based on primary sources and many errors about fairy tradition are laid to rest.

Jeremy Harte combines folklore scholarship with a lively style to show what the presence of fairies meant to people's lives. Like their human counterparts, the secret people could kill as well as heal. They knew marriage, seduction, rape and divorce; they adored some children and rejected others. If we are frightened of the fairies, it may be because their world offers an uncomfortable mirror of our own.

Jeremy Harte is a researcher into folklore and archaeology, with a particular interest in sacred space and tales of encounters with the supernatural. His other books include *Cuckoo Pounds and Singing Barrows, The Green Man*, and *Alternative Approaches to Folklore*. He is curator of Bourne Hall Museum in Surrey, where he lives alone in an old house full of dust and shadows.

The aim of Heart of Albion's 'Explore' series is to provide accessible introductions to folklore and mythology. Some books provide 'overviews' of quite broad topics, drawing together current academic research with popular beliefs. Other books in the series deal with more specific topics, but still with the aim of providing a wide-ranging introduction to the topic.

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Cover illustration 'The Good Fairy' Kay Nielsen (detail)

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Part 1

Introduction

1: Who are the fairies?

'Faerie is a perilous land', said J.R.R. Tolkien. 'In it are pitfalls for the unwary and dungeons for the overbold' (Tolkien 1964: 11). It is the hidden country that lies behind our familiar landscape, visible to us perhaps in a faint outline, but seen in its entirety by those born and bred in the old fairy tradition. To look at the world through their eyes is to step into a different country – beautiful, cruel, and above all, strange. Here we will meet with hollow hills and inhabited lakes, trees that bleed and cry out, obedient whirlwinds and treacherous gold. Little is as it seems in that land, not even life and death. And before setting out for it, a traveller would do well to find out something about the natives.

Fortunately there is no shortage of books about the good people, the seelie court, the other crowd, the gentry, Themselves… people do not like to call them fairies, it sounds so blunt and abrupt; and besides, you never know who might be listening. In the Highlands, 'being supposed always, though invisibly, present, they are, on all occasions, spoken of with respect. In general, all conversation concerning them is avoided; and when they are casually mentioned, their apprehended displeasure is carefully averted, by adding some propitiatory expression of praise' (Grahame 1812: 270-1). The hidden people made no secret of their own views on the subject. In the Scottish Lowlands, people used to quote a verse in which they said:

> Call us good neighbours, good neighbours we'll be
>
> Call us fairies, fairies we'll be.
>
> ('J.H.C.' 1868: 197)

What 'being a fairy' might involve is not spelt out, but it is clearly unpleasant. Perhaps it would be best to say as little of them as possible.

That was not the view of Reginald Scot, a Kentish squire who made the first study of these traditions, back in 1584. Others had written about

fairies before him, but he was the first to discuss the way that people believed in them; and while later folklorists have tended to a wistful fondness for old superstitions, Scot is belligerent. 'In our childhood', he says, 'our mothers' maids have so … fraied us with bull-beggers, spirits, witches, urchens, elves, hags, fairies, satyrs, pans, sylens, Kit with the cansticke, tritons, centaurs, dwarfes, giants, imps, calcars, conjurors, nymphs, changling, Incubus, Robin Goodfellow, the spoorne, the mare, the man in the oke, the hell wain, the fier drake, the puckle, Tom Thombe, Hob gobblin, Tom Tumbler, boneles, and such other bugs, that we are afraid of our owne shadowes' (Scot 1886: 122).

Scot's list of fairies has inspired a series of imitations, perhaps the best of them being a 400-word extravaganza by the Victorian folklorist Michael Aislabie Denham, which can be found reproduced in its entirety in Katharine Briggs' *Dictionary of Fairies* (Denham 1892: 2.77–80; Briggs 1976: 95–6). In fact Briggs, who is perhaps the one essential writer on fairy traditions in the British Isles, began her researches with an enquiry into these fairy names. Fate had put her in charge of a troop of junior Girl Guides, who wanted to know what brownies, pixies and the other group titles might mean. By the time she had finished finding out, she had a manuscript entitled *The Personnel of Fairyland*; and four more books were to follow over the next two decades (Davidson 2000: 193; Briggs 1959b, 1967, 1976, 1978).

This was an impressive body of work, but its success created a kind of template for subsequent publications to follow. Since then, there has been a slew of Guides, Field Guides and Illustrated Encyclopaedias (Arrowsmith 1977; Curran 1998; Franklin 2002) which expand the Reginald Scot theme by giving helpful alphabetical listings of the different sorts of fairies. It reminds you (often quite deliberately) of those splendid Guides to British Birds which have one page for the reed warbler and another for the sedge warbler, each with notes on plumage and habitat. Certainly after scanning one of these volumes, the reader will have no difficulty telling a boggart from a buggane, if you should come across one, which you won't. Fairies may be real, but they are not real in such a literal-minded way.

What is real, of course, is the people who tell stories about fairies – and they are at risk of being forgotten in the hurry to catalogue every one of their creations, from the asrai to the wulver. Moreover, if we examine carefully what people are saying, some of the more elaborate taxonomies of their beliefs begin to look suspicious. There is a wonderful picture of spriggans in that 1970s classic, *Faeries*, which is

essentially Katharine Briggs brought to life with fantasy illustrations (Froud and Lee 1978: 20–1). The accompanying text explains to us that they are mischievous giant spirits found at coits and carns. The idea that there were five varieties of Cornish fairy – the small people, spriggans, piskies, buccas and brownies – goes back to Robert Hunt, who worked as a mining consultant in the area around St. Ives from 1830 onwards (Hunt 1865). But Henry Jenner, who knew a great deal more about Cornish matters and wrote while the traditions were still alive, thought that small people, piskies, and spriggans were simply three different names for the same thing; the only difference lay in the choice of Standard English, West Country dialect, or vestigial Cornish to describe them (Jenner 1916). As for the brownies, they were conjured into being when Hunt misunderstood a bee-charming rhyme (Spence 1948: 82). Here a whole species of fairy has been created, not by the folk, but by the folklorist.

Besides, even when a story about fairies was recorded word for word – and that was not often – what does it mean? We can point to a cat when we say 'cat', if we want to make our meaning clear, but we cannot point to a brownie; as the linguists would put it, 'brownie' is a symbol without a referent (Williams 1991: 457). The word was first used in 1513 by Gavin Douglas, for whom it was just one amongst many names for frightening wild spirits (*Eneados* Book 6 line 18). Eighty years later, when King James VI mounted the attack on fairy belief in his *Daemonologie,* the brownie had become a domestic spirit, 'doing as it were necessarie turnes vp and down the house…like a rough-man' (Book 3 Ch. 2). This is the brownie that appears in the standard literature, and which inspired the junior branch of the Girl Guides – in their doing 'necessarie turns', if not in their general appearance; the brownie looked like a big hairy man, and was entirely naked (Spence 1948: 37). Yet the Broonie who appears in the tales of Duncan Williamson is very different. For Williamson, a Scottish Traveller who grew up in the 1930s, the Broonie is an old, old man – a lonely tramp with a little white beard, who is despised as old men often are, yet who has beautiful blue eyes that are full of life. In one story he is jeered at by a hotel-keeper, a stranger to the district, but is treated well by the local boatman who acts as odd-job-man for the hotel. The coin that he gives to the boatman, when looked at, is not a penny but a five-pound-piece; the hotel-keeper goes down with a mystery illness, he and all his guests, so he loses trade and has to learn to make friends with the locals to stay in business (Williamson 1985:14–15, 97–107). That's an object lesson in how to treat gentle

old tramps, and by implication, how to treat Travellers as well. But which is the true brownie or Broonie? There is no answer to that.

Will the real leprechaun please step forward? Surely there must be more to him than the grinning stacks of stuffed green figures by the duty-free shops at the airport. Indeed there is, and Bob Curran of County Down has written a short volume on *The Truth About the Leprechaun* (Curran 2000). In amongst the usual whimsical accounts of habitat, appearance and so on, Curran passes on many authentic stories about the Irish *leipreachán*, who seems much more grim than the smiling chappie on the tea-towels; he is sullen and stingy, and all too eager to do harm to a stranger. This debunking of the tourist convention is itself conventional, for ever since Puck lambasted the tinsel fairies in *Puck of Pook's Hill* it has been understood that fake fairies are sweet and pastel-tinted, while real ones are gritty and rough (Kipling 1906: 14). But the earliest references to something like a leprechaun are cheerful enough. In a manuscript of the eighth century, Fearghus mac Léide travels to the underwater realm of a people called *luchorpán* (meaning 'little body') and is entertained with gifts by the pigmy nation. The word *luchorpán* later became reversed to *lupracán*, and by the nineteenth century people near Limerick were speaking about the luarachan while those in Ulster knew him as a logheryman; in County Cork he was the cluricaun, while the name of leprechaun was found in the Midlands (Winbery 1976; Ó Giolláin 1984). As this form was used in the standard books of folklore, it gradually eclipsed the rest. But before this happened, the traditions had become quite diverse. The cluricaun was a mischievous spirit attached to certain families, haunting their cellars and covertly drinking up their wine, while the logheryman could be a solitary rural figure, sleeping covered in his long hair. And even as these distinctions were being invented, the tradition was adopted in Gaelic-speaking Scotland, where the dwarf spirit was called *luspardan*. The island of Luchruban, off the coast of Lewis, evidently preserves another form of the name. It had 'ane little kirk in it… Pygmeis hes bene earthit [buried] thair'. Sixteenth-century travellers proved the truth of this claim by unearthing some of these tiny bones; a hundred years later, other enquirers were equally satisfied with the claim that these were the bones of sea-birds; and now nobody can find the pigmy kirk at all (Henderson and Cowan 2001: 50-4). Further north in Orkney they talk of the luridan, evidently another form of the name, although this spirit is said to be much like a brownie. It seems that any attempt to pin

down an exact meaning for words like 'brownie' and 'leprechaun' is so much grappling with thin air.

This is to be expected, because those who passed on the traditions were not concerned with what the fairies were like in themselves; they were interested in how they might deal with people. It is only literature – and that not until after Shakespeare – that asks us to imagine what fairies do when there is no-one watching them. But many modern authors have written as if they had exclusive insights into fairy life and psychology. Carolyn White, in her survey of Irish fairies, has not embarked on chapter one before she is telling us that fairies like to be left alone, that they are passionate creatures, that they are not very subtle reasoners (White 1976: 8–9). This all makes sense to the reader of a modern novel, but it is not the way of tradition. Compare it with how things are said in the ballad of Hind Etin. He is a fairy who has taken a mortal woman to be his bride. Why are her cheeks so wet, ask the children. There's a reason for that, he says, it is all

> For your mother was an earl's dochter,
> Of noble birth and fame,
> And now she's wife o Hynde Etin,
> Wha neer got christendame.
>
> (Child 1882-98: 1.360–71, no.41)

We are not told what he thinks. We are not told what she thinks. We are told that he took her from a castle into a forest for a union with something from beyond the human world – and the rest we can figure out for ourselves.

Unlike later folklorists, the people for whom fairies really meant something never thought to classify or analyse the strange people; instead, their stories are all about the fairy encounter with the human world, and since no two encounters are ever the same, their messages about fairies are not necessarily consistent. A story-teller warns us carefully to shun all contact with fairies, for fear of being blasted or struck; then another informant, or even the same one in a different mood, says that if we see a leprechaun, we should grab him and squeeze until he lets on about the hidden gold. At one moment fairies are small enough to hide under a dock leaf, in the next they are large enough for knock-down fights and secret affairs. First they are beautiful beyond imagining, then they are intolerably deformed; they are immortal, yet they have funerals; they cannot abide fire, they come and sit by the hearth; they flee from the touch of iron, and they are

master blacksmiths. At Craig-y-Ddinas fairies were driven away by the Methodists, and in Man they made special friends with one (Spence 1948: 292; Killip 1975: 31). The fairies of Donegal demanded a share of illicit whisky, while those of Mull never touched the stuff (Ó hEochaidh 1977: 380; Henderson & Cowan 2001: 63). In short, nothing has ever been said of fairies in one story that could not be countered by another, equally authoritative story to the contrary.

2: Are fairies real?

'For the folklorist, the important issue is what people believe, or say, about the fairies. Tales of the fairies, and what people are prepared to believe about them are matters quite distinct from their actual, physical existence' (Smith 1980: 398). Here scholarship speaks with a voice quite unlike the style of most guides to fairies, which are written on the pretext that each different sort of fairy has a particular appearance, way of life, native habitat and so on. Or is this a pretext? For spiritual seekers it can be much more than that. Faery Magic, Faery Wicca, and Celtic Faery Shamanism (to name just three of the paths on offer) start from the assumption that fairies do exist, and that people can really meet them. In which case, perhaps, we should pay careful attention to traditional descriptions of the hidden people.

But tradition can be very subtle in what it says about this. Fairies are not real as the things of this world are real. They live in grassy mounds, but if you slice the top off a mound, you will not find the fairies inside – though you may soon find out that you should have left well alone. In areas with a rich folklore of caves, like North Wales or the Hebrides, there are very few stories that link them with fairies. Why so? It is not hard to imagine an actual tribe of people dwelling in caves, while it is quite impossible to imagine a real race that lives inside mounds or rocks; and fairies have to be unimaginable. That's what makes them fairies.

So the reality of fairies – if fairies are real – must be of a kind that allows for illusions, deceptions, and seeming impossibilities. If they are creatures of an inconstant shape, then we are never going to be able to tell a *glaistig* from a *gruagach*, no matter how many times we check them against the pictures. That has not stopped believers from writing detailed studies of what fairies are really like. The most famous of these is *The Secret Common-Wealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies*, by Robert Kirk (1644–92), the minister of Aberfoyle in Stirlingshire (Henderson

and Cowan 2001: 171–6). According to later tradition, Kirk was eventually carried off by the people whom he studied, in revenge for having revealed their secrets; this story may have been whipped up by the locals at Aberfoyle when the first tourists came looking for the Fairy Hill, but it suggests a certain unease about Kirk's dual role as both a clergyman and a believer in the hidden people. The Highlanders called them the *sith*, and there were seers, or specialists in fairy matters, who had contact with them; it was from these people that Kirk gained his information, and not from direct knowledge. His book is, as it were, a collection of travellers' tales from the Otherworld, just like the early anthropological studies which relied on eye-witnesses returning from America. He draws on the latest thought in metaphysics to argue for an actual, substantial mode of existence for the *sith*, however subtly different it might be from our world.

Kirk's fairies had 'light changeable bodies… somewhat of the nature of a condens'd cloud, and best seen in twilight' (Kirk 1976: 49–50). This was physics, not folklore, but it is the physics of a pre-Newtonian world. Since then, it has become much more difficult to define how fairies could be as real as rocks and trees are real; how they could have an existence independent of what people imagine about them. Patrick Harpur has written books which locate them in what he calls 'daimonic reality', while some of the most thoughtful definitions have come from Fortean scholars (Harpur 1994; Dash 1997: 418–37).

This may seem a little esoteric – who believes in fairies nowadays? Quite a few people, actually, and not all of them learnt their lore from the 'Mind Body and Spirit' section of the local bookshop. It pays to remember this. A folklorist was talking to an Irish countryman about the fairies when he made some unguarded sceptical remark, and the old fellow rounded on him – "You are talking like you were a Protestant or a Yankee or a foreigner of some sort. Or you have been listening to the so-called educated ones" (Christiansen 1971–3: 102). Of course some researchers do approach the whole subject in the detached tone of an agnostic theologian, but others do not. Eddie Lenihan of Crusheen, who knows more about the living fairy faith than most, got into a chat with a taxi-driver on the way to Dublin Airport. "But do you believe all that oul' stuff?", says the man. ' "I do", I replied directly. No point in beating about the bush' (Lenihan 2003: 9–10).

Ideally, perhaps, belief and scholarship should go together. Between 1897 and 1900, the *Fortnightly Review* and other journals published six studies of fairy belief in the West of Ireland by W.B. Yeats, who was

a folklorist as well as a poet and visionary. His first essay on the subject, *The Celtic Twilight*, begins soberly enough with details of place and informant, but within a few chapters he has put his notebook away and stands windswept on the beach at Rosses, speaking to an invocation of the fairies and their queen (Yeats 1893: 83–9; Kinahan 1988: 231). So he knew that people meant what they said when they talked about fairies, whom they called the *sí* (or *sidhe* in the older spelling; the same word as Gaelic *sith*). There was a man on Inis Mór in the Aran Isles who heard the sound of fighting in his room, and when he got up there was blood on the floor, and his child was dead. A neighbour, who was out early that morning, saw the fairies going in a troop, and the child in the middle of them. 'Once, while he was telling this story, he thought I was not believing him, and he got greatly excited and stood up and said he was an old man and might die before he got to his house and he would not tell me a lie, before God he would not tell me a lie' (Yeats 1993: 169).

Irish people took fairies very seriously, which is why the *Clonmel Chronicle* was able to report in 1895 that a young woman had been carried away by them. Her name was Bridget Cleary. She was a young married woman, twenty-six years old, stylishly dressed and apparently quite good-looking. There are no photographs, not even in the police records, although the police did keep a photo of the cutting in the bog where her body was found. For Bridget had not been taken by the fairies at all. She had been dragged by her husband and relatives from the bed where she was lying ill, and accused of being a false imitation, some kind of substitute for the real woman who had been carried off. In their efforts to bring back the true Bridget, Michael Cleary and the rest held her above the fire and threw a jug of piss over her; they forced her to take herbs that had been given to them by a man called Denis Ganey, who was rumoured to know about these things. The next day, her husband held a burning stick to her mouth, and when her clothes caught fire he threw paraffin on them. And after Bridget was dead, he hid the body (Bourke 1999: 55–113).

> The night was cold in the month of March she was lying
> in her bed,
> They marked her on the forehead with a poker burning
> red,
> Are you Bridget Cleary they asked her many a time
> She answered yes but they would not stop from doing
> the awful crime.
>
> (Ó Giolláin 1991: 210)

This verse, from a contemporary broadside, comes to the heart of the matter. It is all very well for you or I to give credence to people's beliefs about the supernatural, but what about Bridget's belief that she was *not* a fairy? Does that have no better standing than Michael's belief, equally strongly held, that she was one? It is for this reason that Angela Bourke, who wrote the classic study *The Burning of Bridget Cleary*, subtitled it *A True Story*. Our first response, confronted by that horrifying scene, is to insist that there were no fairies, that it was all a lie. Then why did these people ever think or act as if there were? Bourke shows how talk about fairies need not be literally be true, but may still express the kind of things that can only be said in stories, and not in words.

None of this cut much ice with the Clonmel Crown Court, who gave Michael Cleary twenty years for manslaughter. He would have gone down for murder, had it not been established that he acted as he did because he held the traditional belief in fairies, like most Irish countrymen. By the close of the nineteenth century, ideas of Ireland, the fairies, rural life and traditional values were all bound up into a single image, though usually it struck outsiders as endearing rather than lethal.

Thomas Crofton Croker, who started the whole business of recording folktales back in 1825 by wandering with his notebook around West Cork, wrote up his fairy stories in a charming impersonation of the countryman's voice; but in case you might think he was an artless peasant himself, he added long notes which reminded the reader of similar stories they might have met in English literature, and in Continental writers such as the brothers Grimm (Schacker 2003: 46–77). His compatriot Thomas Keightley, who wrote the first international compilation of fairy legends, was equally careful to buttress his entertaining reading with a good scaffold of footnotes (Keightley 1828). And both writers were indebted to their charismatic precursor, Sir Walter Scott.

Scott – or rather his collaborator John Leyden, who did most of the research – stands at the head of fairy scholarship in the British Isles (Henderson and Cowan 2001: 195). Their 'Essay on the Fairy Superstitions' appears as a headnote to the ballad of 'Tam Lin' in the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, but it is really a small booklet in itself (Scott 1802–3: 2.167–227). Here readers were first introduced to the forgotten manuscript of Robert Kirk; here they met with fairy passages from the antiquarian John Aubrey, the demonologist Richard Bovet,

the versifier Thomas Heywood, and others who would become standard citations in the literature; here they first learned about the brownie and the kelpie, beings who (many transformations later) would re-emerge as Katharine Briggs' bright-faced Girl Guides. But this essay from the *Minstrelsy* was remarkable, not just for the new information which it offered, but for the way in which it brought together folktales, learned languages, scholarship, the atmospheric evocation of landscape and a certain bluff common sense. It was a fabric which, once woven, would not be easily unpicked again. In a sense, we are still seeing fairies through the eyes of Scott and Leyden, not through those of the people who believed in them.

3: Who first told the stories?

Scott's conclusion on fairy lore was that 'A work of great interest might be compiled upon the original of popular fiction, and the transmission of similar tales from age to age, and from country to country… It would carry me far beyond my bounds, to produce instances of this community of fable among nations who never borrowed from each other any thing intrinsically worth learning' (Scott 1810: xcix). Episodes from our homely fairy stories could be recognised, a little strangely dressed perhaps, in the literature of far-off countries, and in the mythology of pagan religions.

Readers of Croker's little book were surprised to find that their old childhood tales had some kind of scholarly standing. One reviewer, anxious to show that the Highlander could tell as good a story as the Irishman, passed on the tale of a mill where there was trouble at night, and the miller's man was set to keep watch. Come midnight, in walks a *uirisg*, which is a kind of shaggy spirit; he sees the man, and asks to know his name. "Myself", says the man, cautiously. The *uirisg* curls up before the fire, and is soon asleep when the man, not much liking his company, tips hot ashes onto him so that his hair is all ablaze. He streaks out the door, bellowing to his fellows: "Myself has burnt me! Myself has burnt me!". "Well", they say, "if it's you that's burnt yourself, then you go cool yourself down" (Rose 1825: 211). And the reviewer, a good classicist of course, expects that his audience will recognise one of the oldest stories of all – the episode of the Cyclops from Homer's *Odyssey*, where the wily Odysseus tells Polyphemus that he is called 'No-one'. When he is blinded, the giant roars out "No-one is killing me", and gets as little sympathy as the *uirisg* did (*Odyssey* Bk.9).

In Apuleius' tale of Cupid and Psyche, young Psyche is told to go down to the house of the dead in search of her husband, but on no account to accept the food offered there (*Golden Ass* Book. 6 Ch. 9). It is the same when Thomas the Rhymer, in the ballad that bears his name, is taken on a far journey by the Queen of Elfame, and cautioned not to eat of the fruit that he sees hanging on the trees (Child 1882–98: 1.317–29, no.37). Then again, Snorri Sturluson tells how Thor stopped

off one night at a farmhouse, where he killed and roasted his goats for supper. After all had been eaten, he gathered the bones together and raised his hammer over them, when all at once bone joined to bone and the goats stood up, alive once more. But the boy of the house had cracked one of the bones, and that goat was lame afterwards (*Gylfaginning*). Similarly in a Devon farmhouse, the farmer sat up at night to watch the pixies, who dragged in one of his cows, killed her and made a meal of her. Then they started a game with the bones, tossing them to and fro, and the farmer caught a bone and kept it. After their game, they called the cow back to life, and off she went to the byre, limping where the bone had been abstracted (Henderson 1866: 321–2).

Peleus, the Greek hero, wins the sea-nymph Thetis by clinging onto her, though she transforms herself into fire and wind, a tiger and a serpent (Apollodoros, *Library* Book 3 Ch. 13.5). In the ballad of 'Tam Lin', the heroine Janet wins her fairy lover by clinging onto him, though he turns into a serpent and a lion, into hot iron and fire (Child 1882–98: 1.335–8, no.39). When Lugh, the hero of Irish epic, ends the battle of Magh Tuireadh by cutting off the head of Balor of the Evil Eye, he is advised to place it on his own head; but instead he places it on a pillar of stone, and the stone cracks from top to bottom (Rees and Rees 1961: 37). And when an Irish girl leaves the hill of the fairies, they offer a beautiful shawl for her to wear; but instead she ties it around a tree, and the tree splits from roots to crown (Smith 1987: 113).

The recurrence of these motifs has been studied for many years; reconstituted bones have their own specialist literature, and so do heroes introduced as 'Myself' (Jackson 1961: 23, 118). In his *Science of Fairy Tales*, Edwin Sidney Hartland attempted an international survey of the prohibition on eating the food of the fairies or the dead – the motif which is shared by the stories of Psyche and Thomas the Rhymer, C211.1 in Thompson's system (Thompson 1955–8: 1.505). He also worked hard to collect every instance of a child exchanged by the fairies, each case where a fairy bride had deserted her husband, and every occasion on which time slipped by mysteriously in a trip to the fairy hill. That was in 1891, perhaps the last year in which anyone could have hoped to write down everything known about the traditional lore of spirits.

Certainly there is a pleasure in recognising these familiar motifs in a strange costume. In Ireland and Scotland there are fairy trees that must never be cut down, otherwise the little people will cause bad luck

(Mullin 1997: 88–90; Lenihan 2003: 115–23). Alastair McIntosh, the ecologist, mentioned this local tradition when he took visitors to the fairy knowe at Wester Foulis in Perthshire. As was proper, they stood briefly outside the wood and assured the fairies that they would do no damage. One of the party, who happened to be the World Wildlife Fund Manager for Malaysia, took him aside to say how grateful he was. Of course everyone did this back home, but he had thought that while he was in the West he would have to pretend to be rational… (Laviolette and McIntosh 1997: 8). A touch of folklore makes the whole world kin. But if everybody shares the same story (and some beliefs about spirits seem well-nigh universal) then we are no nearer understanding where that story might come from. Was it learnt in one place, and then scattered across the globe? Does it echo some deep natural need of the human mind? Is it perhaps a universal aspect of spiritual reality?

Any of these three explanations could be true for the common motifs of fairy lore. It is different when we come to the longer, traditional tales. Consider the story of Whuppity Stoorie, as the Scots call it, though it was Tom Tit Tot to the English and will probably be more familiar in its German form as Rumpelstiltskin. Anyway, it's the one with the girl who claims that she can spin, and can't, and has the work done by a fairy or imp who will claim her baby unless she can guess what its name might be (Marshall 1973). Clearly there is no universal archetype which impels people, quite unknown to each other, to invent Tom Tit Tot. It is a story which spread because somebody once made it up, and other people liked it enough to repeat the basic plot. And this is true of a great deal of fairy lore.

But can these stories be traced to their point of origin? In 1825, Thomas Croker was told a charming story about the fairies of Knockgrafton in County Tipperary. They came out on moonshiney nights to dance in the old fort, and as they twirled round they all sang the refrain "Sunday, Monday… Sunday, Monday… Sunday, Monday". Very nice, but a little repetitive. There was a hunchback that lived nearby, a good-natured fellow, and he happened to be passing by while the fairies came out to dance and sing. Wanting to show his appreciation, he helped their verse along by adding an extra note: "Sunday, Monday, Tuesday too". Oh, but they were delighted. They took the hump off him, just to show their thanks, and he went back home a proud tall man. Well, the story got around, and soon enough there was another visitor to the fort; he was a hunchback too, but in all other respects the exact opposite, being surly and cross-grained by

nature. He heard the whole story, and nothing would do for him but to go to the fort next night, where he waited for the fairies to come and sing. They had hardly started the new chorus when he blundered into their circle, shouting raucously "Wednesday! And Thursday! And what about Friday?". All their song was spoiled, and the fairies swarmed about him in fury. They took the hump that they had removed from their friend, and clapped over the one that already stood on his back, so that when the dawn came he limped home twice the cripple that ever he was (Croker 1825–8).

Since the nineteenth century, many more versions of this story have been collected in Ireland – over three hundred, at one count (Ó Suilleabháin and Christiansen 1963: 101). In Ireland, the living tradition of storytelling survived until well into the twentieth century, and a Folklore Commission was set up to record it, with government funding, in 1935. Since then, they have collected over a million stories, and are still indexing them. In the thick bound volumes which line a room at University College Dublin, there are about 800 banshees, perhaps a little over 1000 leprechauns.

Versions of the Knockgrafton story are known from Scotland, too, and from Man, so that a Celtic distribution seems possible (Morrison 1908). But then we find that the story is known in Germany as well, and in Spain, and throughout Europe (Aarne and Thompson 1961: 170). Not just Europe, either; because the same tale has been told in Tibet, and China, and Japan (Ashliman 2000). You can sit by the fire in Korea, which is about as far from Tipperary as you can get, and they will still be telling the same story.

When a tale is told in a single region of the world, we can perhaps find enough evidence to show how and when it spread. But to trace the transmission of these international folktales is a task which would defeat any resources short of the Recording Angel. A lifetime could be spent accumulating international versions of the Knockgrafton story, and at the end it is very doubtful if we would know whether it was a Korean story that had somehow ended up in Ireland, or vice versa. If it is impossible to trace the origin of these stories about fairies, then clearly the collection of types and motifs will never be able to establish the origin of the fairies themselves.

4: How were the stories told?

But there is more to a traditional story than the bare plot summary, number by number as it stands in the type and motif index. 'It is precisely the colouring, the atmosphere, the unclassifiable individual details of a story, and above all the general purport that informs with life the undissected bones of the plot, that really count' (Tolkien 1964: 22–3). There are dozens of stories about how the fairies stole a baby and left a changeling in its place; but few can compare with Jenny Blackadder's version, as she told it to a circle of wide-eyed children from Dumfries-shire in the 1780s. Here is the mother, coming back after she has been too long at the well. 'She hears a skirl in her house like the sticking of a gryse, or the singing of a sow; fast she runs, and flees to the cradle, and there, I wat, she saw a sight that made her heart scunner. In place of her ain bonny bairn, she found a withered wolron, naething but skin and bane, with hands like a moudiewort, and a face like a paddock, a mouth frae lug to lug, and twa great glowerin een' (Chambers 1870: 70–2).

Whatever you might think about the origins and meaning of fairy stories – and, as we have seen, there are several views on this topic – this is the foundation on which it must rest; these are the stories themselves as they were told by the people who passed them on, from generation to generation. Nurse Jenny was a fine storyteller (she knew a good version of Whuppity Stoorie, too) though admittedly we only know of her through the recollections of Charles Sharpe, who was looking back to his boyhood through the mists of forty years. But Sharpe, like Thomas Croker and Patrick Kennedy after him, did at least make an effort to catch the voice and idiom in which the stories were told. It is quite another matter when an author takes their story from tradition, more or less, and then dresses it up with thoughts and feelings all of their own.

Allan Cunningham wrote about his native Galloway in the 1820s. He had believed in fairies as a boy, though something – the march of intellect, perhaps, or contact with the Edinburgh literati – later robbed him of his faith. By the time he came to write his *Traditional Tales of the English and Scottish Peasantry*, he had learned how to produce

lengthy and rather sentimental versions of the originals. But at least there had been originals. In 'The Hollow Ships', we recognise a common story in which the fairies try deceitfully to carry off a wife, leaving only a wooden substitute behind. There is a fine scene in which the husband keeps his wife from leaving the house, though voices from outside are calling her frantically. "Are you not a queer man and a stern?", says the wife. "I'm your ain leal wife, and will and maun have an explanation". But the husband says "It is written – 'Wives, obey your husbands'; but we have been stayed in our devotion, so let us pray" (Cunningham 1822: 2.258–95).

Now there are two themes which, more than any, run through fairy tradition; the relations between men and women, and the conflict between Christianity and other kinds of belief. Here we have them both vividly expressed in a single tale, and yet for all we know this might be a literary spin which Cunningham has given to the old story, and not part of folk tradition at all. As it happens, there is another version of this tale, one on which Cunningham drew when he was writing 'The Haunted Ships'. This was published in the appendix to a volume of traditional ballads by Robert Cromek; it makes much less of the husband's patriarchal authority, and does not mention the power of prayer at all (Cromek 1810: 305–6). Did Cunningham know something about local tradition which Cromek did not? They must have had a lot in common. In fact Allan Cunningham *was* R.H. Cromek, as far as this book was concerned, since he supplied the publisher with notes and made up most of the ballads as well (Miller 1920–1).

Deception has helped to build up the corpus of fairy lore, and it was not always as innocent as Cunningham's imposition on his readers. A series of ghoulish folktales from the Lincolnshire Fens was published in the early days of the journal *Folklore*. They were sent in by Marie Balfour, some in note form, and others written at length in a dense local dialect. Evidently the people of the Cars (as the drained parts of the fenland are called) took a very serious view of the Strangers, Tiddy Ones, or Yarthkins, as they were called. They put out offerings for them, and relied on them for the fertility of their crops and the health of their children.

Now, stripped of its Lincolnshire dialect, this all sounds uncommonly like something out of James Frazer's *Golden Bough*. The Strangers danced in the moonlight on the old stones, we are told – the very same place where, long ago, 'th' fo'ak set fire on tha sto'ans, 'n smeared 'un

wi' blood, an' thowt a deal more on 'un than o' th' pa'asson bodies an' th' chorch'. But now only the Wise Women remembered the old ceremonies (Balfour 1891: 279). This is good Frazerian stuff, and Balfour deserves some credit for creating a myth of rural paganism some fifty years before Gerald Gardner bared all; but it is not folklore.

Balfour's talents were not confined to Lincolnshire. She contributed several stories to Joseph Jacobs' anthology of English folktales, including a very effective reworking of ideas about a Northumberland spirit called the Hedley Kow. Jacobs, who had a good ear for folk idiom, spotted that something was not quite right. 'One might almost suspect Mrs. Balfour of being the victim of a piece of invention… scarcely after the manner of the folk' (Jacobs 1894: 222, 238). Still, he was happy to include 'Me A'an Sel', which Balfour had heard from a Mrs. W in North Sunderland. Or so she said. This is a variation on the *uirisg* story in which a boy plays by the fire with a fairy child, and uses the 'Myself' trick to escape when his new friend gets burnt; it can be found pretty much word for word in a source printed fifty years before, except that Balfour has added a few literary touches (Richardson 1841: B3.48).

Katharine Briggs did notice that there was something a little odd about Balfour's material: 'the uniqueness of her collection… has tempted some folklorists to disbelieve her report, but this is a heavy charge to bring' (Briggs 1976: 383). The Folklore Society was conducted on ladylike principles in those days, and anyway, source criticism was never Briggs' strongest point. She herself was halfway through a long creative partnership with Ruth Tongue, the singer and dramatist from Somerset. And Ruth Tongue was a gifted storyteller, in more senses than one.

Tongue spent her childhood in Somerset, a county to which she retired in 1957. Within two years she had contributed her first story to Katharine Briggs, reworking an account of the fairy fair which had been described in Bovet's *Pandaemonium*. By 1965 they were working together on two books. One was a volume of English folktales, of which at least half came from Tongue's prodigious powers of recall, or imagination. The other, a survey of Somerset folklore, was derived entirely from her own accounts. Five years later, after an unfortunate fire in which all Tongue's papers were burnt, she worked with Briggs on their final book, *Forgotten Folktales of the English Counties*. These came out while Briggs was working on the *Dictionary of Fairies*, a happy coincidence, for Tongue was now remembering stories that she

had been told from all over the British Isles. No sooner did Briggs find reference to an asrai, a silkie, a shoopiltee or a hyter sprite in her sources, than Tongue would suddenly recall a story which she had once been told about such a figure. And as these stories were fed back into the *Dictionary*, which was and is the standard work of reference on the subject, Tongue's material found a circulation which it might never have gained if it had been subject to more searching criticism (Harte 2001).

The stories which were created by Balfour and Tongue have real genius, and they can be found in many a book on English tradition, side by side with the real thing (Garner 1969: 51–9; Clarke and Roberts 1996: 108). In fact they are better than the real thing – 'almost believable, unlike the pretty fairies I thought I knew. I felt a shiver down my spine, proof of a kind of authenticity' (Purkiss 2000: 2). This is hardly surprising, for a fake is produced to fit our expectations of what something should be, and that's a game which reality can never win. It is only when taste has moved on that the authenticating details start to look sham.

The presence of an occasional bad apple only goes to show how much folklorists depend on the good faith of their predecessors. By and large, fairy lore does hang together consistently as reports from oral tradition, though there may be considerable variations in style. Jenny Blackadder's imagery was earthy and vivid; if we cross the language barrier from Scots to Gaelic, we will find storytellers with a quite different kind of conscious artistry, like this account from Harris. 'They were milking the cows, in the evening gloaming, when they observed a flock of fairies reeling and setting upon the green plain in front of the knoll. And, oh King! But it was they the fairies themselves that had the right to the dancing, and not the children of man! Bell-helmets of blue silk covered their heads, and garments of green satin covered their bodies, and sandals of yellow membrane covered their feet. Their heavy brown hair was streaming down their waist, and its lustre was of the fair golden sun of summer' (Evans-Wentz 1911: 116). Then in more recent times, there is the Scottish Traveller style brought to perfection by Duncan Williamson. These are spun out to fill a winter's night – his changeling story, ' The Taen-Awa', must be the longest on record – but the effect is achieved not by imaginative digressions, but by an almost novelistic feeling for character and situation (Williamson 1985: 43–65).

Not everyone has Williamson's way with words, or his memory for tales. Much of the fairy tradition collected in recent times has come from passive tradition bearers. Of the 600 items of fairy lore recorded by Robin Gwyndaf of the Welsh Folk Museum between the 1960s and 1980s, most were passive, and many sound like attempts to remember something from a book which would please the folklorist (Gwyndaf 1991). In 1937–8 the Irish Folklore Commission arranged a huge collecting scheme from primary schoolchildren – over 1100 volumes were written up – but they too acted as passive tradition bearers, reporting on what their parents and grandparents believed. You might think that active fairy tradition had died out, if it were not for the extraordinary work of Eddie Lenihan. No mean slouch at telling a story himself, Lenihan has sought out the best tradition bearers in Galway, Clare and Limerick, recording what they have to say and passing it down in local tradition (Lenihan 2003).

Many of Lenihan's stories are accounts, not of something that happened far away and long ago, but of personal experiences with the other crowd. They are closer to memorates – those short, unstructured recollections which we produce as evidence for the supernatural. Ask "Do you believe in leprechauns?" and you will be told something like this. 'I saw him myself, Tadhg… By gor, whatever look I gave I saw this thing rising up out of the gully and springing up on top of the rail of the bridge – yerrah! He was a paltry little thing, he wasn't a foot tall – and the sun was shining on him.I was as near to him as I am to the lower part of the house now… "*Th'anam 'on diabhal*! Look at the *lutharacán*!" said I' (Ó Giolláin 1984: 90–1).

Carl von Sydow, who first identified memorates as a genre of narrative, suggested that over time they turn into fabulates, or fully-fledged stories. As other people recall what we said, they unconsciously adapt it in line with the other traditions that they know – crocks of gold and other familiar incidents enter the scene, and in this way personal experience is transmuted into legend. Of course some stories never go through a memorate stage; they are, as it were, born legendary. Junior Crehan the fiddleplayer of County Clare used to tell how he caught the *lucharacán* and was taught a tune by him, which is certainly a cut above your usual vague story of apparitions (Uí Ógáin 1992–3: 203). As often happens in folklore, the distinction of memorates from fabulates is a useful tool in some cases, but not a set of categories to be applied universally.

Besides, what a folklorist calls memorates can be interpreted quite differently by other listeners. They have been taken as primary evidence by the fortean, the parapsychologist and, in earlier days, the theologian. The best account of fairies in Wales, and one of the most comprehensive early views of fairy tradition after Kirk, was collected by Edmund Jones, an Independent minister from Monmouthshire, whose main work was published in 1780. *A Relation of Apparitions of Spirits in Wales* consists mostly of what we would call ghost stories, but a minority of these appearances (about twenty, making up a sixth of the whole) were clearly identified as fairies. In any case Jones had his own system of classification: apparitions which lamented a bad life were damned spirits, those which gave good counsel were saved ones, and anything else belonged to a minor order of demons. Like the medieval thinkers from whom he took this scheme, he then had to explain why devils should take a holiday from their usual malignity to dance in circles under spreading trees. However, 'the light of eternity will show myriads of things which we cannot know here (nor are fit to know), and which we shall there certainly and infallibly know' (Jones 2003: 84). In any case, he wrote not to discuss what fairies were like, but only to establish the fact that such spirits existed – the best refutation, in his view, of atheism, deism, rationalism, and other menaces to faith.

5: Where do fairies come from?

Many years ago, when the Advocates' Library at Edinburgh contained antiquities as well as books, there was a weathered Roman altar on display, inscribed *Diis campestribus*. This means 'to the gods of the countryside', but when the old librarian was translating it for visitors, he would explain, "that's the fairies, ye ken"' (Scott 1830: 118). The age of Edmund Jones and Robert Kirk had passed, and it would never have occurred to the librarian to think that the glens were populated by real supernatural beings, whether gods or fairies. He simply meant that the pre-Christian inhabitants had once worshipped rural deities, and that traditions of these beings had lasted long enough to inspire a belief in fairies; in other words, scratch the surface of the fairy faith, and you will find that it is really a survival of paganism.

In fact this identification is not as conclusive as it sounds. Fairies are creatures of the imagination – or at least we apprehend them through our imagination – and that is a faculty which draws, quite indiscriminately, on everything that we have ever found out for ourselves or heard from tradition. So yes, a belief in fairies contains something of the old gods; but it also derives from every other figure in the web of story – from saints, ancestors, fiends, heroes, ghosts, familiars, vampires, angels and anything else that is possible to be imagined.

And the storyteller's art is so powerful a solvent that no scholar can reverse the process, or tease out the origins of a tradition without the help of independent historical sources. In Newfoundland, where the fairy belief is still very much current, there are two threats that the good people pose to those who trespass on their ground. They can blast the rash human, creating a tumour from which pins or hair or other nasty stuff will eventually be lanced; or they can lead people astray until they are hopelessly lost and cannot find their way home (Rieti 1991: 75–7). Now the original settlers of Newfoundland came mostly from Ireland and the West of England. There are many stories about being led astray by the fairies in the West Country, and just as in Newfoundland, a piece of bread in the pocket is a sovereign protection (Harte 1995). But there is no mention of anything like the blast. Irish tradition, on the other hand, is full of the danger to be expected from

fairy contact, including the idea of objects lodged in the body (Logan 1981: 96–7); but although there are stories of fairies that lead people astray, protection by bread is never mentioned. So here, just the once, we can catch the tradition-makers in the act of twisting together two separate strands of lore. But how the Irish ever came to believe in the blast, or the Dorset people in pixyleading, is beyond conjecture.

And yet sometimes the language of fairy tradition, the very names of fairies, preserves something of their deep history. The bow or bough of County Waterford, a form of the banshee, is an Anglicised version of the *badhb*, and she in turn preserves her name of the Gaulish war goddess Bodua or Cathuboda (Lysaght 1986: 38, 197). Hob o' t' Hurst, a Yorkshire fairy, turns out on closer examination to have been Hob Thurst, and the thurse or *thyrs* was one of the fierce spirits of the Anglo-Saxon wilderness (Allies 1856: 424). Grendel in *Beowulf* was a *thyrs*, and not the earliest one, since the use of this name for the third rune in the futhark shows that it was in common use before the separation of the Germanic peoples.

On the other hand, Hob Thurst worked for an innkeeper and received a regular payment of bread and butter, which was hardly the lifestyle of his remote cousin Grendel. A name may survive, while the traditions that go with it are transformed beyond recognition. In Britain the continuity of ideas about the supernatural has been broken, either by the alteration of languages, or by changes in the culture that language expresses. In Ireland the position is different, since Irish lived on with at least some of its oral traditions, including those of supernatural beings.

Look at County Clare during the 1740s. It was a hard time, especially for a poet like Aindrias Mac Cruitín who was richer in words than in worldly goods. Indeed, he was soon to be turned out for non-payment of rent; but 'beside the petitioner's miserable cottage from which he fears to be evicted stands the invisible palace of Donn', the king of the Munster *sí* (Müller-Lisowski 1948: 175). Having failed to win patronage in this world, Mac Cruitín sought Donn to take him on as poet in residence, supporting his claim with a virtuoso display of literary skills which also invokes Aonghus Óg, Lugh, and other characters from the mythological cycle of Irish epic. In its most developed form this cycle describes successive waves of invaders, culminating in the *Tuatha Dé Danann* or people of the goddess Danu, who in turn are subdued by the sons of Mil, with whom human history begins. It is a long, winding story, complicated partly by the need to

take in all possible sources, including the Biblical, and partly by the way that action spreads over two levels – this world and the other. Access between them is mediated through certain places, especially mysterious hills; the name *sí* (*sidh* in the older spelling) is given sometimes to these hills, and sometimes metonymically to the Otherworld to which they give access (Ó Cathasaigh 1977–9). After their defeat the Tuatha move to this level and are called the *aes sí*, the people of the Otherworld, who are also the fairies.

So in eighteenth-century Ireland it was possibly to think about the *sí* on two levels, the mythological and the folkloristic. Brian Merriman was writing *The Midnight Court* a generation after Alexander Pope set to work on *The Rape of the Lock*. Both drew on images of the supernatural to write about the relations of men and women; but where Pope needs a quite artificial machinery of sylphs and gnomes to get his poem moving, Merriman has his court convened by Aoibheall, a queen of the *sí* who lived at Carraig Liath near Killaloe and whose stories were familiar to all his readers. People might reasonably expect to meet Aoibheall or Donn, just as they could encounter Finnbhearra, Áine, Clíona or any of the other leaders of the fairy host (Logan 1981: 27–57).

But Donn of the Sandhills, as he appears in Mac Cruitín's petition, has virtually nothing in common with the Donn of the mythological cycle. Though the traditions that defined them were alive at the same time and in the same culture, there is a difference in style between them; myths belong to an archaic and heroic way of speaking, while legends are small-scale and local. That does not prevent a drift of motifs between the two genres. In the heroic tale of *Tochmarc Étaíne*, the queen Étaín is taken from her husband Eochaid Airem by Midir, lord of the hollow hill of Brí Léith. Her angry husband lays waste to the hill to get her back (Bergin and Best 1934–8: 185). This is just what husbands or brothers do in local legends, when a woman has been carried off by the fairies; they threaten to burn the furze from off the hill, to cut back its turf, or desecrate it in some other way. The theme of abduction and return is common to both stories, but in all other respects they are quite different.

Legends of the more homely type – stories about ordinary men and women, who meet with fairies in the woods and fields of a familiar landscape – do not feature in early manuscripts. But from the twelfth century onwards, writers made a point of telling these stories, which follow just the same lines as in later tradition. William of Newburgh

tells a story, which he had known since his boyhood in the 1140s, of how a countryman passed by a barrow which was seemed to be open, full of bright lights and feasting company, and how he stole a cup from them. The same story was being told seven hundred years later at places in Britain and Scandinavia. One version takes place at Willy Howe near Newburgh – although here it may have been readopted, rather than surviving on the ground, since the story had already been translated and widely circulated by Keightley sixty years before it was recovered from oral tradition (Hartland 1891: 146–7). William's contemporary, Walter Map, tells how a man married a fairy wife and lost her when she was struck by a bridle, just as happens in later Welsh tales. Ralph of Coggeshall had spoken to people from Dagworthy Castle in Suffolk, which was haunted by a fairy, or rather by a human girl who had been carried off and had assumed the fairy nature. She was taken, as so many children would be later on, when her mother left her at the end of a furrow while helping bring in the harvest (cf. Munro 1991: 256). She hoped to return after seven years, a detail which was later forgotten in English tradition but survived in Irish fairy lore (Yeats 1893: 98).

For a brief period in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, chroniclers liked to set these stories down, for entertainment or to fulfil some not very obvious theological purpose. Otherwise there are only hints and allusions which suggest an earlier history for modern fairy lore. The modern belief, first recorded by Kirk, says that anyone may view the *sith* if they put their foot on the foot of a seer who has the vision of them (Kirk 1976: 64). And we find that in the 1150s a traveller called Bartholomew was given an opportunity to do the same, though he turned it down; we only know this because he ended his life as a hermit on the Farne islands, and talked much of the nature of spirits (Simeon of Durham 1882: 1.298). The belief in pixyleading, or being led astray all night by a fairy, existed in the South-West peninsula before it was taken to Newfoundland; earlier it had been recorded in the English Midlands as well, but we would have no idea that it was a general belief had it not been for a preacher of the fourteenth century who, searching for a good homely image, spoke of travellers that had 'been led at nyght with gobelyn, and erreth hider and thider' (Owst 1933: 113).

It seems that by the twelfth century, people in the British Isles (and, more generally, in Europe) had created a consistent new body of beliefs about fairies. True, this drew on motifs each of which, taken

individually, had a long history in myth and legend; but now they were combined as they had not been before. If this is true, then to search for the origin of fairies is fruitless, whether it involves identifying them as pagan deities, supernatural entities, the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, or whatever. The fabric is more than the sum of its threads. And to consider just how sophisticated the work of creation could be, we need not look at an international tale type or a collective body of local tradition. It is enough to concentrate on a single text, such as the medieval romance of *Sir Orfeo*. 'It was probably based on an old French source, the lai d'Orphrey which may have been written by Marie de France, being similar to the *Lai de Freine* and *Sir Landeval*. If so, it may well be based on an original Breton lay. This Breton lay may have influenced or conversely been influenced by Walter Map. The Middle English author may have introduced modifications extant in Anglo-Saxon tradition as found in King Alfred's translation of Boethius. The original tale might have been derived from Boethius, Virgil or Ovid or all three, and might have been a deliberate attempt at welding the classical myth to a Celtic one (such as the *Wooing of Etain*) or may simply represent the rewriting of the classical along familiar lines. The Auchinleck romance may therefore contain elements from Classical Latin, Medieval Latin, Old French, Old English, Breton and Irish as well as Middle English traditions, and there are also possible analogies with Welsh and continental tales…' (Williams 1991: 470). All this, remember, is the background to a single singing of a single tale about how a hero loses his wife to the realm of Faerie, and how he brings her back again. By the modern period, the story of Orfeo had itself disappeared from tradition, becoming a further invisible source for new narratives.

6: Is there an explanation for fairies?

'The opinion of Faeries and elfes is very old, and yet sticketh very religiously in the minds of some. But… the truth is, that there be no such thinges, nor yet the shadowes of the things, but only by a sort of bald Friers and knavish shavelings so feigned; which as in all other things, so in that, soughte to nousell the comen people in ignorance, least being once acquainted with the truth of things, they would in tyme smell out the untruth of their packed pelfe and Massepenie religion' (Spenser 1910: 65). Well, that sorts that one out, then.

Many English writers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries took it for granted that fairy belief was just one of many opiates peddled by the Catholic Church. As time passed and bald friars were seen less often, they were replaced in the speculations of the learned by that classical priesthood, the Druids. But not until 1803 did the theory reach its logical culmination, when James Cririe argued that the Druids promoted a belief in fairies because they *were* the fairies. Hiding from the vengeance of a newly christianised population, they had retreated to their old temples in the barrows and cromlechs. During the daytime they hid; at night they came out to eat and to get some exercise for their cramped limbs, while maintaining their cover by eerie fictions about the little people who needed gifts of food, who might be seen dancing, but who must never, never be disturbed (Cririe 1803: 347–8).

Anyone who reads old folklore studies will have met with explorations on this theme, though usually it is Picts or Stone Age survivors rather than Druids (MacRitchie 1890). Fairies live in hollow hills because the lost race occupied earth-houses. They can appear and disappear because the lost race were masters of concealment. They are shaggy or ragged because the lost race were ignorant of clothing. They steal women and children because the lost race needed to maintain the breed (Spence 1946: 115–31; Silver 1999: 45–50). Usually, as the clinching proof of the theory, we are reminded that fairies traditionally used flint arrowheads, and were afraid of iron (Spence 1948: 181–2). Here, surely, we have a race-memory of iron as the metal of invading peoples (the Celts, or whoever) who could overawe superstitious natives with the merest flash of their superior technology.

And then again, perhaps not. Once you start being literal-minded about fairies, where do you stop? The lost-race theory only works if you take fairy tradition as a series of facts, to be explained one after the other, and forget that this tradition consists of stories told by people for their own imaginative and cultural needs (MacCulloch 1932). Of course portraying the fairies as a separate race – a race who might prefer the things of nature to those of culture, stone to iron – might well be part of that imaginative enterprise (cf. Breatnach 1993: 107). But it was the folklorists who, having lost belief in fairies, needed to re-enchant the world by making them 'real' in an archaeological sense. Lost-race theory invested ancient history with a mythical glamour, while all the time pretending to be above such things (Harte 1998; Bown 2001: 166).

It makes sense that the last folklorist to take the lost-race theory seriously should have one of the most haunting imaginations of any writer on the subject. 'I think there are still areas where the fairy blood is strong', says Alan Garner. 'I can remember not being allowed to play with one of their boys because he was supposed to be dirty and sly. He probably was. But he could run like a dog, and climb impossible trees, and make wild birds pick breadcrumbs out of his hair' (Garner 1969: 90).

MacRitchie found his real fairies in Maes Howe and Newgrange; Garner, it seems, in the trailer park on the edge of town. As so often, this view was anticipated by Katharine Briggs, who had written of how 'Any unaccountable stranger might come to be thought of as a fairy… perhaps some of the Gypsies would be the last candidates for fairy honours' (Briggs 1959a: 542). Of course Briggs knew perfectly well that Gypsies had fairy lore of their own (Briggs 1970–1: B1.221), but this was beside the point. What mattered was the idea of a secret people – speaking their own language, living on the wild land, having magical powers, fiercely protective of their own and light-fingered with the property of others. That was how the settled people saw it, at all events. For a view from the other side of the fence, we turn to the Traveller Duncan Williamson. 'The people of this Other World have the freedom, have the power, they are immune from persecution by the local public and can't be disturbed. People of the Other World are part of nature – same as the travelling folk' (Williamson 1985: 15).

Williamson is telling us that we can understand fairies (and Travellers) a little better when we see a likeness between the two peoples. Subtle metaphors like this are what good storytellers explore through their art.

But there is another approach, the bastard cousin of metaphor, which says that fairies really are Travellers. In other words, when people said they had encountered fairies, all they had ever seen was a Gypsy in the dusk. And this has been claimed, quite seriously (Trigg 1975: 161–3).

When people use a fairy story to talk about other things that matter to them, the story itself is not diminished. We are looking for a kind of truth which will heighten the poetry of the tale, not whittle it away; at least, I hope we are, since the second half of this book will deal with exactly this topic, the metaphorical senses of fairy legend. It is when people reduce fairy stories to their origins, or supposed origins, that we feel cheated. In Shetland, they have a local race of fairies called the trows; at least, that is the common belief, but one islander explained to Alan Bruford that the trows were only local fishermen hiding out in the hills to avoid the press gang (Bruford 1991: 124). It's a picturesque story, but not as good as the belief which it replaces. Somehow, in trying to make the fairies sound real, an explanation like this manages to spirit them away.

7: How do people learn about fairies?

During the heyday of folk studies, many scholars travelled to unfamiliar regions in search of fairy belief; sometimes they found a storyteller, sometimes they didn't. Meanwhile, distracting things are happening all around them. A child sees a comb lying on the road, stoops to pick it up, and is roundly scolded by her mother. The traveller is not to know that a banshee may leave her comb on the road, and that to pick one up would bring its owner thundering to the house later that night (Lysaght 1986: 180). Two boys bob their heads over a fence where a man is working in his garden; they shout "Dick, where art tha?" before ducking and vanishing. The traveller has not heard how the luckless householder was out poaching with a mate one night when they both caught something that wriggled and squirmed in their bags, and how they were halfway down the hill before one fairy called out to the other, and the two men dropped their bags and fled (Bowker 1883: 73–6). One driver asks another how they are doing for time, and the other says "Well enough – going on like Sokespitch's can". And the traveller is not to know that the fairies gave old Sokespitch a barrel that poured good beer and never ran out, until one day a silly maid looked inside, and then all she could get was dust and cobwebs (Croker 1825–8: 3.vii).

In other words, scholars have to be told the fairy lore – if anyone is willing to pass it on to them – but ordinary people learn about the fairies at the same time and in the same way that they learn about life. In the 1960s, Sheila St. Clair was talking to a woman in Mourne Mountain while a little grand-daughter played with a stick and a stone in the next field – 'until, with an exclamation of horror, the granny realised that the child had broken the stick off the thorn tree. With a muttered apology, she excused herself and disappeared out through the back kitchen. From there she crossed the field to the child. She took the stick from the child's hand and, with a length of linen, carefully bound the stick back on the tree; as she did this I could see that she was speaking aloud but could not hear what it was she said. Then she led the child three times around the tree, before delivering a good smack to the fat little legs, whereupon the child ran crying into the byre' (St.Clair 1994: 164). No explanation about fairy thorns was

needed, except perhaps for a folklorist. And sometimes even that is not forthcoming. Eddie Lenihan knew many old farmers who would always carry a row of pins in their jacket, and if you asked why, they would mutter something about them being handy for getting splinters out. Maybe; but pins, being made of iron, are also a protection against danger of a different sort.

'To come across someone today who still retains their inherited knowledge of the fairy world is a strange experience', writes Margaret Killip of Man. 'The true believers, if they may be called that, for they are never consciously so, require no audience and in fact possess knowledge they may never tell to anyone. They are far more likely to keep it hidden, but if inadvertently they let slip a hint of familiarity with a supernatural dimension, the person listening experiences a strange sensation, as if a glimpse had been given of a country heard of but hitherto unrealised' (Killip 1975: 28). For a visitor to the island, the grey hills and the quiet glen are lonely places. Locals know better. Here are the elder trees that should never be touched, not since the farmer hacked them back, and hanged himself in the barn that night. Here is the pool where the *sleih veggey* dangle their feet in the water, and here is the path they have beaten to the farm gate; something tall is seen by the gateposts, and cattle are frightened. Then there are two cairns in the field beyond, each with its buggane; there is a lane to Claghyn y Foawr, where the great plodding footsteps are heard; and the river from which the *tarroo-ushtey* comes to graze, while beside its banks are heard the echoes of music, so clear that a man with some skill in harmony was able to scratch the notes down on a rock with a river pebble before the sounds faded away (Gill 1932: 259–66).

In such a densely populated landscape, it made sense to know a thing or two about the neighbours. That is what fairy legends are for – they may entertain, but they also advise. A story will conclude, 'So, you see, you should always'; or, 'So, you see, you should never… '. People come to their understanding of the supernatural, just as they get their knowledge of words, through a kind of unconscious assimilation. Indeed, the semantic range of a word like 'fairy' itself would be learnt through experience, not as a formal definition. We know that the term came into Middle English from Old French *faierie*, but that French word meant a particular kind of experience, not a class of being; it suggests the presence of fate, and this shades off into a general sense of enchantment (Williams 1991). So before 'fairy' became a name, it was a way to describe the power of elves, pucks, thurses, and other beings who were perhaps best not identified. And by referring to them,

however allusively, it built up a reputation for what they were and the things they might do.

To name the fairies is to call them into being, which is why people were so careful about the language they used. In Irish there were more than twenty ways of referring to the *sí* (Ó hEochaidh 1977: 26–7); *shee*, the Manx form of the word, disappeared from the language altogether, replaced by various roundabout phrases; in Welsh the earlier forms gave way to the general heading of *y tylwyth teg*, 'the fair family', which sounds like an imitation of English 'fairy' and came into use at much the same time. Perhaps it was better not to talk about the fairies at all, just to acknowledge their presence by little acts of respect and neighbourliness. But then these acts themselves implied much about the nature of the beings that they were so careful not to name. They, too, became part of the way that fairies were known.

Take the example of a believer like Maunsie Spence of Yell, who was walking home with his catch of fish in the 1870s. As he passed a great grey stone, he was caught by a sudden pain in his ankle; he carried on home, made soup of the fish, and then came and poured it around the stone. People asked what he was doing, and he explained that the fairies had struck him because they were getting none of the fish (Bruford *et al* 1977–8: 203–4). He went back to the stone because there were fairies in it, true; but unless he had returned with that bowl of soup, there would have been no fairies, or at least no imaginative contact with them; ritual observances confirm the existence of whatever it is that the ritual was about. When we find that the N18 from Limerick to Ennis curves to go round a fairy thorn, we admire the knowledge of Eddie Lenihan, who campaigned to save the tree, as well as the prudence of the County Surveyor who knew of the risk involved in damaging it. The curve of the road at Latoon, a massive work of modern engineering, is now a kind of monument, tracing an outline of Faerie across the Clare landscape.

Most people feel that any kind of identification, even a malicious one, is better than the shadowy Unknown. That is why the rituals are often noisy and dangerous. Filling straws with gunpowder, setting light to them, and then throwing them onto a cow's back is not guaranteed to bring peace of mind to the cow, but it made a lot of sense if the beast was trowshot – wounded, that is, by the missiles of malicious trows. The Shetland farmer who let off the firecrackers, shouting "Fly, you buggers, fly!", had at least given a name to his fears, and done something about them (Bruford 1991: 133).

Dealing with the fairies was just as important, in a traditional community, as telling stories about them. And as there were people who excelled as storytellers, so there were specialists who knew what to do when sickness or bad luck had been caused from the other side. In Ireland, where they were known as fairy doctors, the tradition continued into the last century, and there were people doing much the same work in the Highlands and the Northern Isles. There had been similar practitioners in England and Wales, although here the practice died out after the sixteenth century, in line with changing ideas about the power of the fairies (Davies 2003: 182–5).

The greatest of the Irish fairy doctors was Biddy Early (?1798–1874) of Feakle in County Clare. Not much is known, in the biographer's sense, about Biddy's life. By the time that Yeats heard of her, twenty years after her death, she had already become a part-mythical figure, and the process has been going on unabated ever since (Schmitz 1977; Ryan 1978; Lenihan 1987). This is a Biddy Early who unfailingly knows about the people who come for her help – their homes, their troubles, even what they said on the way to her cottage; she can divine their problems with the fairies and present a cure, or tell them when no cure is possible; and for all that she was in a long dispute with the local clergy, she comes across as a kind of folk saint, dispensing understanding and healing in equal quantities. How different from a fairy doctor like Moll Carroll of Ballineen in County Cork, who was unlucky enough to be described by contemporaries, and hostile contemporaries at that (Bennett 1869: 372–5). But the Biddy who has been cherished by posterity is a type of what a fairy doctor should be – a person who can draw on the images of Faerie to tell a convincing story about misfortune, and who offers her clients at least a chance to do something about it.

A timely story might be needed, not for personal reasons, but to smooth the path of community life. It is hard to realise what the dynamics of life were like in a small village or island where no-one could get away from anyone else; sometimes the fairies offered a way out, a mutually agreed fiction that certain things did not happen. On the island of Bute, Finwell Hyndman used to leave her husband and family every few months, and come back the next morning with tired eyes and crumpled clothing. It was tacitly accepted that she had been spending her time with the fairies, not an earthly companion, though this being the 1650s it meant that she was eventually had up for witchcraft (Henderson and Cowan 2001: 213). Admittedly murder

strains this tolerance to breaking point. In Orkney, James Houston lost his grandson in 1624; he told the grieving mother that 'the fairie had tane him away', but this was too much to accept, and Houston was tried for killing the boy (Dalyell 1834: 539).

Fairies could explain a lot. Indeed for some people they served as one of the universal, irrefutable explanations characteristic of mania. Imagine the scene in the cottage of old Betty Griffith on Anglesey, as it was in 1840. The fire is almost out, the floor is bare; in the corner, where you would expect a bed to be, there is a great matted barricade of furze, and behind that crouches Betty. "It is the *tylwyth teg*; they never will leave me alone, there they sit making faces at me, and trying to come to me… If I am up they will sit upon the table; they turn my milk sour and spill my tea; then they will not leave me at peace in my bed, but come all round me and mock at me". Only the furze kept them at bay (Stanley 1872: 256). Then there was Martin Roland, who lived near the bog a little way out of Gort in Galway. A little before his death, he confided in Yeats that he could no longer sleep at nights, for the sound of the others shouting at him. They used to sit on the chimney, until he pulled it down. Then they vexed him with their music, until he got a pipe and blew on it, tunelessly, all the day, and that drowned them out. Yeats asked the neighbours about him, and they said that it was all in his mind, true, but that he had seen things that were really there when he was young (Yeats 1902: 195–8). In Betty and Martin we recognise what would now be called paranoid schizophrenia, something for which the fairies were a natural vehicle, since everyone agreed that they were invisible, ubiquitous, and able to hear whatever was said. But the delusion lay, not in holding these beliefs, but in taking them beyond what was regarded as reasonable by the community.

If ordinary people suspected the presence of the fairies, they did so on much more practical grounds. In 1889, two teenage boys are walking to their home at Cleendra, on the west coast of Donegal. As they pass by a grey stone, they hear the sound of a fiddle – marvellous playing, no human musician could play half so well. Charlie starts to dance, and finds he cannot stop, not if he killed himself dancing. Every time Paddy calls for him to come down, he gasps out "Can't!". So Paddy sprints to the nearest house, to ask for help; Peggy Manus is the woman of the house, and she explains that Charlie must thank the fiddler, or he will dance till sunrise and then be taken into the fort on the hill. Charlie does as she has told, and then finds he can stop dancing.

That evening the boys go round to Peggy and ask her to tell them about the fairies. 'She gave each of us two turfs and told us to sit on them and she would tell us what to do whenever we met them'. Then she tells them about the old ruins on the hill where the fairies live, and about the miserable things that happened to a farmer who was too mean to leave a pot of potatoes out on Samhain for them, with a can of milk full to overflowing. After what they have been through, they are in no mood to contradict her. The next night, the two lads go to another house where they hear a long, fantastic tale, 'Speed Heavy and Light Foot'. This *scéal*, though well told, is seen by them in a quite different way. As they leave, Paddy whispers to Charlie, "I am sorry I did not go into Peggy's. I would rather her story than my father's. Peggy's are true ones but that story my father told me could not be true" (Gallagher 1939: 51–4).

People who are more used to the written word would have treated both kinds of story as nonsense, or maybe decide to believe the story of fairies and then be over-literal about that belief. We have lost the frame of mind which is able to accept an embodied metaphor. Take the example of a man at Derrykeel, County Galway, who is on piecework, and working hard at it. His mates in the job are vexed with him because, by labouring so hard, he is taking work from others that might need it more than him; and besides, he is making a great show of his strength, and displays of that kind are frowned on by the community. But they do not put it like that. They say that when you are seen working vigorously, especially if someone calls attention to it, the fairies will hear. That is something to be afraid of, for they covet the young and strong. And when the young man dies, everyone agrees that the fairies have taken him (Gregory 1920: 1.171; cf. Yeats 1993: 165).

When people speak of fairies, they may be using them to talk about something else – what Angela Bourke calls a virtual reality (Bourke 1996). We understand this well enough in other contexts. John Locke often used the example of a changeling to illustrate how something might have human appearance without having a human mind, and no-one stops to ask whether the author of *An Essay on Human Understanding* supposed that actual fairies might leave a real substitute in a mother's cradle (Yolton 1993: 36). But then consider, from a quite different social background, the story of a Norfolk ploughman who finds shillings at the end of each furrow – a fairy's gift. Now the ploughman knows all about the deceptive nature of fairy silver, but these shillings look solid enough, and he goes down to the village to spend them. One trader asks him where he got them from, then

another, until finally the story travels round the whole village. He keeps mum, because he knows that fairy gifts will cease as soon as you tell of them, with the result that nobody will accept his money, fearing the worst. The boss hears about it and calls him in, to explain where he got the shillings, and still he won't say. It is not until he has been sacked for theft and insolence and worse, that he tells where the shillings came from, and after that there are no more (Emerson 1895). This is a good traditional story, and every turn of it can be matched up with the motif-index, but it is also a very perceptive exploration of what money really is. The fairies make their silver valueless, not by turning it into leaves as in other stories, but by giving it to someone who cannot exchange it for goods because no-one will accept that it is legitimate in his hands. Someone in that Norfolk village had thought seriously about economics, and yet they chose a story about fairies to express what they had to say.

Fairies are important because of the things that can be said through talking about them. This applies to fairies that are discussed in real and deadly earnest, like those which Michael Cleary said had taken his wife, but it also applies to the kind of fairies which nobody takes seriously at all. Norfolk was the home of the hyters, also known as highty, hikey or ikry sprites; they were a sort of nursery bogies, lurking in lonely places and getting you if you stayed out after dark (Rabuzzi 1984). There was no particular lore about them, in the adult sense; they belonged to an extensive class of 'obviously cautionary figures…not likely to frighten anyone over eight years old' (Briggs 1980: 145). And yet they, too, were a kind of fairy even though they were only a figure of speech, not beings from an independent supernatural world. Just like the fairies in the story from Derrykeel, hyters worked as metaphors for social rules; but the *sí* were in some sense for real while the hyters were in every way a fiction.

Perhaps 'fiction' is too blunt a word. The gremlins who infested cockpits and aerodromes during World War II were described by pilots with a great deal of imaginative verve. No parapsychologist ever went crawling after them among the fuel tanks. They belonged to the world of the tall story but, despite this, it is noticeable that gremlins never really thrived after the War. All the vivid touches to the stories had come from the oldest of reasons, the fatedness that lies behind the word 'fairy' – these young men had only a thin shield of machinery between them and death, and the machinery was often unreliable, which was where the gremlins stepped in. 'When one lives perpetually on the edge of distinctly unpleasant finality there must be *something* to

combat any insidious effects, and hence the Gremlins. Blame 'em for every confounded thing that goes off the rails, extract every ounce of humour from their hypothetical adventures, cling to the myth for all you are worth. They keep you alive and laughing and that is the saving grace' (Douglas Marshall, 1943, quoted in Edwards 1974: 209–24).

8: Where are fairies found?

Gremlins were among the last of the fairies, and they were unusual in belonging to an occupational group – pilots or mechanics – and not to a local community. Normally there is a geographical spread to the characteristic fairy legends, and to look at this is to get an impression of how the lore changes from one region to another. Armed with a good index of migratory legends, we may hope to find some kind of a pattern in the abundance of fairy legend. When William of Newburgh told his story about the cup which was stolen by a peasant from the fairy feast, it seemed like the fancy of an isolated storyteller; but as we collect other instances, we can plot them on the map. Stories like this have been told in Cumbria, Mull and the Isle of Man; when we find that there are variations of it in the Northern Isles, and that it is also common in Scandinavia, a Viking origin starts to look quite possible (Ó Catháin 1991: 149–50). This just goes to show that the British Isles are an arbitrary unit for studying folklore – after all, Shetland is as near to Norway as it is to Scotland – but they do offer a great variety of traditions within a manageable geographical area.

True, some fairy legends are ubiquitous. People from Kent to Caithness tell much the same story about changelings, for instance. But other tale types are much more localised. This applies not just to the stories but to the whole emotional and imaginative context from which they take their credibility. During modern times – that is, roughly, from 1750 to 1950 – people believed in fairies quite differently according to the region in which they lived. Tradition changes its tone, roughly speaking, as you go from south-east to north-west. So, taking the British Isles as a whole, we can speak of a lowland zone, followed by an upland one, and ending along the Atlantic coast.

The lowland zone consists of south and east England, where the landscape is gentle, the fields well cultivated, the people numerous and living in villages or large towns. As for the fairies, they too are civilised, as in this account from 1734. 'My grandmother has often told me of fairies dancing upon our green, and that they were very little creatures cloathed in green; they would do good to the industrious people, but they pinch the sluts; they would steal children, and give

one of their own in the room; and the moment any one saw them they were struck blind of one eye… They lived under-ground, and that they generally came out of a mole-hill; they had fine music always amongst themselves, and danced in a moon-shiney night around, or in a ring' (Rimbault 1859: 481).

As this suggests, stories about fairies in the lowland zone are told largely for amusement. Always the fairies are said to be very small and rather charming; people look down on them as they might on any small thing. These are the typical fairies of Drayton, Herrick, and other seventeenth-century writers (Briggs 1976: 98–102), and for this reason they have often been dismissed as a literary contamination of 'true' folk tradition, but in fact writers who were close to the actual folk such as John Clare and William Barnes described them in the same way (Clare 1993: 14–16; Barnes 1962: 1.133).

As we go north and west, however, the character of fairy tradition changes with the landscape. This is the pastoral countryside of upland Britain, with hamlets or isolated farms set among rough and mountainous country; until the Industrial Revolution there were few large towns. Roughly speaking, the zone extends from Aberdeenshire, through the Scottish Lowlands and across England north of the Pennines, to include Wales and the south-west peninsula of Devon and Cornwall. In this region the fairies receive much more respect. They live in wild places, on the moors or hills; generally they are said to be the size of a young child or of someone stooped with age, like the hobman of Yorkshire, 'a little old fellow, with very long hair, large feet, eyes, mouth and hands, stooping much as he walked, and carrying a long holly stick' (Blakeborough 1898: 209). It was best to keep on good terms with such a being, but 'in them days when t' hobman did take to yan, you were all reet in t' long-run', and these touchy neighbours were also a source of wonder and interest – the quality of storytelling is much richer here than it is in the south and east.

To the north of the pastoral land, where hills give way first to mountains and then to the sea, come the Highlands, with the Hebrides, Man, and the Northern Isles of Orkney and Shetland. These make up an Atlantic zone, together with the west coast of Ireland from Cork to Donegal. The land is mostly poor; fishing and hunting have been called on to supplement the diet, and there were recurrent years of famine. Here people were largely self-sufficient until the modern period, and had little interest in the states which claimed authority

over them. More authority was held by the secret nation, for this is the zone in which people are most afraid of the fairies. 'We praise them and avoid them', as they said curtly in Donegal (Ó hEochaidh 1977: 32), and naturally so, for these were fairies of human size and appearance, a proud and vengeful race. They might carry off people for their own purposes; they could maim and kill, often for what seemed mere caprice; and certainly they would hear anything that was said in disrespect of them. In these regions the lore of fairies was not passed down for entertainment, but for safety's sake. 'Every day and night people were set to watch the entry to the fairies' round hillock, just as people used to be sent to watch the entry to the lair of the wicked carnivorous wolf' (Carmichael 1928-71: 5.217–225).

The fairies of the Highlands had already gained a grim reputation by the 1680s, when Robert Kirk was collecting material for his book. Part of Kirk's project, in fact, was to communicate to the more sheltered citizens of the south and east just what was going on in the supernatural world of the Gàidhealtachd. He did not regard the *sith* as folklore, nor would they have seemed particularly exotic to a man who was born and bred in Aberfoyle; but he must have been aware that things were different in the Lowlands. And this is true for the distribution of fairy belief throughout the British Isles. As you move to the fertile country and the cities with power and influence – to Dublin, Edinburgh, Manchester, Bristol – so the fairies diminish in stature and authority. And when you approach London, the fairy lore tails off altogether. This is why the zones of belief are distributed along fault lines running from south-east to north-west.

It is hard to be certain of what happened in earlier periods, where the evidence is so patchy, but certainly by the time that Scott or Croker began their researches the zones of fairy belief had taken on their modern form. Already in 1749, William Collins had anticipated a journey to the Highlands, 'Where still, 'tis said, the fairy people meet/ Beneath each birken shade, on mead or hill' – the imputation being that they no longer did so in the Home Counties (Collins 1929: 124). If you wanted to learn about the secret people, then, you took the stagecoach or, later on, the steam train out of London; you travelled on until you were among people who no longer spoke recognisable English; and then you got off and asked them about fairies.

That, after all, was the method followed by Mr Wentz of America, and it later bore fruit in a remarkable book. *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries* was published in 1911 by Walter Evans-Wentz (during the

course of research, he had discovered some Celtic roots of his own, hence the extra name). Half the book consists of journeys into Cornwall, Wales, the Highlands, Man, Ireland and Brittany, where in each case the boundlessly enthusiastic Evans-Wentz made introductions to a leading scholar and was taken to hear tradition bearers. The rest of the work argues for the actual, supernatural existence of the fairies. It is hard to see any connection between this fieldwork and the conclusions that Evans-Wentz reached from it; perhaps this is because he never quite defines his terms. What is a Celt, after all? Shorn of the richly evocative prose with which Evans-Wentz introduces the subject (1911: 1–16), it seems to mean 'someone who lives a long way away from London'.

In fact the zones of fairy belief, as I have sketched them out, get their character from the different ways of life that can be found in the British Isles. They have no respect for other boundaries, whether linguistic or national. The upland zone includes the Welsh-speaking parts of Wales as well as the anglicised county of Pembrokeshire; it encompasses both Devon and Cornwall, and includes the Scots-speaking Lowlands along with northern England – they all had similar ideas about fairies. There were fairies enough in Yorkshire and Lancashire, at least until the early nineteenth century (McCann and Medway 1998: 117–21), and we would probably know much more about them if the attention of folklorists had not been diverted elsewhere. It is true that the Atlantic zone corresponds closely with the areas where Irish and the Gaelic of the Highlands have survived as living languages; but it also includes Orkney and Shetland, where people spoke a dialect of Scots, and before that, a Nordic language. Indeed, many of the characteristic beliefs and fears of the Atlantic zone extend outside of these isles, and are to be found among similar communities in Scandinavia.

Clearly there are similarities between the fairy lore of very widely scattered districts. This is as you might expect, for stories travel light, and there have been easy communications among these islands since the Middle Ages. Far to the west, off the lonely coast of Galway, lie the Aran Isles. Here, if anywhere, we should expect to find pure tradition. It was on the windswept isle of Inis Meáin that an old, old man spoke to W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory, when they came asking about the fairies and their power. They were much impressed, and asked how he had come to be a seer and a healer. Well, says Pat Deruane, when I was living in a back-to-back in Manchester, there were these two old girls across the road, and they told me a cure or two… (Gregory 1920: 1.113–9).

Nothing unlikely about such an encounter; the Irish made up a sixth of the population of Victorian Manchester. What is surprising is that, despite ethnic mixing on this scale, the legends told in Lancashire and Galway should remain so distinct. Here and there you can trace a story that blurs the boundaries, like the phantom of the fell; she is a feeorin (as they called the fairies in Lancashire) who entrances a young man, taking away his life and strength, and this is much more like the behaviour of an Irish *leannan sí* than of an indigenous hob or boggart (Bowker 1883: 174–88). But by and large, people with access to different stocks of legend kept them separate; they became, as it were, bilingual in their traditions.

This is true over a wide area, but there is one region where it does not seem to apply, and that is Cornwall. Much of the fairy lore of the Duchy, especially from its western tip at Penwith, was recorded by two scholars – Robert Hunt, whom we have already met speculating on spriggans, and William Bottrell. They both collected in the 1830s, though they published at separate dates, and Hunt also drew on material from Bottrell's papers. Though they wrote up their material in quite different styles, it seems clear that they were drawing on a very prolix, artistic style of storytelling, quite different from the brief manner of a typical English legend, and some of their stories are unlike anything found elsewhere in Britain. In one account, a traveller is lost on Selena Moor near Lands End when he sees a fairy company and is about to join them. Amongst the crowd he recognises his old girlfriend, whom he thought was dead. No, she says, it was never me that was laid in Buryan churchyard, but a sham body put in my place. And now you must be careful, for if you eat or drink in this company you will be taken captive as well. Profiting from her advice, he makes his escape (Bottrell 1879–80: 2.94–102).

Now everything about this story is typically Irish – the lost traveller, the friend among the fairies, the substitute body and the prohibition on food and drink. Either West Penwith had retained the one example of a tradition otherwise unknown throughout southern Britain, or, more probably, the story had entered the repertoire from an Irish source not long before Bottrell collected it. There was a brisk market for chapbooks in Cornwall; after 1800 they could have been carried on packet boat service, which linked towns in the south of Ireland with those on the west coast of Britain.

Why should the Cornish be so ready to adopt new stories, when other regions were much more conservative? In the early nineteenth century,

the Duchy was increasing in wealth and population, while retaining much of its native traditions; in some areas, there was almost a renaissance of folk culture. Bottrell had witnessed popular dramatisations of fairytales and legends, including some about the fairies (Fees 1994: 4–6). There was a ready audience, too, for the droll-tellers – men who wandered from house to house as pedlars or beggars, but earned most of their keep by stories. A lively invention, strong powers of imagination, and the ability to spin out a story until it lasted the night; all these were required of a droll-teller and helped to shape their characteristic style (Hunt 1865: 1.xv–xviii). Evidently a time had come when the indigenous fund of fairy legends had started to dry up, and they had cast around for stories from any other source.

9: Who told stories about fairies?

Once it had entered the repertoire of the droll-tellers, a tale like that of the fairy dwelling on Selena Moor became Cornish, whatever its origins. It is only with an outsider's eye that we can pick it out as being somehow anomalous. And, you might ask, who are we to judge the traditions of other people – people who are, for the most part, long since dead – and to pick out what may or may not be true about their own lore?

Often there is a clear contradiction between the outsider's view of fairy lore, and the interpretations held by storytellers themselves. Take the connection between fairies and the dead. In story after story, we find that people who apparently died are said to be among the fairies; drink is poured out for the fairies, as it is for the dead, that they may feast on its etherial substance; and the feast of Samhain, when the fairies are abroad, is also Halloween, when the dead revisit their old haunts (Spence 1946: 65–83). But when asked why the fairies were so much like the dead, a local informant would deny that there was any link between them at all. Here we have a resemblance which, although it is denied in peoples' own ideas about their fairy lore, nevertheless has a real existence; not as an objective fact about the world, perhaps, but as a discovery which would be made by any reasonable person who examined the lore.

After all, some kind of impartial perspective is needed if we are to understand why people hold beliefs, often contradictory beliefs, about the fairies. They can't all be true, and while we should respect what informants have to say, we need not abandon common sense. In a cottage on the wilds of Dartmoor there lived a brother and sister, Jimmy and Grace Townsend. Jimmy was a convivial sort of fellow, and spent much of his time at feasts or market days, while Grace did the work around the house; but then this didn't matter, as he explained to his drinking companions, because she was nothing but a pixy. The real Grace had been exchanged in her cradle for one of the elfin race, and ever since then he had been living with something that was not a human being – not that he minded, as long as it kept the house neat and tidy. Friends of the Townsends were rather sceptical about this,

and Grace finally left the house to get married and start a new life, but nothing would shake Jimmy's confidence in his own interpretation (Crossing 1890: 52–6). It would take an outsider's perspective to say, not just that Jimmy was wrong in his belief, but that he had hit on one that enabled him to do very nicely for domestic comfort without ever acknowledging the person who provided it.

As for Grace, who knows what she thought? In fairy lore, as in many other traditions, all the dice seem to be loaded on the side of the men. Folklorists of the old school tended to a certain discreet vagueness on this point. 'It is said that …', they wrote, or, 'The tale is told…'. In the chapters which follow, I have preferred stories which are attributed to an actual person, place and time, hoping that direct quotation will preserve something of their original voice, whatever the tricks played on it by authors or editors. And of those voices, about half turn out to be those of women. Fairy traditions may be used for the benefit of men, but they are evidently not their sole property.

It was men who were expected to pass on the fairy legends, however. In 1891, when Jeremiah Curtin wanted to find out about the other crowd, he took lodgings at a pub in Dingle and as customers came in, he asked them what they knew on the subject. This was a very practical, masculine way of collecting information about the fairies, and his informants took him at his word, explaining what should one do when confronted by them, and why particular methods were followed; he might just as easily have been collecting for a national survey of fisheries or cattle vaccines (Zimmerman 2001: 304–8). Clearly this was not the way to make contact with women's lore, but Curtin had already considered that, and found that women had fewer and less interesting stories to tell (Curtin 1895: 144). A hundred years later, Eddie Lenihan reports that almost all of his fairy traditions come from men, and that women are content to leave this kind of thing to their husbands.

Perhaps this is because men find it easier to listen to men; but the most successful collaboration of a female folklorist and informant tends, if anything, to the same conclusion. Patricia Lysaght collected an extensive body of lore from Jenny McGlynn, but Jenny herself had picked up all her stories from a masculine environment. In the 1960s, her home in County Laois was what they called a rambling house, because people rambled to it of an evening. This was very much a man's prerogative – nobody's wife or daughter would want be seen out

at night on the roads in this way – and so Jenny was often the only woman present during the big storytelling sessions (Lysaght 1991: 27).

The role of men and women as storytellers varies according to the genre which is being passed down. In England, and even more so on the Continent, fairytales (in the sense of *märchen*) are a woman's business, and their content is tailored to particularly female concerns; we hear more about the emotional life of love and marriage, less about chopping giants' heads off (Warner 1994). Love and suffering are likewise the common themes of ballads, and these also were passed down amongst women.

Some of the best Scottish ballads of the supernatural, including those of Faerie, were collected from Anna Gordon of Aberdeen. She was born in 1747 into a middle-class family with an interest in music; many of her ballads were learnt from an aunt, who in turn had picked them up from nurses and old women, so that the train of transmission goes back at least to the beginning of the eighteenth century (Buchan 1972: 62–73). Evidently, until they came into the hands of these wealthy musical amateurs, the ballads had been passed on amongst the humble and the poor. It is different with the transmission of fairy legends; where that can be traced, it seems to run amongst people with some standing in the community. Thomas Evans, for instance, from Hafod Ruffydd in Cardiganshire, was 'a man of very strong common sense, and worth consulting on any subject: he was a good arithmetician… thoroughly understood the bardic metres, and had a fair knowledge of music… was well versed in Scripture, and filled the office of deacon at the Baptist Chapel… He thoroughly believed in the tales about the fairies' (Rhys 1882: 122).

Besides, the circumstances under which fairy lore is collected can often be misleading. Folklorists in those days loved everything that was ancient and passing away. The old man in the corner, disregarded by everyone else or subject to kindly condescension, suddenly gained a new respect when it was known that the gentlemen from Oxford or Dublin wanted to speak with him. But when that old man had learnt his stories, many years ago, he was someone quite different – the head of the household; when he spoke, people listened. His stories of fairies served, consciously or otherwise, to support his authority, otherwise he would not have told them. Consider a threat that runs, again and again, through Irish stories of the fairies – the danger that waits on anyone who goes out alone late at night. There was a girl at

Lochmaddy in North Uist who went out to the peat-stack at night for a creel of peats. 'She was aware of something whizzing through the silent air, passing through her hair, grazing her ear, and falling at her feet. Stooping down in the bright moonlight, she picked up a fairy arrow. The girl never again went out at night' (Carmichael 1928–71: 2.346).

These stories have a natural tendency to keep the young in the house at night, seated around the fire where their parents can keep an eye on them. Look at the way people spoke of fairies in a farmhouse on Dartmoor, in the 1830s. As the family sit round the hearth, talk turns to of the pisgies – 'they've a got their own ways 'bout everything, an' us can't understand mun'. The children sit wide-eyed and scared; the others are more inclined to say that it is all stories, but when a sound is heard outside they all jump, and as the man of the house goes to the door his wife looks troubled. But no, it is only a neighbour who has been pixyled on the moor. By now the servant girl is quite worried, and the farmer's son insists on taking care of her, and brings her to his side, behind the settle (Crossing 1890: 19–38). This is a vivid scene, all the more so because it comes from a fairy tradition which disappeared soon afterwards; and if Crossing has been at all realistic in his little vignette, then it shows how fairy belief reinforced the ordinary lines of authority in a household. Men are more masterful in dealing with the pixies than women, and the old more so than the young. In Ireland it was seen that 'They grow very learned in this lore. They are the ones who sometimes come to manipulate it. They are themselves, sometimes, half fairy. 'Wise men' and 'wise women' are always old' (Arensberg 1937: 211).

But then the young naturally defy the controls that age would put on them; rejecting the rules, they are inclined to dismiss the belief in fairies that enforces them. "Willie, I'm gaen to the well. Dinna leave the hoose till I come back", says an Aberdeenshire mother. "What could take place, mother?". "Ye wouldna ken: anyway, gin ye gang oot, put the Bible in aneath your wife's head". The old woman will not say it in so many words, but she fears that her daughter-in-law, who has just had a child, may be carried off by the fairies. Anyway, Willie looks compliant, and when his mother comes back she checks anxiously that he has carried out her instructions. She puts her hand under the pillow, and pulls out, not the Bible, but a grubby peat from the fireside. For Willie, who is fed up with his mother's instructions on this and that, has tucked in the nearest thing he could find and left the

house. When he comes back there is a row, though he tries to laugh it off. 'It's nae laughing matter, and gin ye dinna take care, ye may soon get something ye're nae seeking" (Gregor 1883b: 56).

'The old people were concerned with a lot of foolishness of that kind', said Eibhlín Ní Dhubhlaigh of Donegal, after repeating the injunction not to hand out unsalted fish at night in case it gave the fairies power over you. 'But the young people have no thought at all for it' (Ó hEochaidh 1977: 325). The same process of attrition was taking place in Man. 'All the old folks that were familiar with the fairies in Cregneish are gone to their rest, and the young ones gave no credit to their stories, and the most of them is lost and I cannot recall them, for I only laughed at their tales though they were telling them in earnest and believed that it was the truth' (Faragher 1914).

As the young grew old, they might begin to see merit in the fairy rules and sanctions which they had rejected years before, when they were on the receiving end of authority. Or they might not, feeling that the world had moved on. This conflict of interests between the generations provides one plausible model of the way that fairy traditions disappear. By 1900, most researchers spoke of the survival of fairy lore as if it were a precious resource under threat – as if fairies were a sort of red squirrels to be kept safe from the grey invasion of unbelief; this is particularly true in Ireland, where it was more or less the same thing to conserve fairies and the Gaeltacht. To the Edwardians, the fairy faith had become a metaphor for belief in Christianity, or indeed a belief in *anything*, and it was comforting to know that while the tide of faith might be out at Dover Beach, it was still flowing strong in Galway Bay (Silver 1999: 185–212).

But this is a book about fairy traditions, and not about the emotional and spiritual investment that outsiders have made in those traditions. It is enough to say that fairy lore, under the right conditions, was extraordinarily tough. It was tough enough, for instance, to become part of everyday life in Newfoundland, even as it was falling into disuse in south-east England; it was tough enough to spread across the confessional boundary in Ulster, where Protestants and Catholics, who could agree on virtually nothing else, were nevertheless united in their views of the fairies. Nowadays, people who say they have seen fairies can be joshed out of it with a wink and a laugh. And yet in seventeenth-century Scotland, people had been ready to affirm their belief in the fairies, even though it meant being burned alive for witchcraft.

We began by asking who the fairies were, and where they came from. There is much more that could be said on both of these topics, but as we work on them, they give way to something deeper: what do they mean? 'The question ought not to be framed in the form "Who were they?"… Rather should one ask what was the function of this faith, what was the ultimate meaning of this assumption and belief in another race as the close neighbours of men?' (Christiansen 1971–3: 95). Every legend or belief is an answer to a question – though the questions can be of a dozen different sorts, trivial or profound. Why did she had to die so young? Why won't the butter come? Why do I keep getting lost in a familiar landscape? Why do the bottles in the cellar keep getting empty? Why don't I love my baby? Why does this damn aircraft keep wobbling from side to side?

As an old man, Yeats was visited by spirits. Like the fairies he had once invoked on the shore at Rosses, they would neither confirm nor deny their objective existence. Instead, they said, "We have come to give you metaphors for poetry". All of us, in our own way, are living out the poem of our lives, and it is for this that the fairies give us metaphors.

Part 2

Fairy Traditions

10: The Lady from the Lake: fairies and marriage

Near Corofin in County Clare, a ruined castle of the O'Quins looks down on Lake Inchiquin. There was a time when there was neither lake nor castle, but even in those days there was a young O'Quin. He was a daring sort of fellow, and when he heard that three mysterious women were said to bathe at nights in a well that stood in the valley, he concealed himself nearby and watched them, all unseen. Then as they left, he leapt from his hiding place and seized the youngest and most beautiful of the three. She pleaded for her freedom, but it was no use. So they came to some sort of an agreement, and the mysterious lady became his wife. A fine castle was built, and the two of them lived happily in it with their two children. But the beautiful lady had agreed to marriage on one condition – young O'Quin was never to invite company to the castle.

Many years passed by, and all was well in the castle and its domain. O'Quin raised a fine breed of horses, and at length he decided to put one of them in for the races. It did well, and O'Quin was treated to many rounds of drinks in celebration. His new friends insisted on accompanying him on the homeward road, and he was in no state to resist, so they reeled their way across the plain, laughing and singing, until they came in sight of the castle, and of the fairy woman who sat there waiting. As O'Quinn came closer she slipped into the waters of the spring, which bubbled and swirled out of the well towards him. It rose and rose; all the others fled for their lives, not stopping until they had reached the hills. Below them, a placid lake covered all the plain (Davies 1853; Kennedy 1866: 282–3).

Inchiquin is not the only place where they tell this tale; there are variants from West Cork, Galway and Donegal (Almqvist 1999: 29–33). But always there is a prohibition of some kind, and we know that as long as it is kept they will be happy, and when it is broken, the strange wife will vanish. Sometimes the husband is merely careless; sometimes the storytellers imply that he has been goaded into boasting of this strange woman, and that brings about his downfall:

He went off to the races with his horse next morning. The horse won. The same happened next day and the next; the horse won first prize. The gentleman was delighted. The people gathered around him, and one of them said that his wife would be proud when she heard the good news.

"She will, if he has a wife at all", said a second man.

"I have the most beautiful wife in the world", said the gentleman.

"Show her to us and we'll believe you!"

The gentleman became angry.

"Come with me, and see her!", said he.

The men followed him to his door. He had forgotten all about his promise, until he saw her standing beside the well with the two children at her side. He raced towards her to tell her about the races, but he was late. Before he reached her, she jumped into the well along with the children. None of them was seen from that day to this.

Johnny Sheimisín Ó Domhnaill, County Donegal, 1930s

(Ó Súilleabháin 1977: 57–9, from the Irish)

The lady in the story would seem to be an ordinary wife, except for three things – her mysterious appearance, the prohibition, and her mysterious disappearance. These are the clues which remind us (though not the hapless O'Quin) that she is from the Otherworld. Of course, her requirement that no strangers should come to the castle might be a natural wifely reaction to a party of drunks demanding dinner and lodgings, but that seems too literal a reading. It is rather that she wants something about her to be kept secret. There are Highland stories in which this is more explicit. O'Cronicert was hunting through the woods when he started a doe, and chased her for a long day, and as evening came on she turned into the loveliest woman that eye had ever seen. He caught her, and would not let her go, and she agreed on three conditions. The third condition was that he should never reproach her with the fact that he found her as an unwise animal in the wood (Campbell 1900: 127–32).

So she may seem human, but the fairy wife is really something strange, as alien as an animal. She has been caught – as animals are – and domesticated, but her true nature is that of the wild wood. It is not

surprising that these stories of the fairy bride overlap with a much more widely spread tale, that of the swan maiden or (as people generally tell it on the Atlantic coasts) the seal wife. In this tale type, a man comes across a group of young women who are bathing, having taken off the outer skins which make them into birds or seals. He seizes hold of one, as did the young O'Quin, and will not let her go until she agrees on marriage. Marriage, under the circumstances, seems a bit of a euphemism; true, there is a mutual agreement between the parties; but this is because the man has acquired the skin, cap or cloak of feathers without which the girl cannot escape. Of course he conceals it but one day, many years later, she comes across its hiding place, and then at once she is off (Leavy 1994).

The similarities to the story of the fairy bride are obvious, not just in the plot, but in other details like the importance of water. There is no particular reason in the narrative why the bride should come out of a well or lake, but this is the pattern in the Irish stories, as it naturally is with legends of seals and swans. Water seems to carry some charge of symbolism, as if stood for the mysterious beginnings and endings of things into which the young man has crassly blundered (Kavanagh 1995: 74). Certainly the Welsh stories of this type are all associated with lakes. They were passed from one storyteller to another, wherever there was a suitably dramatic body of water. The distribution is quite separate from that of the seal-wife legend, which seems to have begun in Scotland and spread to Scandinavia; the Welsh fairy bride has no trace of an animal origin about her, and is much less passive in the way that she is caught in marriage, and the way that she regains her freedom (Wood 1992: 60, 66).

The classic version of this story comes from Llyn y Fan Fach, near Myddfai in Carmarthenshire. On the banks of this dark lake, a shepherd boy pastured his flock. Three maidens used to come from the waters, and run amongst his flock, but every time he got nearer they would sink back into the waters, chanting:

> Hard baked bread!
> It is not easy to catch us.

But one day the shepherd found some stuff like dough floating on the surface of the lake, and ate it. After that he was able to catch one of the girls, but she slipped away, promising only to be his if he could identify her when he saw her again. This was no easy matter, as the three were virtually identical. Fortunately the shepherd had remembered a detail of her costume which marked her out, and so she

was content to come and live with him. But there was a condition. On the third time that he should strike her without a cause, she would return to her watery home, taking with her the herd of cattle that she had brought out of the lake. Well, they lived happily; and then one day, the man asked his wife if she would run out into the field and catch the horse. He was in a hurry, and when she did not answer, he tapped her briskly and said "Go, go, go". That was the end. She fled to the lake, and the cattle followed after. Two of the oxen were at the plough when she called them, and they came after her at once, carving a furrow through the mountain that stood in their way: this furrow was always shown to visitors when they were told the story, in case they looked sceptical (Ab Tydfil 1820).

This is the first version of the tale from Llyn y Fan Fach, but forty years later a much longer account, decked in all the flowers of Victorian rhetoric, was supplied by William Rees. He had spoken to various people around Myddfai, including a local antiquary, and probably selected a little from each of them to produce a good composite story. The incident of the bread is expanded – now it is too hard at first, then too soft, then just right, like Little Bear's porridge. In this version the maiden is given away by her father, as a respectable young woman should be. Instead of the three blows coming at once, the first occasion waiting for the horse is followed by two mysterious passages in which the lady weeps at a wedding and laughs at a funeral, as if she saw through the outward appearances of life to some deeper meaning. The Welsh wife, unlike the Irish one, leaves her children behind when she returns to the Otherworld. There are three of them, all sons, and they grow up to become famous as doctors (Williams 1861: xxi–xxx).

There were other Welsh stories of a fairy wife, but they are all forgotten now, while Llyn y Fan Fach has become one of the most famous legends in the country. Its pre-eminence is understandable: the story touches on every aspect of life, 'a sermon in miniature' (Gwyndaf 1992–3: 257). And Rees published his story at an opportune time. A few years earlier the success of a literary fairytale, Le Motte Fouqué's legend of Undine, had launched a tidal wave of Otherworldly maidens. If you went to the ballet, the theatre, or any other cultural form from the 1840s onwards, chances were that you would see a sylph or a swan maid, a nymph, vily, rusalka or something of that sort (usually aquatic) who would succeed in marrying a mortal, only to lead to unhappy consequences all round (Maas *et al* 1997: 30).

Clearly the story of the lake maiden had an appeal far beyond the original audience of Carmarthenshire hill farmers. Victorian folklorists,

in particular, were profoundly concerned with the issues it raised about female independence (Silver 1999: 92–105). As far as they were concerned, the departure of the lake maiden, leaving husband and children behind, set a very bad example for women in this world. Why would she ever want to do a thing like that? Hartland notes the numerous instances in which the strange wife leaves after being tapped, struck, hit, chastised or beaten, but fails to draw what might seem an obvious conclusion (Hartland 1891: 311–2).

It is a hazardous business to base conclusions on a single version of a folk tale, especially when it shows signs of having been worked up for the reading public. Fortunately several other Welsh tales of the lake maiden are known, and these shed light on much that is unclear in the earlier story. For instance, the first blow at Llyn y Fan Fach happens when the wife is sent to bring in a horse. Why a horse? Then we find a version from Llyn Cwellyn in which the wife issues a prohibition, not just on being struck, but on being struck with iron. Her young husband was happy to accede to this request, and they lived happily together until one day he went out to bring in a colt for farm work. The colt was skittish, and the farmer asked his wife to help catch it; but do what they could, the untamed animal still kept out of the way, and he got more and more cross with it. Impatiently, he threw the bridle at the horse as it ran between them, and this was an unwise move; for the bridle missed its target entirely, striking his wife instead. She vanished and he never saw her again (Williams 1802: 37–40).

This form of the story is much more common than the 'three causeless blows' of Myddfai, and must therefore be a more reliable guide to the kind of ideas that were in the mind of the storytellers. At a surface level, it sounds like an accidental tragedy. The man did not beat his wife, did not even touch her, but made his fatal mistake while they were working together, as a couple must when they are running an isolated farm. But legends always work on more than one level, and it is significant that the thing which causes all the trouble is a bridle – a device which tames and restrains what was previously wild and free. At Llanllechid the story says that it was not a bridle, but a *llyfether*, and this turns out to be a fetter, the long strap that ties the forefoot and the hindfoot of a horse together (Rhys 1881: 197–9).

'Don't tie me down' seems to be the message. Since in these stories the lake maiden leaves after an accidental touch, they can't be read as thinly veiled sermons against wife-beating; but they do show an unexpected sensitivity to women's feelings about marriage as a trap, a loss of freedom. It's true that, in a narrowly legal sense, there was no

divorce in nineteenth-century Wales – not for the poor, at any rate; but people had their own ways of sorting things out, and their own sources of support as well. After the third blow, the fairy wife does not just go away – she goes home, back to her own people. She can break up the marriage, not because she is a free agent, but because she has ties to more than one social group. Through the bonds of marriage she was related her to her husband and children; but she has also kept up the connection with her blood relatives amongst the lake-dwellers. This would have made sense to Welsh country people, because in Wales the affiliation of a woman to her blood relations was much stronger than it was in England. She kept her own surname, and her daughters would often take a patronymic from her side of the family.

Perhaps it is significant that when the lake maiden goes home, she does not take her children (who belong with her husband, their nearest male kinsman) but she does take the cattle which she brought with her at marriage. This was a ruling which everyone would have understood: on the break-up of a marriage, supernatural or otherwise, the dowry goes back to the wife's kin. In many versions she conjures them home with a loving description of the brindled, white-speckled, bold-freckled cattle which does rather contrast with the implied disregard for her children. And yet there are other versions in which the wife seems to be caught between the two social groups, as if the conditions which she imposed on marriage had not been a liberating expression of self-worth, but a constraint which she regrets as much as her husband. This is made clear in a version from Llyn y Dywarchen, near Beddgelert, where the wife vanishes after being accidentally struck by a bridle:

> Her husband never saw her any more; but one cold frosty night, a long time after this event, he was awakened from his sleep by somebody rubbing the glass of his window, and, after he had given a response, he recognised the gentle and tender voice of his wife saying to him:
>
> Lest my son should find it cold
> Place on him his father's coat
> Lest the fair one find it cold
> Place on her my petticoat.
>
> William Jones, Caernarvonshire, 1830s
>
> (Rhys 1882: 58–61, from the Welsh)

The children, she implies, belong to both him and her; but now there is a boundary between them. This is one of several alterations in the Welsh tradition which tend to civilise the story. The lake maiden is fully human, not part-animal; the young man makes an effort to court her, rather than leaping out from behind a rock; she leaves because a mutually agreed condition has been broken, and not because she has suddenly come across an old cap or feather cloak in the attic. All these changes make the story less mysterious in a supernatural sense, and more like a dramatic preparation for the give and take of marriage. The Irish stories have a different prohibitions, but these also imply certain condemnations of behaviour – don't beat your wife, don't come back drunk with a pile of uninvited friends from the races. A recent version from Monaghan is much clearer about defining, in a negative way, the characteristics that make a good husband. He brings useful things back to the house, he takes the children with him, he does not insult them; at all events, if he does the opposite of these things, the marriage is over (Almqvist 1999: 34–7).

So it seems fair to say that 'the gender perspective is sympathetic to the woman' (Wood 1992: 63). But another reading could be made from the man's point of view. In the Inchiquin story, the prohibitions on drink and friends seem to be so absolute, so unbending in the face of possible human accident or weakness, that our feelings go out to the miserable husband (Almqvist 1999: 45). Of course these variations in interpretation between scholars are to be expected when one story is Welsh and the other Irish. The fact that one of the two folklorists is a woman, and the other a man, might also have something to do with it.

Certainly the legend of the fairy bride can be used to explore what it might mean for a woman to enter into marriage, or to leave it; nevertheless, the stories were for the most part told by men, not women. It is the descendants in the male line who carry the tradition; the lady of Llyn Cwellyn, who appears to have been called Penelope, left an extensive family in the district around Snowdon. They were known as Pellings 'and there are still living several opulent and respectable people who are known to have sprung from the *Pellings*. The best blood in my own veins is this fairy's' (Williams 1802: 40).

In fact at Llyn y Fan Fach the whole story, lake maiden and all, is no more than a prologue to the lineage of the Meddygon Myddfai. They were a hereditary caste of physicians who served the house of Rhys Gryg in the thirteenth century; with the fall of the lords of Dinefwr, they lost any official status, but doctors and herbalists in the area

continued to claim descent from them well into the nineteenth century (Hartland 1888). When memories of the house of Rhys were still fresh, the healers of Myddfai used them as a charter for their own status, but over time descent from a medieval physician must have lost its allure, and so they claimed a fairy ancestor instead.

But a fairy was more than just an ornament to the family tree. In many of the Welsh stories, she acts as a kind of talisman, bringing good luck to the farm:

> It is to this day a tradition – and I have heard it a hundred times – that the dairy of Corwrion excelled all other dairies in those parts, that the milk was better and more plentiful, and that the cheese and butter were better there than in all the country round, the reason assigned being that the cattle on the farm of Corwrion had mixed with the breed belong to the fairy, who had run away after being struck with the iron fetter. However that may be, I remember perfectly well the high terms of praise in which the cows of Corwrion used to be spoken of as being remarkable for their milk and the profit they yielded.
>
> Owen Davies, Caernarvonshire, 1840s
>
> (Rhys 1881: 198–9)

In the more literal versions of the story, this increase is due to the care taken by the fairy wife, who turns out to be a dab hand at all sorts of farm work. She is, as one might say, a treasure, which means that she is being treated like an object. Beginning as a captive, she becomes a servant, and is then made a wife, though as no ceremony is ever mentioned, the marriage seems to be of a very informal kind. And how does she feel about it? Traditional storytellers do not normally discuss the feelings of their characters, but from the Western Isles there comes a song and story which, unusually, looks at the situation from the viewpoint of the fairy woman.

> A deer-hunter of the hill found a sorrowful little woman in a rocky nook at the foot of the mountain. She was naught but a sorrowful little tiny fairy woman, and as pretty as a picture. She was weeping and lamenting, grieving and sorrowing, sobbing and sighing, like to break her heart. The hunter inquired of her the cause of her sorrow, and she told him that the big worldling had

put the steel above the lintel of her bower when she was out seeking a pitcher of water, and she could not get into her own house. The hunter lifted the dear lovely little mild woman of curling coiling hair on the tops of his palms and the summit of his shoulder, and he took her home, and he had her herding the cattle. When the fay would be at the cows she would be mourning and sorrowing, and she could be heard afar off.

Over the cattle I will not watch,
Over the cattle I will not be,
Over the cattle I will not watch,
For my joy is in the fairy hill…

Thou man who closed to me my door
And robbed me of my pleasure,
Without seed, without luck, without joy be thou –
Ill is the thing which thou hast done!

Hebrides, 1900s

(Carmichael 1928–71: 5.121, from the Gaelic)

11: Household familiars: fairies and work

In most stories the fairies are supposed to lead a life of leisure, but there are some in which they seem to be made for hard work. This sort of fairy is given various names: usually a brownie in Lowland Scotland, a *bodachan sabhaill* (which means 'little old man of the barn') in the Highlands, a bwbach or bwca in Wales, and in England a boggart, hobman, or hobthrust. Whatever name he goes by, the household familiar can be identified by his contribution to the homestead. Typically he does the same work as farm labourers, but does it far more quickly, and alone (Briggs 1978: 54–65). He is Milton's drudging goblin who:

> swet
> To ern his Cream-bowle duly set,
> When in one night, ere glimps of morn
> His shadowy Flale hath thresh'd the Corn
> That ten day-labourers could not end
>
> (*L'Allegro* lines 105–9)

The tradition continued through to the nineteenth century. Daniel Burton of Levenshulme in Lancashire had a boggart to help him, and his servants found in consequence that

> During the night everything was 'cleaned up', and all was in apple-pie order when they came into the kitchen at daybreak, the milk churned, the cows foddered, the necessary utensils filled with water from the well, the horses ready harnessed for their day's work at the plough, and even a week's threshing done and the barn left as tidy as though it had just been emptied and swept.
>
> John Higson, Lancashire, 1880s
>
> (Bowker 1883: 54)

Daniel's farm was a model for the neighbourhood, and the old man raised finer crops than any other farmer in the district. 'His "luck" became proverbial'. So the household familiar was, at one level, a way of explaining success in agriculture. In the cold light of day, it was obvious that mowing and threshing were done by labourers, the servant class whose contribution to the work of the farmstead made good luck possible for their employer. But by eclipsing them behind the figure of the household familiar – tireless, uncomplaining, and above all, invisible – farmers could gloss over the real source of their prosperity. Understandably, relations between human servants and their supernatural colleague were said to be tense. 'The least delinquency committed either in barn, or cow-house, or larder, he was sure to report to his master, whose interests he seemed to consider paramount to every other thing in this world, and from whom no bribe could induce him to conceal the offences which fell under his notice. The men, therefore, and not less the maids, of the establishment usually regarded him with a mixture of fear, hatred and respect' (Chambers 1826: 270).

Victorian folklorists were naturally inclined to take the farmer's point of view and thought that vigilance like this, though imaginary, might still be rather a good thing. But the stories make it clear that the household familiar was not just a projection of his master's wishes. Like many an old retainer from this world, he could be awkward and cross-grained, and above all, he would not stand being criticised. In Furness they told how a farmer, when the fields were ready for harness, glanced up at the evening sky and saw heavy rainclouds rolling from the west. Ah, if only the crop could have been fetched in that day! The hob of the farmstead heard what the farmer said, and took him at his word. Next morning every sheaf had been brought into the barn, but the best horse was found dead between the shafts of the cart. And the day turned out fine after all, which did not help the farmer's temper; irritably he wished that Hob could be doused in the millpond. A few hours afterwards, not the spirit, but the corn was found floating there (Bowker 1883: 247).

But as long as you were prepared to fit in with his ways, the household familiar would work without any thought of reward; how different, muttered the farmers, from his human colleagues. And if he did require payment, it was only a token. At Over Silton in the North Riding, there was a hobthrush which worked for the landlord of the village pub. A churn would be set ready for him in the evenings, and during the night he would churn the cream, taking for his reward a large slice of bread

and butter. One night, they put the cream into the churn as usual, but neglected to place any bread and butter beside it. Hob was so disgusted that he never came to churn any more (Grainge 1859: 325–6). Sometimes it was more than neglect which broke the bond. Near Llanover in Monmouthshire, bread and milk used to be left out for the *Bendith y Mamau*, 'the mother's blessing', for so the fairies were called in that part of the world. One of the servants thought this was rather a waste, so when his turn came he ate the bread, then drank the milk and pissed in the bowl, leaving that for them instead. Enraged, the fairies threw it around the house; then, before they left for good, they caught the servant and cursed him, saying that as he had behaved like an idiot, so there would always be an idiot among his descendants (Rhys 1883: 191).

These spirits will accept no payment other than food. In sticking to this, they are respecting the old rules that bound master and man in the days of live-in service; it was the custom that workers would receive bed and board from the farmer, and in return they would contribute their labour around the farm. The farmer ate at the same table as his farmhands, and in this way the abstract relations of employment were humanised by a kind of family life and by sharing a meal cooked from food which they had produced together. The *Bendith y Mamau* were outraged, not just because they had been served some nasty stuff, but because they had been excluded from their share in the common diet of the household.

But the actual relationships between a farmer and his servants were not always so comfortable, especially when living-in gave way to paid labour. Hobthrust might not want wages, but other people did. By the early modern period, rural Britain was divided (very roughly speaking) between the populous south and east, where labourers occupied their own cottages and had a straightforward cash relationship with their employers, and the more isolated and pastoral country, where the hands were more likely to live in and farmers still felt under obligation to keep up personal relations with them. Beyond this pastoral region, in turn, there were communities which maintained a peasant economy and had no dominant farmer class.

In the pastoral country – the upland zone of fairy belief – stories of the household familiar would have had a natural appeal to farmers, who found themselves torn between the old ideal of familial relationships with their workers and the new values of cash wages. Significantly, the stories are very rare in Ireland, where storytellers were accustomed to

smallholdings and not the kind of large tenancy which needed the work of many hands. Séan Ó Catháin came across a single instance at Malinmore in County Donegal, but the story was told in English rather than Irish, and related to a family of Scots descent – 'pretty well-to-do, having a good-sized farm' (Ó hEaochaidh 1977: 89, 378).

The history of the household familiar always ends with his departure. This is obviously necessary if the story is to be believed – after all, if the spirit hadn't disappeared for one reason or another, how come he wasn't still threshing and churning at nights? But there is also unease about getting something for free from this mysterious source, about entering into an agreement (unkind neighbours might call it a pact) with a spirit of unknown pedigree (Wilby 2000). So the relationship comes to an end, usually as the unexpected consequence of the farmer's good nature when he provides a set of clothing for his servant.

> When night came the old woman placed Piskey's new clothes, and a bowl of gerty milk on the barn-boards, where the moonlight would shine on them to show them best. A few minutes after leaving the barn she came back to the door, opened its upper part a little, and, looking in, saw Piskey standing up, eating his milk, and squinting at the clothes at the same time. Laying down his empty bowl he took the new breeches on the tip of his hand-staff, carried it to the window, and seeing what it was, put it on over his rags, dragged on the stockings, and gartered them, donned coat and cap, then jumped over the barn-boards, and capered round the barn, like a fellow light in the head, singing,
>
> Piskey fine and Piskey gay,
> Piskey now will run away.
>
> And sure enow, run away he did.
>
> 'Captain Peter', Cornwall, 1830s
>
> (Bottrell 1870–80: 2.168–9)

While the household familiar was in rags, he was prepared to work for virtually nothing – but give him a decent suit of clothes, and at once he gets a better idea of himself, and is ready to leave and look for fresh chances elsewhere. This is told very much from the farmer's viewpoint

– see what comes of being generous to them! – and it is the common version in south-west Britain, but it appears elsewhere, as far north as Tiree, where the invisible herdsman became too proud to tend the cows as soon as he was issued with a pair of trousers (Campbell 1900: 189).

There is more than one way of telling this story, though, and some versions cast the farmer in a much less favourable light (Briggs 1967: 32–4; Edwards 1974: 108). At the Manor Farm of East Halton in Lincolnshire, a costume was left out one New Year's Eve for the industrious hobthrust. But the family, determined to economise, had made it out of hards – that is, the thread spin from coarse hemp – and not from good linen. Come midnight, they heard him put it on and then a thin voice chanted, half in sorrow and half in anger:

> Harden, harden, harden hemp,
> I will neither grind nor stamp.
> Had you given me linen gear,
> I had served you many a year.
> Thrift may go, bad luck may stay,
> I shall travel far away.
>
> (Binnall 1940)

It is easy to see how this story might appeal not so much to the farmers, as to those labourers who felt they were getting short change from their employers. The idea that someone could be paid off by a gift of clothing would have made more sense to the earlier storytellers, since replacement clothing (or livery) was then part of the agreement which servants made in return for their labour each year. But as time passed, people forgot that it had been the business of masters to clothe their workforce, so there seemed to be something anomalous about the reward given to the household familiar. Why should he need this little suit at all?

In his natural state, people decided, the spirit must be clothed in rags – or less. Hobthrust 'always comes scantily clothed, in fact, in a perfectly nude state. It is related that one girl, whose sense of modesty was offended, offered to make him a… coarse brown linen-shirt', with the usual result ('A Fellow' 1878: 62–3). The Fynoderee of the Isle of Man has a name which means 'hairy one' and he was big and shaggy, with fiery eyes, and vastly stronger than any man. He acted as a servant for the Radcliffes at Gordon, working at night, and never feeling the cold; but one frosty winter they made a suit for him and put it out in the barn. He lifted the garments up one by one, saying:

> Coat for the back is sickness for the back!
> Vest for the middle is bad for the middle!
> Breeches for the breech is a curse for the breech!
> Cap for the head is injurious for the head!
> If thou own big Gordon farm, boy –
> If thine this little glen east, and thine this little glen west,
> Not thine the merry Glen of Rushen yet, boy!
>
> (Morrison 1911: 51)

So the gift of clothes had not left him proud at their quality, or indignant at their cheapness; it had simply made it impossible, in some mysterious way, for him to stay in his employment, and he goes on his way regretfully to the isolated glen. This interpretation of the gift of clothes suggests more than just master-servant relations; it is a kind of meditation on all human contact with the supernatural. The spirit will do service on his own terms only. If you attempt to make him fit in with the human order – and clothing or livery traditionally said that a servant belonged to one particular master – then the link between the worlds is broken.

In their resistance to human culture, these spirits seem to belong to the natural, even perhaps the animal world; they are shy, strong, nocturnal. 'Some brownies kept the servant lasses of the farms which they haunted in constant fear'; a big, hairy, naked man crawling down the chimney each night was bound to be a strain on the nerves (Spence 1948: 37). In fact most of the household familiars have something rather scary about them, and it must be significant that although there are a great many names for the type in English, nearly all of them are also used to describe frightening spirits of the wild. In the north of England there are hobs, hobthrusts, dobbies and boggarts which have nothing to do with farms or firesides. They frequent lonely caves or crossroads, and jump out at belated travellers (Henderson 1879: 263–4). In one of the few Irish examples, the role of household familiar is taken by the sinister figure of the pooka, who appears in one of his traditional embodiments as a big grey ass – hardly the right outfit for doing washing-up and cleaning, but an expressive way to hint at a savagery which has been only temporarily domesticated (Kennedy 1866: 126–9).

Some tradition-bearers, sensing the importance of this contrast, made their stories tell how the fierce spirit was domesticated, or how he went back to his native wild. A farm called the Trwyn at Mynyddyslwyn in Monmouthshire was haunted by a bwca that terrified everyone until a

young girl came to work at the house; but she made friends with him, and this transformed the bwca into an industrious spirit who worked all night in return for a bowl of white bread and milk. All went well until one night, out of pure devilment, she left out coarse bread, and like the foolish servant at Llanover, soaked it in the piss that had been left out for dying cloth. Enraged, the bwca attacked her and kicked her all round the house, before storming off to another farm, where he made friends with the servant girl and did all her spinning; no nasty tricks here, but in the end she found out his name, and he had to move on. After that he moved to a third farm and got friendly with one of the labourers, but the man went off to the wars and was killed, and after that the bwca went completely wild and spent all his time distracting the plough-oxen in the day and throwing things around the house at night (Rhys 1902: 2.593–6). That's the story as it was told towards the end of the nineteenth century, but this spirit, unlike most, has a history; there are accounts of him from 1700 or thereabouts, when Job John Harry was tenant of the Trwyn. 'The report of it spread very far, and was in every man's mouth for a long time, and is still remembered and spoken of at times' (Jones 2003: 106). It was not called a bwca then – in fact Harry was uncertain quite what to call it – but at all events it was a great nuisance around the farm. It kept knocking at the door; it threw stones around; it spoke from out of the oven by the hearthside; in short, it behaved as poltergeists always do behave. More legendary elements, like the household service and the departure when affronted, were evidently added to the story after those who remembered the actual facts were gone

The bwca turned order into disorder when he was wild, and disorder into order when he was tame. But as the story from the Trwyn suggests, the industrious, helpful side of the household familiar is found only in tales of the distant past. When people relate something from their own experience, the work of the supernatural turns out to be much less constructive. A Manxman remembers waking in the night, when he was a child, and seeing a light in the kitchen. But his parents are both sound in bed. He hears a whirring noise and dives under the blankets. Next morning his father turns the spinning wheel over carefully and says: "It seems your mother forgot to take the band off last night, a thing people should be careful about, for it's giving Themselves power over the wheel, and though their meaning's well enough, the spinning they're doing is nothing to brag about" (Morrison 1911: 5).

And a Yorkshire boggart is pure poltergeist:

> The children's bread and butter would be snatched away, or their porringers of bread and milk would be dashed down by an invisible hand… One day the farmer's youngest boy was playing with the shoe-horn, and as children will do he stuck the horn into a knot-hole… The horn darted out with velocity and struck the poor child over the head. Time at length familiarized this preternatural occurrence, and that which at first was regarded with terror, became a kind of amusement with the more thoughtless and daring of the family. Often was the horn slipped slyly into the hole, which never failed to be darted forth at the head of one or other; but most commonly he or she who placed it there was the mark at which their invisible foe placed the offending horn.
>
> 'An old tailor', Yorkshire, 1750s
>
> ('P' 1825)

In the end it was all too much for George Gilbertson, the farmer whose children were so distracted by the boggart. One day (we are back in legendary time now) he determined to move house, brought a cart to the door and loaded it, piece after piece, with all the family furniture and goods. As they pulled up the hill a neighbour chanced to come by, and said how sorry he was to see the Gilbertsons leaving the old house. "Heigh Johnny my lad, I'm forced til it, for that damned boggart torments us so, we can neither rest night nor day for it. It seems like to have such a malice against the poor bairns, it almost kills my poor dame here at thoughts on it, and so, ye see, we're forced to flit, like". And like an echo, resounding from the depths of the old butter churn perched on the cart, came the voice of the boggart – "Ay, ay Johnny, we're flitting, you see". "Damn thee", says George, "if I'd known thou'd be there I wouldn't have stirred a peg of the furniture" And slowly he started to swing round the waggon. "We may as well turn back to the old house, then, as be tormented in another that's not so convenient".

This is a classic Yorkshire story, though it is also known in Lancashire and Northumberland, while in Orkney the part of the boggart is taken by a hogboon (Marwick 1975: 42). The hogboon is a guardian spirit who lives in a mound near the farmstead and comes out at night to collect food that is set out for him and perform his tasks; his association with a barrow, the seat of the ancestral dead, suggests an origin in old

Norse tradition. And generally, the distribution of this flitting story suggests that it came over from Scandinavia, where it is often told of the *nisse* – not that this really tells us anything about why it should have been so popular in the nineteenth century. The Vikings didn't leave their ancestral spirits behind them, but they did initiate a pattern of isolated rural settlement which bred cautious, canny hill-farmers like the heroes of these tales. Often the good sense of the farmer is made clear by contrast with another, less prudent figure. Jonathan Gray of Whitby had long enjoyed the services of a household goblin, or perhaps a ghost; as sometimes happens in these stories, the mysterious helper was thought to be the spirit of a dead labourer, one Ralph, who had been frozen to death one night coming back from the fair. At all events he was physical enough to enjoy a jug of cream, which was put out each night until Jonathan married again, and his second wife was a woman of a saving disposition. She substituted skimmed milk for the cream one night, and after that Ralph ceased to be a household drudge and turned into a poltergeist, with the farmer's effort to escape him by flitting ending in the usual discomfiture (Gutch 1901: 364–7).

These stories were popular because they summed up a worldview that must have been pretty much universal amongst hill farmers – that radical attempts to improve things won't get you anywhere. You can make a great pother about packing the furniture and getting ready to move, but at the end of the day your luck will travel with you, and you might as well stay in your own home as be tormented in another that's not so convenient. This is not a story for labourers, who did generally move on each year; nor for the tenant farmers of the arable south-east, who expected to better their condition as they transferred from farm to farm. It belongs to the dales and the fells, to stone farmhouses inhabited by many generations of the same families and, apparently, by their hobs and boggarts.

12: Blood and water: fairies and the home

When fairies are described in connection with the home, they always seem to be guardians of tidiness and good order. However uncanny the spirits may be – however rough, hairy or wild – they are very diligent about washing up, sweeping the floor, putting away chairs and tables and tidying up the fireplace (Spence 1948: 221–3).

This sounds much like wish-fulfilment, though you do wonder exactly whose wishes are being consulted. Certainly in some of these stories, the servants welcome an invisible friend who will do all the work. But in others the household spirit is a kind of super-servant, more faithful, tireless and diligent than any mortal, keeping the others up to scratch. Brownie-Clod got his name from the clods of earth which he threw, illogically, at any of the domestics who had failed to keep the house clean. 'Over the servants he was always a vigilant and faithful spy, ready to give faithful account of their good or bad actions; and hence it followed, that with these he was very seldom on a good understanding' (Stewart 1823: 141).

Ideas like this seem to call for some practical explanation. It is true that only a few writers have looked for an underlying purpose in beliefs about fairy servants, or about fairies in general. But amongst those who take it as more than just a succession of amusing stories, this tradition that fairies insisted on neatness seems very suggestive. What do we make of a situation like this?

> The house had to be kept spotless. One night I was just too tired after a day's work and I didn't wash up after the supper. I said I would just leave it in the basin till morning and I thought every cup that was in the house was going to be broken with the racket that was on in the house that night. I've never left the house dirty at night since.
>
> Jenny McGlynn, County Laois, 1980s
>
> (Lysaght 1991: 32)

Keith Thomas, in his influential *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, used anthropological parallels to prove that this fairy business was all much more sensible than might be expected. If a fear of the spirit world kept dirty dishes from piling up in the sink, then maybe the fairy faith had some use after all (Thomas 1971: 730–1). Croker had made the same point back in the 1820s. Traditions that the fairies loved clean water and a swept hearth were not vacuous superstitions at all, for 'The suggestions of intellect and the precautions of prudence are easily discernible under this: a safety from fire in the neatness of the hearth; a provision for its extinction in replenished pails, and a motive to perseverance in the promised boon' (Croker 1825–8: 3.204).

So fairy lore operates for the good of the community, although you can't help noticing that, as usual, the work of serving 'the community' falls disproportionately on the backs of women. Certainly Diane Purkiss has fingered the bias that runs though these traditions, especially in verse written by Jacobean poets (Purkiss 2000: 164–5). Amongst these is Richard Corbett, whose 'Farewell, Rewards and Faeries' must be the best-known fairy poem of all time. He looks back, or pretends to look back, with a wistful eye to the days when fairies kept the household in good order.

> And though they sweepe theyre Hearths no less
> Then Maydes were wont to doe,
> Yet who of late for Cleaneliness
> Finds *sixe-pence* in her Shoe?
>
> (Corbett 1955: 50)

Now if you are looking for folklore as the authentic, unmediated voice of the people, then clearly these poems will not do. Corbett was not passing on gems of rural tradition for the sake of posterity; he wrote for his contemporaries and social equals, people who felt they knew what the servants should do, and rather liked the idea that they could be conned into doing it by a belief in fairy gifts. Their fairy queen is simply a master in drag, who

> did command her elves
> To pinch those maids that had not swept their shelves:
> And further, if by maidens' over-sight
> Within doores water were not brought at night,
> Or if they spred no table, set no bread,
> They should have nips from toe unto the head
>
> (Browne 1868: 1.66).

But not every allusion to fairy neatness was a fiction, or a way of getting more value out of the servants. Corbett, one gathers, didn't believe in fairies, let alone fairies who left real sixpences in people's shoes; but many of his contemporaries felt differently. Amongst these was the folklorist and antiquarian John Aubrey, who had a lively interest in fairies. 'When I was a Boy, our Countrey people would talke much of them', and Mrs. Hoskins of Hereford used to be left a groat every night; in the end she melted them down and had them made into a little cup, which her daughter still kept on the dresser (Aubrey 1972: 203–4).

Where these silver groats came from was a mystery, and after the passage of three hundred years it is likely to remain so, but Mrs Hoskins thought they came from the fairies. The episode was part of her own life-story, her self-respect, as were so many of these tales about the mysterious silver. It was something to be proud of, to deserve a fairy gift of money. 'Two serving damsels of this place declared, as an excuse, perhaps, for spending more money than they ought upon finery, that the pixies were very kind to them'. In the house where they worked, near Tavistock, they had discovered that silver would be dropped overnight into a bucket of clean water, if they were careful to leave this in the chimney corner before they went to bed. But one night they forgot to put the bucket out, and the pixies came rustling indignantly into their room. The girls woke up and heard what was going on; one of them thought they should get up immediately and set the hearth in order, but the other yawned lazily and said they should not stir themselves, not for all the pixies in Devon. Well, the hard-working girl got up, and filled the bucket, where a handful of silver pennies were found waiting for her in the morning; but the lazy one was afflicted with a lameness in her leg, and this lasted for seven years (Bray 1838: 1.188–90).

The teller of this story evidently drew on memories of nursery tales. Often these play on a contrast between the good girl, who is clean and thoughtful and comes to a happy end, and the bad, spiteful, dirty girl who meets her deserved reward. Stories like this were a gentle way of cajoling children of both sexes into kindness and attentiveness to others, but when they were told to girls rather than boys, they acted as sweeteners for the feminine role that lay ahead of them. After all, cleaning and sweeping is hard work at the best of times, and if you are going to spend the rest of your life doing it, you might as well have a story or two to give it some magical allure. Getting that bucket of fresh, bright water is a chore, but maybe, just maybe, there will be a piece of

bright silver shining at the bottom of it. In fairy legends, water is often a kind of metonymy for a woman's life.

The gift of sixpence might reward conformity to social roles, but society – at least in the form of parents or employers – had no great interest in supporting it. Quite the reverse, as Anne from Bassaleg was to find out.

> Going by night into a little grove of wood near the house, she heard pleasant music and saw a company of the fairies dancing here. She, seeing the place pleasant, went with a pail of water there to gratify them. The next time she went there, she had a shilling in the place, and so had in several nights after until she had twenty-one shillings. But, then, her mother, finding the money, questioned her where she had them (fearing she had stolen them). The girl would by no means tell until her mother went very severe upon her, if not to beat her. Anne then was obliged to tell how it was, but had no more money after that.
>
> Anne Francis, Monmouthshire, 1760s
>
> (Jones 2003: 88)

Once she had told someone else about her trips to the woods, the exchange would be at an end. In that respect, the secret gift was like a relationship with a fairy lover, something that was best kept hidden from prying eyes. A milkmaid from Lancashire, who received sixpences in return for a jug of milk, trusted her boyfriend with the story of this little nest-egg, and how she had come by it. That night, neither the jug nor the sixpenny bit showed themselves, and they never came back again (Thornber 1837: 333). There is just a hint in this story that the fairy gift stands for independence – the literal freedom of having your own money, of course, something which the girl would lose on marriage, but also the more subtle mental independence of a secret which is all her own, and which will lose its power as soon as someone else knows it. It is hard for a women to preserve that secret in the face of importunity from lovers, parents or sons. When a Welsh boy was short of money, he was given a half guinea by his mother from her little store.

> I was frightened when I saw a poor woman like my mother possessed of so much money, and I entreated she would tell me how she came by it. "Honestly", said she; I remember the very word.

> "Oh, mother!", said I, "tell me where you got it; to whom would you trust your secret, if you do not confide in your only son?".
>
> "Well, if I must, I must", said my mother. She then told me, and most unfortunate, poor woman, for her was the disclosure; for from that moment the donation ceased. Often did she attend the well; but, alas! in vain.
>
> Dafydd Sion, Glamorgan, 1820s
>
> (Croker 1825-8: 3.227–8)

But if clean water deserves fairy gifts and healing, the failure to provide it may bring on repercussions. Stories of lucky sixpences found by the well are common throughout the upland region of fairy belief; the traditions are very different in the Atlantic zone, where the fairies enforce cleanliness in a much more ruthless way, and the emphasis is all on punishment. In Ireland, the careful housewife always left out a pail of water for unexpected visitors. One woman was woken up, about the middle of the night, by a great hubbub around the fireside, and found that the fairies had taken possession. Some of them were preparing their food, and others cooking it; they cautioned her to go back to bed, and she did so, being much relieved in the morning to find that everything was undisturbed. Except the pail for drinking water; this had been left empty overnight, but in the morning she found it full of blood, as a hint that she should be more thoughtful in future (Wood-Martin 1902: 2.9). And things could have been worse, as they certainly were in this Manx story:

> At night the fairies came into a house in Glen Rushen to bake. The family had put no water out for them; and a beggar-man who had been left lodging on the sofa downstairs heard the fairies say, "We have no water, so we'll take blood out of the toe of the servant who forgot our water". And from the girl's blood they mixed their dough. Then they baked their cakes, ate most of them, and poked pieces up under the thatched roof. The next day the servant-girl fell ill, and was ill until the old beggar-man returned to the house and cured her with a bit of the cake which he took from under the thatch.
>
> Dinah Moore, Isle of Man, 1900s
>
> (Evans-Wentz 1911: 127–8)

This is an abbreviated version of a common Irish story, in which something – it may be the fairies, it may be a dead man – gets entrance to the house because the rules of cleanliness have not been observed. That sinister something feeds like a vampire and takes the blood from the people of the house; they fall mysteriously ill, or lie still and cold as if they were dead. Only when a crumb of the blood-cake is restored to them, and they get their own blood back in their bodies, do they recover (Ó Duilearga 1940).

These stories depend on a contrast between the two living liquids – water and blood. Blood, of course, belongs in the body. As soon as it leaves the body, we feel that it is something frightening and polluting – even dirty, if you accept the anthropologists' dictum that dirt is matter out of place. Now, people like to imagine their houses as a kind of surrogate self, and just as blood is the liquid that flows in individual veins, so water is the liquid that flows in and out of our house-body. Breaking the rules, by leaving water which has become polluted inside the house, invites trouble from the supernatural world. In a grimly appropriate response, the fairies take blood and hide it away outside of the body so that this, too, ceases to be clean and becomes polluted.

That may seem rather an elaborate explanation for a simple folktale, but it accounts not just for the story, but for the beliefs that belong with it. More often than not, the dirty slop-pail contained foot-water; that is, the water which everyone had used to wash their feet before they went to bed. This was in old Ireland, when it was unusual to wear shoes, so that all day people would be treading in stuff from outside the house across the all-important threshold. Not until the end of the day was the careful housewife able to clean up this process and send the dirt back out where it belonged.

Fairies are dangerously offended, or even empowered, by the presence of dirt in the home. It is as if the house has to be cleaned from them, not for them. That explains why foot-water plays an important role in another narrative, which tells how fairies can gain access to the house, and what you should do about it once they are there. Like the story of the blood-cake, it is most common in Ireland:

> There was a widow woman living a long time ago in the east of County Limerick in a lonely sort of place, and one night when she and her daughter were going to bed, didn't they forget to throw out the feet water. They weren't long in bed when the knock came to the door…

> "Feet water, let us in!" says the voice, and with that, the tub of feet water split and the water flowed around the kitchen, and the door opened and in came three men with bags of wool and three women with spinning wheels, and they sat down around the fire, and the men were taking tons of wool out of the bags, and the little women were spinning it into thread, and the men putting the thread back into the bags.
>
> And this went on for a couple of hours and the widow woman and the girl were nearly out of their minds with the fright. But the girl kept a splink of sense about her, and she remembered that there was a wise woman living not too far away, and down with her from the room to the kitchen, and she catches up a bucket. "Ye'll be having a sup of tea, after all the work", says she, as bold as brass, and out the door with her.
>
> They didn't help or hinder her.
>
> Off with her to the wise woman and out with her story. " 'Tis a bad case, and 'tis lucky you came to me", says the wise woman, "for you might travel far before you'd find one that would save you from them. They are not of this world, but I know where they are from. And this is what you must do", and she told her what to do.
>
> Back with the girl and filled her bucket at the well, and back with her to the house. And just as she coming over the stile, she flung down the bucket with a bang, and shouted out at the top of her voice: "There is Sliabh na mBan all on fire!".
>
> And the minute they heard it, out with the strange men and women running east in the direction of the mountain. And in with the girl, and she made short work of throwing out the broken tub and putting the bolt and the bar on the door.
>
> Michael Dawson, County Limerick, 1940s
>
> (Danaher 1967: 127–9)

Angry and frustrated, the fairies call on the key and the foot water to let them back into the house. But the key is tied firmly to the bedpost, and the water has been spilt and run out the door, so the house is now proof against their entry. There are different versions of the story, but in

every one of them the mysterious spinners call on something inside the house to betray the family by opening up its boundaries, and each time the object in question has been neutralised in some way. If it is a broom, it has been thrust as a bar behind the door; if it is carded flax, it has been crushed under a weight; if a spinning-wheel, it has been disengaged from its wheel-band; and if the fire, it has been covered under a heaping of ashes. The list varies from one tale to the next, but in each case a sort of domestic diligence has protected the vulnerable boundaries of the house against the return of the fairies (Ó Coileáin 1990; O'Neill 1991).

The house seems to be a metaphor for the body, for both of them must be kept closed against bad things coming from the outside. To fasten the door is to 'restore the breach through which the good people have made their dangerous entrance into the life of one's family group and its possessions' (Arensberg 1937: 196). Stories of the dirty water which has to be eliminated from the house ought, on this reading, to have something to do with the dirt which is excreted from the actual body. And this seems to be the case, though the earlier folklorists discarded much of the evidence for it in the interests of Victorian propriety.

> Ketty Cassidy lived in Aughrim. One day her husband went to the fair, and there was no-one left at home but herself. In the night, when she was in bed, there came in the full of the house of women, as she thought, and one of them got sick in the corner, and when the baby was born they went to look for clean water, but they had none to get, she had ne'er a drop in the house. One of them says: "What'll we do to wash the baby?" and they said: "What will we do but wash it in the churn that the buttermilk is in; and when she rises in the morning she'll know the odds of not leaving clean water within; and when she drinks it she'll find it worse".
>
> Anne Whelan, County Leitrim, 1890s
>
> (Leland 1895: 170)

Much the same story is found in Shetland. A boy was sleeping on a shake-down near the fireplace, and woke in the night to see two trow-wives warming themselves by the fire, one of them with a baby. The baby's nappy needed changing and his mother looked about the house for clean water, but could find none. So she made use of the bowl containing sowens, or siftings of oatmeal, which were always set to soak overnight to be ready for breakfast. She tipped out the water into

a basin, cleaned the baby and its clothes, and then poured the filthy water back into the bowl, saying "Take ye that for no having clean water at the house!". And then the trow-wives spread out the washed nappy in front of the fire, and waited for it to dry. The boy kept his head under the blankets, but stared at the trows for all he was worth, knowing that they could not disappear while his gaze was on them. They began to fidget, for dawn was coming; and at length, one of them stuck the tongs into the fire until they were red-hot, turned and thrust the points of them towards the eyes of the watching boy, and as he blinked and screamed the trows made good their escape (Edmondston and Saxby 1888: 209).

13: Hunger and silence: fairies and illness

Fairies are the hidden people, the strange people, the other crowd; talking about fairies is also a way of talking about boundaries. The stories refer to the charms and rituals which will keep your home clean from the things outside, but there are also various rules to apply when the movement is in the other direction, and people find themselves breaking into the world of Faerie. The simplest rule, and the one which appears in almost all narratives of a journey to the Otherworld, is easily remembered: don't eat.

There was a widow in Donegal who had only one child, a little girl called Nancy. It was her job to drive out the cattle to pasture, and after that she could play; while she was doing this one day, she met another child of about her own age, a red-headed girl who asked Nancy to come home with her.

> They went down a short way and a door opened into the hill. They had gone in only a short distance when they came to the finest castle Nancy had ever seen. She followed the red-haired girl into the kitchen. There was only one old woman there, but there was great noise and hubbub in the room beyond the kitchen. This little old woman wished Nancy a hundred welcomes and good health and addressed her by her name and surname. She went to a press, took out a loaf and cut a slice off it. As she handed the slice to Nancy another woman came from the room where the noise was and slapped the slice out of Nancy's hand.
>
> "Why did you do that", asked Nancy, "and I so hungry?"
>
> "If you knew what a race for your sake I have made all the way from Cnoc Áine you would not speak to me so. Go out before me through that door and do not look

> behind you until you reach home. There is not a man or a woman of your townland but has been out searching for you this evening. When you go home tell your mother you were saved by Biddy Eibhlíne who was drowned a long time ago the day she was beachcombing on the Rough Shore".
>
> Máire Uí Cheallaigh, Donegal, 1940s
>
> (Ó hEaochaidh 1977: 40–1, from the Irish)

This is a story about danger, about a child who is too trusting and careless. When she meets her new friend, Nancy does not stop to ask who the girl might be, although the fact that she is a redhead ought to ring alarm bells. In Ireland, where the fairies at first glance look like everyone else, red hair often used as a clue that something uncanny is going on (Monaghan 2003: 51). Nancy is not surprised, either, at finding a castle in a hollow hill, or meeting a strange woman who knows her name – another hint that boundaries are being broken. Like any child in those days, she is hungry all the time, and it is only the intervention of the second woman that saves her. Then she goes home older and wiser, carrying adult messages about death and obligations.

There are many stories about the risk of eating in Faerie, though they do not necessarily have a child as protagonist. If it is a man who has carelessly wandered into the other kingdom, the storytellers tend to play down the role of hunger, and emphasise that of good fellowship.

> The queen, as soon as she saw my father, cried out, "Welcome, Mr. Doyle; make room there for Mr. Doyle, and let him have the best at the table. Hand Mr. Doyle a tumbler of punch, that will be strong and sweet. Sit down, Mr. Doyle, and make yourself welcome". So he sat down, and took the tumbler, and just as he was going to taste it, his eye fell on the man next to him, and he was an old neighbour that was dead twenty years. Says the old neighbour, "for your life, don't touch bit nor sup". The smell was very nice, but he was frightened by what the dead neighbour said, and he began to notice how ghastly some of the fine people looked when they thought he was not minding them.
>
> 'Mrs K', County Wexford, ?1820s
>
> (Kennedy 1866: 116–7)

There is something a little suspicious, then, about this fine company. In this tale type, where a friend amongst the fairies saves the rash intruder through giving good advice, much of the storyteller's art goes on building up the image of the feast. 'They arrived in a splendid banqueting hall, lit by dozens of golden sconces that seemed to emit a beautiful fragrance. Fine linen cloths covered the tables, and garlands of delicate flowers decorated them…Liveried male servants bore silver dishes of fine food and shapely maidens in light gossamer dresses stood by…' (O'Farrell 1997: 20). It is all a phantasm conjured up to trap the hero, and at the very moment that he refuses to eat, the servants and carousers will turn very nasty indeed; but it is significant that while the illusion lasts, it is modelled very closely on the lifestyle of the gentry in the big house. A feast is an image of participation, and by joining in and drinking his tumbler, we are to understand, Mr Doyle the humble peasant will join the company of these rich and elegant people. Just in time, he realises that this may not be altogether a good idea.

This story of the friend among the fairies naturally falls into two halves. There is the outward movement, away from home into the fairy hill, where more and more marvellous things are offered for the protagonist to participate in. Then the friend whispers a warning, and the illusion is stripped away. The man or woman stops trusting in the fairies, and starts looking for the door; they no longer participate but refuse, and the movement of the story turns away, back towards the safe return home. Often there is some rejection of the offered food to dramatise this pivotal moment. A Manxman was cautioned against drinking in fairy company: 'accordingly a large silver cup, filled with some sort of liquor, being put in his hand, he found an opportunity to throw what it contained on the ground. Soon after the music ceasing, all the company disappeared, leaving the cup in his hand, and he returned home, tho' much wearied and fatigued' (Waldron 1865: 28). It was hard to know what to do with this suspicious object, but they made it into the chalice for celebrating communion at Kirk Merlew, and that seemed to nullify its fairy character.

Contact with Faerie, something which is to be avoided at all costs by ordinary folk, is the source of power for special people. Through her association with childbirth, 'the midwife becomes a magic figure… She can command the fairies, disperse their attacks, travel through the air, transfer labour pains at will to a truculent or negligent husband. She is in communication with the fairy powers… She herself may deny all this; but it us true, none the less, in belief' (Arensberg 1937: 205–6).

Many stories tell how a woman was taken into Faerie to help someone in childbirth. In some versions, it is a foolish girl who has taunted a pregnant frog or toad, and this animal turns out to be a fairy woman who cannot be delivered of her child until the girl is brought to her. In other tellings of the story, it is the village midwife who is carried one night to a strange house, and after she has helped with the birth she finds that she has been among the fairies. The earlier forms of the story – preserved in Ireland and Scotland, though not in southern Britain – explain that the woman in childbed is also a mortal, carried off into Faerie but needing human help in her time of trial. She acts the part of a friend among the fairies, cautioning the midwife not to eat or drink (Mac Cárthaigh 1991). Sometimes the midwife returns to this world with fairy gifts, or with infallible skills in helping childbirth.

But nothing comes for free, least of all in dealings with the other crowd. They might overlook the theft of gold – it usually turned into dry leaves, anyway – but the theft of knowledge was another matter. The story of the midwife's journey to the fairy hill is usually rounded off by a second episode. When she was doing her service, the midwife had accidentally rubbed her eyes with an ointment which gives her the true sight into Faerie. At once the splendid mansion around her is reduced to withered stumps and roots, and she sees the fairies for what they are, but she holds her peace. Only much later she encounters one of the fairies in the marketplace, and by greeting him she betrays the fact that she has acquired this insight. At once it is taken from her; often with one of her eyes as well.

The story of the midwife was often told as a kind of advertisement for family skill in that profession (Stewart 1823: 104–7; Gregor 1883a: 25–6). But insight into where the secret people were, and what they were doing, was the mark of the fairy doctors, and by making it part of their own life story they too may have helped spread the legend. Certainly one Somerset practitioner, when interrogated about how she could identify and cure disease, began telling the old tale:

> At one time she met with one of the 'fair fairies', being a man, in the market of Taunton, having a white rod in his hand, and she came to him, thinking to make an acquaintance of him, and then her sight was clean taken away for a time, and yet hath lost the sight of one of her eyes.
>
> Joan Tyrrye, Somerset, 1550s
>
> (Purkiss 2000: 131)

Joan Tyrrye, the wounded healer, could make a living out of charms and unwitching because she had paid the price for her initiation. But other practitioners might gain their powers vicariously. If they had a relative who had suffered at the hands of the fairies, this would become their conduit for secret knowledge. There was a cunning-man in Galway who spoke about the source of his power; we know him as Fagan, as he vetoed the use of his real name, which might have led to trouble. This Fagan owed his power to his sister, who had died, or rather been Taken, sometime in the 1870s. To be Taken (I have given it a capital letter, because it is a kind of technical term) is to be carried off by the fairies, and kept in their world. Friends and relatives may think that you are dead, unless a fairy doctor explains the situation to them, and may even bury a simulacrum in your likeness; but all the time you are living out a kind of parallel life in an unseen dimension.

Fagan knew that his sister had been Taken when she appeared to him as he was working in the fields, and when he did not recognise her, she said "I'm your sister Kate". And then she said "I bring you a cure that you may cure both yourself and others". She told him about a herb, and of the field where he would find it growing, and which leaves to pick, and how to use them. It was this that started him on his career as a fairy doctor, 'a great warrior in the business' (Gregory 1920: 1.106; cf. Yeats 1993: 255).

Three hundred years earlier, many Scottish cunning-women had been questioned about their activities, in less amicable circumstances; they were on trial for witchcraft. Many of them had made contact with someone who was generally supposed to be dead, much as Biddy Early and Fagan were to do later on. Christiane Lewingston of Leith, tried in 1597, said that she began healing after her daughter was Taken, 'and that all the knowledge scho had was be hir dochter, wha met with the Fairie'. Alison Peirson, whose patients included the Bishop of St Andrews, had a friend amongst the fairies called William Simpson; he taught her 'of everie seekness, and quhat herbis scho sould tak to haill thame'. Bessie Dunlop of Ayrshire was taught all her cures and thief-finding charms by Thomas Reid, who had once been a mortal man but was now in Elfame. It was a kind of partnership – in fact Reid tried to take it a stage further, pointing out to Bessie how rich he was and how good-looking, until at last he asked her to come and live with him in the Otherworld. Bessie told him indignantly that she was a married woman, and their relationship continued on a purely professional level. But many others among the Scottish cunning-folk,

both men and women, took lovers from the other side and gained their knowledge from them (Henderson and Cowan 2001: 85–6).

Contact with Faerie was a demanding business, even when it had been deliberately sought out. But when it came unwillingly, it was terrifying:

> There is an extraordinary story going around hereabouts just now. Eleanor Dorcey, daughter of James Dorcey of Ballyline was coming home from Kilboyne (Ballingarry) after hearing Mass, the 2nd day of this present month, Sunday, in the company of Nicholas Tobin and others, when she saw the fairy host around Machaire More. A dark person came out of the host and tried to wound her. She ran round Nicholas Tobin that she might not be hurt; but this was little help to her, for she would have been wounded and severely hurt, only that her mother (dead six years) came to save her. Her mother had a woeful expression. Then the fairy host left her and Nicholas Tobin and the other people took her home. She was speechless until cockcrow after midnight, when she recovered her speech; and then she lost the use of her leg which was as cold as ice. Thus she continued for thirteen days, that is till Saturday, till her mother came to her and asked did she wish to be cured. She said she did. "I should have come to you sooner, but I could not come as long as anyone was with you; but now as I find you in solitude, I will heal you. Come out to the roadside". They both went out, though they did not take the same way. Her mother showed her a herb… This is an extraordinary story, unless she became subject to hallucinations like a person in a fever, or unless it is a make-up of her own. But some of the neighbours say her leg was as cold as ice.
>
> Amhlaoibh Ó Súileabháin, County Kilkenny, 1820s
>
> (Ó Súileabháin 1936: 1.133–5, from the Irish)

Ó Súileabháin was not just the local schoolmaster, he was a man who treasured the Irish language and culture, and an incident like this troubled him because the learned and popular categories of disease did not match up. Local wisdom would have it that Eleanor had been afflicted by the *poc sí* or fairy blast. But a doctor, even back in 1827, might have been able to diagnose it as a mild stroke, though even the

word 'stroke' itself is derived from the older mythology (Smith 1987: 140). Medical intervention could do little for stroke patients then, so Eleanor was probably just as well off with her narrative of supernatural healing.

Nowadays, we think we understand what causes a stroke, and doctors can offer something more useful than herbal advice from dead relatives. But what about the suffering of the mind? Is there an objective category of mental illness, or are we no better or worse than the old peasants, with their traditional explanations for misery?

> Sure there was a fairy in a house out beyond fourteen years. Katie Morgan she was called. She never kept the bed, but she'd sit in the corner of the kitchen on a mat, and from a good stout lump of a girl that she was she wasted to nothing, and her teeth grew as long as your fingers and then they dropped out. And she'd eat nothing at all only crabs and sour things. And she'd never leave the house in the day-time, but in the night she'd go out and pick things out of the fields she could eat. And the hurt she got or whatever it was touched her, it was one day she was swinging on the corner gate, just there by the forth. She died as quiet as another. But you wouldn't like to be looking at her after the teeth fell out.
>
> Nora Whelan, County Galway, 1900s
>
> (Gregory 1920: 1.180–1; cf. Yeats 1993: 318)

'Away with the fairies', eh? The catchphrase has been used for a century or more, but it seems a little too pat, too dismissive for experiences like this. Mental illness is not easy to describe from the outside – 'she was always sitting in the corner by the fire', they said of another woman who had been Taken, 'not speaking, but a kind of a sound like moaning she'd make to herself; and they'd always bring her her dinner over in the corner, and if anyone came in to see her – and many came hearing she was away – she'd draw the shawl over her face'. For a woman like this, the metaphor of Faerie had its advantages. It made her strange behaviour more intelligible, and it was a language which she too could use to make sense of her condition. It was not me that was ill, said old Mrs Sheridan, it was the thing in my image, the thing that used to pull its head under the bedclothes when people came. She herself was a long way away, in a grand house, surrounded by people in strange clothes talking and laughing. When the seven

years were over and gone, she returned to the world of normality, bringing gifts as a visionary and healer (Gregory 1920: 1.81–2, 215).

But these stories were not just ways of dealing with mental illness, for it was just as common for any wasting disease to be interpreted in the same way. The real, healthy person had been Taken and all that was left was a kind of image or stock. This kind of talk was only used when young people fell sick – tradition bearers often explained that the fairies coveted their youth and strength. What use would it be to them to take the old and feeble? But tradition did not offer any explanation for the choice of young women, rather than men, though this is the most obvious feature of these stories. As well as the scattered folktale evidence, we know of dozens of instances drawn from real life, or whatever passed for real life in turn-of-the-century Connacht (Gregory 1920: 1.171–244). In this sample, the women who are Taken outnumber the men three to one; five to one, if you include references to young mothers, since almost every death in childbirth was interpreted as a fairy abduction.

And yet this imbalance between the experiences of men and women went without remark, not just from the people concerned, but from the folklorists. Most of these accounts were recorded by Augusta Gregory and William Yeats, in a partnership which lasted from 1897 to 1916 and covered Galway, Mayo and Clare. Gregory did most of the fieldwork and Yeats provided the interpretation, at first in a series of essays and then as notes to the published material.

Outside the gates of Coole Park, the two authors were entering a world in which untreatable illness, an ever-present risk of injury or death, and a high level of child mortality were all attributed to the fairies. Gregory wrote it all up without comment, although her ear for the telling detail suggests a certain empathy (Lysaght 1998; Guinness 1998). As for Yeats, he concentrated with Edwardian high-mindedness on the ideal realm of the *sí*, not the wretched conditions for men and women (especially women) which formed its substrate. This may have been a process of active repression – in 1888–90, his own mother had suffered two strokes and slid into a mental breakdown from which she did not emerge until her death (Toomey 1997: 149–54).

All along the Atlantic coast, from Donegal to Beare, people knew variations on the tale of a young women who was Taken – a story which acted as a kind of template for interpreting women's experiences in real life. The nineteenth century saw many literary variations on this theme, either because it had become more common

in oral performance, or because journalists and versifiers felt it suited the mood of the times. In the 1790s, a poet who was interested in the fairies might have written, as did Richard Millikin of Cork, about a devil-may-care young man who throws in his lot with the wild crowd, and enjoys an exhilarating night riding through the air. After the rise of Romanticism, stories of a very different cast were selected for treatment. Always it was a beautiful, vulnerable and passive young maiden who was abducted by the fairy host. This, observes Éilis Ní Dhuibhne, 'is a fact which is so bristling with socio-psychological implications of various kinds that one longs for some explication. It screams for a feminist analysis' (Earls 1992–3: 119, 146).

Such an analysis might well begin with the prohibition on eating food in Faerie. In all these stories of a trip to the fairy hill, the leading character is told not to eat; it makes no difference whether they are male or female, both are warned in the same way. But in the memorates, which are based more or less on real lives, and usually those of women, we find the same rejection of food presented much more vividly. 'Bridget Kinealy… often spoke about them, and how she was badly treated because she wouldn't eat their food, and how there was a red-haired girl among them that would throw her into the river she'd get so mad with her. But if she had their food ate, she'd never have got away from them at all' (Yeats 1993: 316). By eating we incorporate food into our bodies, but we ourselves are also incorporated into the community that feeds us – something which may be very unwelcome, and very much resisted by a woman when she feels trapped by the people who are thrusting the food on her. It is hard for a modern reader to avoid thinking of anorexia in this context, and Angela Bourke makes the connection in an article which suggests that 'a well-known lullaby in Irish, supposedly sung by a fairy-abducted woman, may be heard as a poignant coded expression of a young married woman's loneliness for her childhood home' (Bourke 1993: 31; cf. O' Sullivan 1960: 18–20).

True, a certain difficulty in relations with the in-laws is part of the small-change of human life in most cultures. But there are good reasons why a young woman's problem of alienation should have inspired story-tellers in this region. Marriage always creates a bond, not just between two people, but between the blood relatives on either side. Traditionally in lowland Britain, this bond was closest between husband and wife, to the potential exclusion of their in-laws; after all, the couple worked together as a unit, whether their household got its living through farm labour or industry. But in Ireland the economic

unit was the landholding, which passed down through the husband's kin. The wife came in from outside, joining the household of her mother-in-law. Her husband's sisters might not take kindly to her, especially if the dowry brought to the family by the wife was too small to let them in turn marry and leave home. There were ample opportunities for friction and the wife's only ally, her husband, was still subordinate to his parents.

So there were good reasons for a young wife to sympathise with the girls in fairy legend, far from home and resisting incorporation into this strange and potentially hostile Other Crowd. Sometimes it is her husband who will come to the rescue, but just as often it will be one of her own blood relatives. In the Hebrides, a trampling sound as if from a troop of horses was heard round the house where a woman lay in childbirth, and when they looked back at the bed, she was gone. At the end of seven years her sister was walking past a *sithean*, and saw the hill open, and the woman sitting there with a child in her arms, singing:

> Little sister, little loving sister,
> Rememberest thou the night of the horses?
> Seven years since I was taken
> And one like me was never seen
>
> (Campbell 1900: 84)

This is one version of the lullaby mentioned by Angela Bourke, which was sung in the Gaelic of the Highlands as well as in Irish. Sometimes we are to understand that the girl in the fairy hill is not allowed to talk to outsiders, but she gets the message over to her sister outside by pretending to sing to her child in a string of nonsense, interspersed with words like:

> My darling sister and my loving sister,
> Break the iron and throw the point over me!
>
> (Ó hEaochaidh 1977: 69, 376)

A fragmentary Scots ballad, 'The Queen of Elfan's Nourrice', consists of a dialogue between the nursing mother, desperate to get back to her own home, and the elf queen who promises to let her out when her duty is done, and the child at her breast can stand and walk (Child 1882–98: 1.358–60, no.40). With a poem like this, it is the time and place of performance, as much as the content, which gives life to its tradition. The ballad, like the Irish lullabies, would have been sung over her baby by a young wife and mother who was firmly in this

world, but who could use the words of the song to express those feelings of loss and loneliness which she was not supposed to have. The baby may be an unresponsive audience, but at least it is a blood relative, the only one she has in the house. In the imagery of her song, it is the fairies who must not overhear what is going on; in real life, the in-laws.

In the stories of captivity 'there is perhaps a background of failed obligations, either within the household or the circle of immediate kin' (Jenkins 1977: 43); and for the handful that fell into mental illness, tradition provided a dramatic metaphor for acting out their situation. Thus, for instance, the girl in County Clare who fell strangely silent when she was taken home on her wedding day to live with her husband's family.

> She sat there by the hob for three days and she didn't turn her face to the people. But the husband said, "Let her alone, maybe she's shy yet". But his mother got angry at the last and she said, "I'd sooner be rubbing stones on the clothes than watching an idle woman". And she went out to the flax and she said to the girl, "You'd best get the dinner ready before the men come in". But when she came in there was nothing done; and she gave her a blow with some pieces of the flax that were in her hand, and said, "Get out of this for a good-for-nothing woman!". And with that she went up the chimney and was gone. And the mother got the dinner ready, and then she went out, not knowing in the world how to tell the husband what she had done. But when she got to the field where they were working, there was the girl walking down the hill, and she took the two hands of the mother and said, "It's well for me you hadn't patience to last two days more or I'd never have got back".
>
> 'An Aran woman', County Galway, 1900s
>
> (Gregory 1920: 1.199–200)

Flax is apotropaic, one of the things that keeps fairies away (Smith 1987: 142). Like many of these protectors – bread, iron, salt, fire – it suggests the work and effort that people take to transform natural resources into food, warmth and other homely things. Appropriately, then, the mother of the house shows her indignation at idleness by beating the substitute woman with a handful of the crop that, more

than any other, takes long labour to turn into a finished product. At the literal level, this drives away the fairy – 'she flew up the chimney' – but the supernatural element is lightly handled. The story is more about the accommodation that is eventually made between the wife and her mother-in-law, and this understanding depends on their shared story of how a fairy was first substituted and then banished.

Meanings of this sort are implied, not stated, but that doesn't mean that only folklorists can see them. Jenny McGlynn, who could tell many stories of abduction, felt that they were really talking about married life. 'People change; they have to get used to a new way of life when they get married. And some can take it and some can't…They would say that she was a demon, that she wasn't from this earth at all… I think that's what it was all about' (Lysaght 1991: 36).

Certainly there are stories in which the supernatural plays only a token part. An old man in Argyll remembered that his mother was carried off by the fairies for two months. When pressed for details, he said that when he was young, his parents – Gillies was the family name – did not get on, and that another man used to come to the house when his father was away. There was a row about this, and his mother was forbidden to see the other man. But she went to market, and was seen talking to him that afternoon, and in the evening she did not come home. So far, so good – we feel we understand what is going on, and it does not involve fairies. But although the other man's cottage was turned upside down, there was no sign of the runaway wife. Nevertheless, she used to come into the house every evening; she would tidy things up and care for the children, brushing their hair. Then, two months later, the husband was walking past a wood when he heard his wife calling him.

> Following the sound of her voice he came to a large hazel bush, but, as he could see no one, he was turning away when from the middle of the bush came again his wife's voice... "I am tired", replied his wife, "and want to come home, but I am naked and cannot get quit of the fairies until I am clothed. Fetch me a smock tomorrow morning, and hang it on this bush just when the sun rises, but you must not try to see me, or the fairies will hide me so that I can never find my way back". The next morning at sunrise Gillies hung the smock on the bush, and, as he was turning away from the place, his wife called out to him to bring her another garment, and each morning she asked for

> something more until he had brought everything she needed. The last thing he brought was his wife's 'mutch' (white cap), and, when he was turning to leave the wood, she called to him to go straight home at once.
>
> Hugh Gillies, Argyll, ?1860s
>
> (Cartwright 1910: 90–1)

He ran home, not turning his head to the right or to the left, and there he found her sitting by the fire, fussing over the children. She settled back in again as a wife and mother, and nothing more was said of what had happened – which might not have been the case, if a story had been told which left out the fairies.

Mrs Gillies was, one gathers, a woman with a mind of her own, someone who could make traditional stories serve her turn. Usually the incentive lies with the men; in a Shetland story, it is the god-brother, or brother-in-law, who saves the day:

> There were a wife lying in her bed with her young infant. Her brother had been at the mill grinding corn and when he was coming home what should he meet but a company of Hilltings carrying his sister with them. What way he got her frae them, I ken no, but he got her frae them and carried her til his nain house. Than he gaed in to the god-brother and says he, "How is Osla?". "She's still breathing", says the god-brother. Then the wife's brother says, "Gang forth, I want to be here mesel". The god-brother gaed forth and the wife's brother took the image that the Trows had left in place of the wife and hoved her in the fire and they say she gaed off with a crack. Then he gaed forth and took the god-brother with him and showed him his wife well and hale at her brother's fire'
>
> Christina Smith, Shetland, ?1930s
>
> (Saxby 1951: 2–3, adapted from dialect)

The wife that sits in the house is only an illusion – a log, a puppet, a carved stock of wood (Spence 1948: 241–4). How can the menfolk tell that this substitution has taken place? Well, a change in the wife's character is a sure sign. 'A man went from home, leaving his wife in childbed. Her temper had never been ruffled. He found her a wicked scold. Thinking all was not right, he piled up a great fire, and

threatened to throw in the occupant of the bed, unless she told him where his own wife had been brought' (Campbell 1860: 2.67). Once the husband has decided that the thing in the bed is not his real wife, any amount of violence seems justified if only it will effect the change – if it will bring back the dutiful and obedient wife who was there before. 'He turned on his heel and out with him and in again in a moment with the pitch-fork from the byre. He went up to the bed and made a swipe at the thing that was lying there, but, well for her, when she saw him drawing at her she rose and went out of the window like a flash of lightning' (Ó hEaochaidh 1977: 59).

14: Rider on a white horse: fairies and death

Not all stories of fairy abduction end in a violent confrontation; sometimes the pain of loss is balanced by a tale of recovery. There is a lonely strand at Querin in County Clare where the wildfowl settle at nights, and a young fellow called Kern used sometimes to go there on a shooting expedition. One night, on November Eve, he saw a black mass moving along the edge of the water. This came closer, and he saw it was four men, carrying a coffin. As they laid it down, he fired, and they ran off into the darkness. Kern walked up to the coffin and lifted the facecloth, to find a beautiful young girl, not dead but sleeping. Gently, he woke her. She looked around with fright in her eyes, but said nothing. And though he took her home, and she lived with him for twelve months, she never spoke a word, and never ate. When next November Eve came round, Kern walked out towards the strand, and as he passed by an old *lios* or fort he heard the sound of music and laughter. There were two voices talking. One was saying: "Where shall we go tonight, to carry off a bride?". And the other: "Anywhere but Querin, for that young fool Kern took our prize from us. Little pleasure he got from it! She will never eat nor speak now, not unless he makes her dine from her father's tablecloth that we put over her as she lay in the coffin". So Kern raced home, and fetched out the cloth, and the young lady ate and drank from it. Then she could speak, and told her story: how she was stolen from her family on the day of her wedding, and carried far off in a swoon by the strange people. At once he called for a coach and took her home to her father. The old man was delighted to see her once more, and to meet the young man who had rescued her; they all got on well together, and the upshot was that Kern married his young lady with her father's blessing, and took her back to Querin once more (Wilde 1887: 1.49–51).

Here, in a different story type, we recognise the same concerns that animated the tale of captivity in the fairy hill; concerns about strangers, family and marriage, about eating and belonging. The young lady in the coffin is not dead, but she is not fully alive either. Forces from

outside herself have sealed her mouth to cut her off from speaking, eating or belonging – and symbolically, at least, it is not just her mouth which is a sealed opening, since she lives for a year with the young man but cannot become his wife, not until the hostile magic is overcome. Eating food from her father's tablecloth is followed by reunion with her family, as if the two actions were two ways of expressing the same thing. As young Kern is accepted by her family, so he ceases to be a threat which freezes her into silence and immobility, and takes the place of the expected husband.

Legends of this type were popular throughout the Irish and Gaelic-speaking regions, and three separate versions were collected within a few evenings from a pub in Dingle (Curtin 1895: 23–8, 60–6, 66–72). The groundwork of the tale is usually formed by the rescue or discovery of the strange lady, her silence under the fairy power, and the reunion with her family. The method of disenchantment has to be learned from the Otherworld, but details vary from one story to another. In Limerick 'the only way to make her talk is to give her a certain herb boiled in milk, and if he only knew it, that same herb is growing in the field behind his own house' (Danaher 1947: 218–9); 'nine mouthfuls of water from the Fairywomen's Rock before sunrise to-morrow morning' in Donegal (Ó hEaochaidh 1977: 233–5); 'a drink from the cup that is in my hand' in Ross-shire (Campbell 1860: 2.97–9).

In these versions, something must be eaten or drunk to break the spell, but we also hear of an enchantment called the *biorán suain* or slumber-pin. The fairies have thrust it into the girl as they carried her off, and until it is found and removed, she must remain dumb (Ó Cróinín 1967–8: 357). The motif of the slumber-pin is found, not just in this story type, but in many other fairytales or wonder tales. It is a kind of shorthand for female silence, not just the dumbness which a patriarchal society expects and never finds in a woman, but deliberate silence as her way of protecting the vulnerable self until the tale is ready to reach its happy conclusion (Warner 1994: 391-408).

In the tale about the dumbness of a young women stolen by the fairies, we are invited to identify with different characters – first with the lad who discovers her, then with the unexpressed emotions of the silent girl herself, and then with the feelings of her family, after the young couple go in search of them. Often the lad is poor, much poorer than the girl's parents; he and she make the journey to Stephens Green in Dublin, or wherever it is the rich people live. Then they must wait on

the doorstep while the father shouts and threatens them, and insists that his daughter is long dead, until the moment of recognition (McClintock 1877: 246–9).

For being Taken is very much like being dead; in some of these stories the young girl is carried off in a coffin, in others we are to understand that something in her likeness was left behind, and that it was this thing which was mourned and buried by the family. People who return from death, or from the appearance of death, are going to create anomalies in the society of the living, and these are not always as happily resolved as in the story of the dumb girl.

There was a young woman from Ventry in County Kerry, who hadn't long been married before she died. Her husband buried her with great sadness, but life must go on, and before the year was out he had married another girl; they got on well, and a child was on the way. Then a letter came from a farmer that lived many miles off, down in Cork. He told how something queer had been going on in his kitchen – every night the bowl of milk that was left out on the dresser went missing. The farmer had determined to get to the bottom of this, and sat up all night, when he saw a strange woman enter the room and drink the milk. He jumped up between her and the door, and asked her what she was doing. Well, it turned out that this woman was kept prisoner in the *lios* above the farm, and she had endured a whole year there without eating the food of the fairies, because she was able to keep going on the milk from the farmhouse dresser. She told him that she was the wife of a man in Ventry, and gave the address, and now there came the letter asking her husband to take her out. Off went the husband, with his old in-laws to help him, but they were naturally much troubled to think what might become of the second wife, and the child.

> So they went to the priest that was there that time, and they told him the story from the beginning to the end. And when he had heard the story, he said that it was a hard case, and against the law of the church. And the husband said that, when they had brought the woman out of the liss, he would not bring her back with him to make scandal in the countryside, but would send her to America, and would live with his second wife and her children. But the priest said that even if a man's wife were in America, she was still his wife, and it was against the law of the Pope that a man should have two wives; and though it was a hard thing, they must leave

> her in the liss with the fairies, for it was a less evil that she should eat the fairy bread and be always with the fairies in the liss than that God's law should be broken and a man have two wives living in this world. They found nothing to say against the priest, and they went back home sorrowing. And when the woman heard this from the farmer she went back with the fairies to the liss, and ate their bread and remained with them.
>
> Tomás Ó Crithin, Blasket Islands, 1930s
>
> (Flower 1945: 137–9)

A wife, among these agrarian families of the far West, is already something of an anomaly, because she sustains the lineage even though she has been brought into it from outside. And if this is true in an ordinary marriage, things will be even more complicated when the fairies take a hand. There was an honest, hard-working bachelor called Tadhg Ó hAodh who farmed land near Cnoc na Feadalaigh, and one Samhain evening he was out looking at the stars when he saw a dark cloud moving over, and heard the tramp of horses' hooves. Quickly, he scooped a handful of dirt from under his feet, and threw it against the whirlwind, knowing that this would compel the strangers to drop any captive whom they might have taken. Out of the cloud dropped a young woman, Maire ni Ruairc, so Tadhg bundled her up and took her home with him, and they got along well enough, and soon they were married.

This was all well enough, but Maire had another husband back in County Galway, and when he found that he was not a widower after all – despite having buried his wife, or the likeness of her, back in the churchyard at Gort – he came looking for her. Being good children of the Church, they took the matter to the clergy, but this was no help at all. The priest who had married her to Tadhg took his side, naturally, while the priest who had married her to Seán took a different view, and the priest who had buried Maire hardly knew what to think, nor did the bishop. And at the end of the hearing they all went home.

> Next day Maire took her travelling apparel on her back, in order to go to Connacht; and their neighbours made this arrangement between them, that both the doors of the house should be set open, that Seán should stand without, seven steps from the street door, and Tadhg in the garden, seven steps from the back-door, that she should take her choice and abide by it thenceforward.

> The child was sleeping in the cradle; and as Maire was about to depart, she went to the child to take leave of it, and shed a tear. She went then, until she was without the door, when she heard the child cry after her; presently she returned, and remained, without murmuring or uneasiness, with Tadhg Ó hAodh till her death.
>
> 'Mac Gabhann', County Down, 1800s
>
> (Neilson 1808: 2.71–85, from the Irish)

It seems that people had found their own, unofficial way of sorting things out when a woman had more than one man. It was a situation which could have arisen often enough, fairies or no fairies. In a society where people were mobile and communications were poor, where remarriage followed quickly on the loss of a partner and the only form of divorce was to walk out the door, many people must have had lives which didn't quite match up with the approved plan (Jenkins 1977: 44). For some households it took only took a touch of fairy intervention to trigger the impending crisis. Liam Ó Ruanaigh was on his way home from market in Galway when he stopped to talk to a distinguished stranger, and stayed at his mansion for seven days. Meanwhile a body left in Liam's place has been solemnly buried, and his wife has seized her long-awaited chance for a new partner. When Liam comes home, there she is in bed with the servant boy, her new husband; she leans out of the window, yelling at him to go away because he's dead, and he has great difficulty in convincing the village otherwise (Hyde 1890: 91–103).

Some of these stories, then, are using the image of a return from death, or the apparent death of being Taken, to talk about the emotional triangle created when a former partner returns. What, though, about the second husband, or the second wife – what do they think? There was a farmer at Ballaleece in Man, whose wife was carried off by the fairies, and who married again. After a while his first wife appeared to him, riding amongst the fairy troop, and told him that she could be rescued if he was resolute. The company would ride past the barn, and she would be on the horse next to the leader; he had only to rush out and seize the bridle, and she would be returned to the world. But there was a condition. The floor of the barn must be absolutely spotless, swept clean of straw. All day the husband brushed and cleaned the barn, and that night he waited as he had been instructed, but the bridle slipped from his hands and the young woman was never seen again.

His second wife had overheard the conversation and, jealous of her rival, had rolled a barrel into the barn and made sure that a single straw was hidden underneath it (Jenkinson 1874: 60).

A version like this turns the story into a new direction. Images of death and return can stand for the unexpected reappearance of an old flame, but it is equally possible (and perhaps rather more common) for a wife who is really dead to survive in her husband's mind as a kind of rival to her living successor. He mopes about the barn all day, thinking of the woman who is gone, and paying no attention to the one who is actually there. At North Berwick, sometime in the late eighteenth century, a woman died of puerperal fever, though others said she was carried off by the fairies. 'After a decent time had elapsed, finding his domestic affairs absolutely required female superintendence, the widower paid his addresses to a young woman in the neighbourhood. The recollection, however, of his former wife, whom he had tenderly loved, haunted his slumbers'. She appeared to him in a dream, asking him to gather the minister and a few assistants into the churchyard, where they should dig up her body. At once, the wife assured him, she would jump out of the coffin, and if a swift-footed young man could catch hold of her before she had raced three times round the church, she would be restored to the world. The man told all this to the minister, but the minister (for this is a passage from real life and not a legend) told him to hold his peace and arranged for the second marriage to take place without an hour's delay, and this put an end to all talk of fairies (Scott 1802–3: 2.222–4).

Many a bereaved relative might dream like this; in County Clare a woman appeared to her brother and said, like the farmer's wife of Ballaleece, that she could be rescued if he pulled off the horse that she was riding. The man went to his priest, who was no more helpful than his counterpart in North Berwick. 'The priest said, "Look, it can happen all right. But for everyone's good, it can't be allowed to happen. How can you bring back a person that's dead twelve months? Wouldn't it frighten the life out o' the people in the parish? Look", he said, "I'll do something. I'll say a few prayers…" '(Lenihan 2003: 277). But for all that, there were still those who hoped. And in some stories the rescue is successful:

> "Go down to the fort tonight", says the fairy woman, "and be in the gap in the fort ditch at the stroke of twelve, and take a bottle of holy water, and a black-hafted knife with you, and shake the holy water in a

> ring on the grass. The fairy riders will come out of the fort, and she will be riding a grey horse. Cut the reins of the horse with the knife, and pull her into the circle, and you will be safe until morning, and then you can bring her home".
>
> So he went to the fort, and did all the things that she told him to do, and sure enough, the riders came out at the stroke of twelve. He made a slash at the reins of the grey, and pulled his wife into the circle. It was then that the hullabaloo commenced, for the fairies were all running and shouting and screaming all around the ring of holy water, but they could not come inside it. The shouting and screaming kept up till dawn broke, and then they all disappeared into the fort. The young man took his wife home, and they were never again troubled by the good people.
>
> John O'Connor, County Limerick, 1940s
>
> (Danaher 1947: 219–20)

But all too often, the end is tragic, as the husband's nerve fails him at the last minute. 'He couldn't stir a hand or foot to save her. Then there was a scream and she was gone' (Evans-Wentz 1911: 49). 'His courage failed him, and he let it drop, and he never got the chance to see her again' (Gregory 1920: 1.195). 'He dropped in a dead weakness, and he failed to whip her off the saddle… The crying was heard all over the country, the woman crying as they went' (Lenihan 2003: 292; cf. Lyle 1968: 176–9). If only he had caught her… but now the wife is forever lost to the world. "If I pass on with the fairies", a girl warns the rescuers in a version from Breffny in County Leitrim, "they'll kill me dead for vengeance that night". And indeed, after the lads had lost her grip on her, 'the awfullest cry rose out of the throng of the fairies, and when the boys came on to the bridge they seen it all red with my poor Bridget's blood. The horsemen were after dashing her down on the stones to her death' (Hunt 1912: 155–8).

If a husband insists that his wife has in fact been Taken, when to all outward appearances she is dead and buried, other people may well suspect that he is in a state of denial. But as these stories suggest, there is no denying the facts of death in the end. It is as if the process of grief, which is too much to be borne in its entirety, has been divided into manageable portions. Disbelief is a common emotion at such a time,

and so is yearning or searching. Some kind of secondary attachment may take the place of the lost one, so that further grief is postponed until the subject of this attachment is also lost. William Wilde, who as a Connacht doctor in the 1840s had seen enough of grief and death, noted how 'years may elapse, yet will the friends and relatives still cling with desperate tenacity to the delusive hope that the fairy-stricken will return; and they listen with avidity to the various legends which tell how such and such of their neighbours or friends in former times were seen in the court of Fin Varra, or down in the Well of Oran, and sent home messages to their friends to be no ways uneasy about them, for they would return one day or another' (Wilde 1852: 122).

Anger, too, is part of grief. The hostility expressed towards the fairy stock – all those red-hot pitchforks and ploughshares – may be directed towards a living woman who has failed expectations, but it might also be directed to what is simply a corpse – something mute and still which cannot, must not be the real lost wife. And at least these rituals gave the man something to do. Michael Cleary was close to hysteria when he attended chapel on a Sunday in 1895. Soon afterwards he had recovered enough to lead a crowd to the fort at Kylenagranagh, carrying a big table knife. He said that his wife was in the hill and demanded that they wait to see her ride out on a white horse, so that then they could cut the cords that held her onto the horse and she would come back to them. Bridget was never going to come back, though, for her burnt body lay crouched in the swamp where her husband had buried her (Bourke 1999: 6, 18, 23).

Michael Cleary, then, had better reason than most to feel guilty about being a widower. But guilt will work its way into grief, whether justified or not. Many of the women who were supposed to have been Taken had died in childbirth, often while bearing their first child, and as there was a strong Victorian tradition of blaming the husband for his wife's confinements, if she died he might well have felt that it was his fault (Duffy 1972: 97).

Sudden death, especially the death of the young, is a kind of affront to the community; it should not happen, and the mourning which it arouses is much keener than that which is felt for the old or the ill. There was a young man at Granard in County Longford who died without warning, as he slept under a haystack. This was on May Eve, and so the family was convinced that he had been Taken into the fort that lies above the town. For nine days the family put out food for him at the edge of the earthworks, and every night the food disappeared, so

they knew he was there; and meanwhile they had sent for the fairy doctor. When he came, the doctor lit a fire outside the fort, and threw powder onto the flames, which were doused at once in a dense smoke. "Come forth!" he cried, and everyone who was there saw a shrouded figure rising up in the cloud of smoke, while some heard a voice saying slowly, "Leave me in peace; I am happy where I am; let not my parents weep over me, for I shall always bring them good luck and guard them from evil". Then the flames died down (Wilde 1887: 1.200). If this really happened, in anything like the manner in which it is described, then the fairy doctor must have been almost a stage-conjuror as well as a magical one. But he was also a good counsellor – he provided a healing ritual which allowed the grieving parents to accept that their dead son would never come back to them.

Society, after all, has to come to terms with the death of its members. Most of us have an idea of the good death, the one that takes place without too much disruption of the social and spiritual order; details may vary from one culture to another, but in early modern Britain and Ireland, the good death came at the end of a long life and a short illness, with the dying person surrounded by family and prepared for what was to come by the consolations of religion. Life being the messy business that it is, there were always bad deaths which did not conform to type – young people dying, mothers cut off in childbirth, the sudden fatalities that happened at work and the horrible death of drowning out on the lonely sea.

The bad death could be denied, not just by the immediately bereaved but by the community in general, if it was reinterpreted as being Taken. 'On the whole one might say that those of the Dead who inhabit Fairyland are people who have no right to be dead at all' (Briggs 1970: 96). The seers of Perthshire told Robert Kirk that they had often seen those who had died 'befor the natural period of their lyf expyr', and who therefore were not truly dead, but had gone into the *sith*. These were the people whom the Scottish cunning folk sought out as confidants. The witch, trying to break beyond the barrier into another world, reached out and touched hands with the prematurely dead, who were still hankering after this one. The traumatic history of early modern Scotland provided plenty of contacts. Thomas Reid, who gave his magical advice to Bessie Dunlop, had been killed in battle at the tragic defeat of Pinkie, thirty years before they met. Elspeth Reoch met a fairy man dressed in black beside the waters of Lochaber. He said he was 'sumtyme her kinsman callit Johne Stewart quha wes slane

be Mcky at the doun going of the soone'. Killed at an hour that was neither day nor night, he remained between two worlds, neither dead nor alive (Henderson and Cowan 2001: 60).

But in the end, the bad death was defined not so much by the way in which it came as by its effect on the survivors. 'When I was staying with a friend in Galway a little time ago, an old woman came from the Burren Hills to ask for help to put a thatch on her cottage, and told us, crying and bemoaning herself, of the snatching away of her five children'. They had been tall and strong and handsome, good workers and loyal to their mother. 'Consumption they were said to get', she says, 'but it was never in my family or in my father's, and how would they get it without some privication? Four of them died with that, and Martin was drowned'. Then she told a story of how one met a small little woman on the road, and another got a fright when she was passing a gentle place. She knew they were Taken, for they came back to her in dreams (Yeats 1993: 159–60). A man from near Doolin in County Clare says 'I do pray for my own two people that the fairies brought'. He had a brother that got sick working at Doonagore quarry, and a sister that turned ill and died after going to a dance, when a woman tapped her three times on the shoulder as they walked along the road, but would not cross running water. 'Hadn't they some set on our family after that, the fairies, hadn't they?! Hadn't they some set on 'em?' (Lenihan 2003: 303–12).

These stories open a door to private worlds of suffering. It cannot have been easy, given her privileged position, for Lady Gregory to have entered into that country; besides, she was divided from her tenants by religion as well as by social standing. Sometimes she hoped that the fairy faith itself would bridge this gap, as when folklore led her to the 'startling…conclusion that Ireland is Pagan, not Xtian'; for a moment, at least, the Catholicism of the emerging Free State slipped behind a Celtic mist (Saddlemyer and Smythe 1987: 205). Yeats was also looking for an occult path which would lead him beyond the contradictions involved in being Anglo-Irish. His poetry and his fieldwork both came to the same view of the fairies; each in its own way celebrated a soulless fairy race that lived in a kind of fierce inhuman joy, though being a Romantic Yeats was half in love with this idea, while country people usually took a more pragmatic view of their chances (Kinahan 1988: 41–84; Earls 1992–3: 120–5). 'Bad and all as Tulla was, he'd rather be there than here for the rest of his time' (Lenihan 2003: 229). Even so, in the hour of their death there were

those who saw things less conventionally. In County Limerick in 1894, 'old Clifford was a profound believer in the fairies. I had a chat with him the day before he died, just after the priest had his last interview with him. He looked through the low open window at Knockfierna and he told me that he would be up there soon on the whale-back black hill east of the cave where Donn was supposed to marshal his men before one of his expeditions' (Naughton 2003: 33).

What would Father Downes have said if he knew his parishioner's unorthodox view of life after death? The discrepancies between fairy and Christian eschatology are obvious, but it is not easy to get an insider's view on how people coped with them. Perhaps, at the level of metaphor, the stories were reconciled. The wife who has been abducted into the fairy hill appears in a dream to her husband, and says "If you do this for me" – the black-handled knife, the circle of holy water – "then I shall be saved". In the same way, it was a regular sermon story for preachers to tell how a soul appeared in a dream to relatives, asking for Masses to be said to alleviate the pains of Purgatory: "If you do *this* for me then I shall be saved". But Purgatory, Heaven and Hell are supposed to be taken as facts, not as metaphors. The Scots, as one might expect, took a much harder line on this. In the mid-nineteenth century, 'an old man dying in Rousay complained bitterly that "George and Jean wadna' bring him oot o' the hill", though he had described to them the very place where they would find him' (Robertson 1909: 107). It seems he had decided that he was not going to die in the ordinary sense, but to be Taken, so that his relatives could perform the necessary rituals and bring him back; but they refused to subscribe to the old man's heresy.

The Irish were more tolerant of the cognitive dissonance between Heaven and the hollow hills; even so, this kind of mixed cosmology left many questions open. If the company of Faerie is being continually recruited from the human race, are there any actual fairies at all, or are they simply the elder Taken, so long distant from this world that they have become cruel and indifferent? Something like this is implied by stories in which the anonymous host try to take someone, through disease or through carrying them off, but are prevented by an individual who has passed over more recently and retains human sympathies. Yeats was interested in this possibility, which he called the Fight Among the Friends (1993: 168–170). If so, it would resemble the afterlife of many African cultures, where the dead are individuals so long as they live on in memory, but then become slowly absorbed into

the collectivity of the ancestors. However, it seems that the fairy doctors, including Fagan, rejected this interpretation when it was put to them. The fairies and the dead (or Taken) are not the same. This is one of several minor points which suggests that Yeats was not imposing his own views on informants. Instead, the ideas of popular tradition, which had been around him since boyhood days in Sligo, had shaped his own views on the supernatural (Thuente 1980: 121–56).

15: Changelings: fairies and rejection

As a baby, the future Charles I was a restless, sickly child. Not long after he was placed in the care of a nurse, she woke up the household with her terrified screams in the night. An old man had appeared in the baby's room and thrown a dark cloak over the child as he lay sleeping in his cradle. When interrogated by King James she said very little, except to murmur that the child was 'no cannie', but the author of *Daemonologie* knew enough fairylore to guess what she meant. The tall man was one of the good neighbours, making away with the true baby, and what was left in its place was a fairy substitute – a changeling (Gregg 1981: 7–8).

It would have been tactless to use that word, for it soon became part of the ever-changing stock of labels for people with learning difficulties. 'The vulgar call them changelings' says Aubrey, who was kinder than most towards mental disability (Halliwell 1845: 237). When Pepys said that Nell Gwynn acted 'just like a fool or changeling' (*Diary* 28 Dec 1667) he meant that she was being moronic, not elfin.

> I was prevailed upon myself to go and see a child, who, they told me, was one of these changelings, and indeed must own was not a little surprised, as well as shocked at the sight. Nothing under heaven could have a more beautiful face; but tho' between five and six years old, and seemingly healthy, he was so far from being able to walk, or stand, that he could not so much as move any one joint: his limbs were vastly long for his age, but smaller than an infant's of six months; his complexion was perfectly delicate, and he had the finest hair in the world; he never spoke, nor cryed, eat scarce anything, and was very seldom seen to smile, but if anyone called him a fairy-elf, he would frown and fix his eyes so earnestly on those who said it, as if he would look them through.
>
> George Waldron, Isle of Man, 1720s
>
> (Waldron 1865: 29)

Waldron was, generally speaking, a sceptic in fairy matters; but even he sounds as if he was half-convinced. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to suppose that it took a modern scientific eye to see real disability behind this sort of elfin freak-show. Already in the 1650s Thomas Hobbes had rumbled the fact that disabled children were being abused under the name of changelings (Edwards 1974: 53–4). In fact the word 'oaf' is derived (by way of forms like ouph and aulf) from 'elf' meaning fairy substitute. But not all reputed changelings were oafish. Elis Bach of Nant Gwrtheyrn in Caernarvonshire was a shrill-voiced achondroplastic dwarf, but he had a sharp-wit and was able-bodied enough to be in charge of the family's goats (Rhys 1883: 175). Another stunted individual, at Portrush in County Antrim, had red hair – which must have supported the fairy identification – and 'the most uncertain temper in the countryside', but was otherwise merely eccentric (Foster 1951: 76).

These were the exceptions, though. Normally when we find a changeling drawn from life, it turns out to be a child with disabilities, usually made worse by neglect from its parents. At Tralee in 1826, Ann Roche was tried for the murder of four-year-old Michael Leahy who 'could neither stand, walk or speak – it was thought to be fairy-struck'. His grandmother had sent Ann and another woman to bathe the boy every morning in a pool of the river Flesk, where three lords' lands met, 'to put the fairy out of it'. The water was cold, and Michael was held below the surface until he drowned (Croker 1862: xxvii).

"It was no matter if it had died four years ago", replied the Leahys, and that gives some clue to their appalling situation. In a world where children were supposed to earn their keep from an early age, severe disability was a monstrous thing, a mouth that would always need feeding and a pair of hands that would never work. Though her companion asked "How can you hope ever to see God after this?", Ann turned away and pushed the child underwater. Some things just had to be done. At least the fairy business made them sound a little more tolerable.

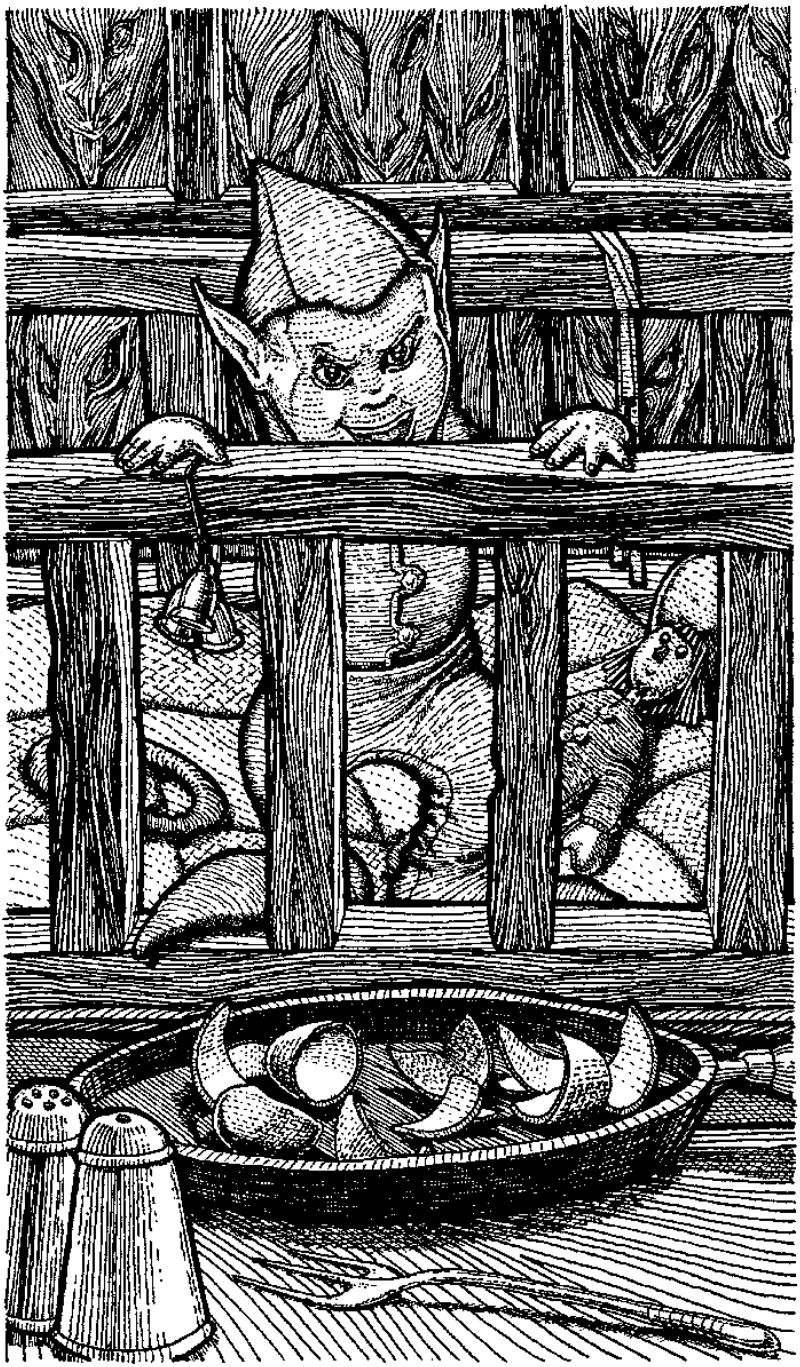
So a child was made into a changeling, not just because of its mental or bodily weakness, but through the family's inability to deal with these things. This was something which took time to mature. Leahy was four years old; Philip Dillon, a boy with paralysis burnt at Clonmel in 1884, was three; John Trevelyan's son of Penzance died in 1843 after three and a half years of being starved and abandoned outside in the cold (Bourke 1999: 34; Deane and Shaw 1975: 93). Poverty was

not always the cause – the Trevelyan household could afford servants, who were told to kick and beat the toddler – but in each case the fairy identification seems to have developed gradually as the parents withdrew from any kind of human identification with their handicapped child.

Given the link between fairies and disability, it is tempting to make this the whole explanation for changeling stories; to explain away the fairy interloper as a highly coloured version of the deformed child. In an arresting article, Susan Eberly matched up conditions such as hydrocephaly, Hunter's syndrome and elfin facies with passages from various books on folklore (Eberly 1988). But few doctors would care to make a diagnosis from a single report by an untrained observer, let alone an account, two or three generations removed, of what might have been. Eberly extends her theory to cover fairies of all persuasions, not just those in changeling stories, and is quite confident that in Yallery Brown – a dwarfish, wrinkled, soft-haired little man – she can recognise a sufferer from progeria. The analogy is persuasive, except for two details. Progeria is so rare a disease that there can seldom have been more than one child at a time suffering from it throughout the British Isles; and Yallery Brown was a character invented in 1891 by Marie Balfour.

Nineteenth-century medical observers were not so confident in their diagnosis, but then they had the disadvantage of actually being there. Some thought that rickets and various wasting disorders were to blame (Silver 1999: 77). William Wilde identified tubercular diseases and peritonitis as the reality behind the conditions treated by fairy doctors (Bourke 1999: 33). Robert Hunt saw several reputed changelings who had tuberculosis of lymph glands in the abdomen, 'mesenteric disease', caused by infected milk (Hunt 1865: 1.72).

So although the label of changeling was used for mental and physical disability, it was just as likely to be given to any children with a disease that seemed to sap away at their growth and strength. Like many diagnoses, this was likely to fulfil itself in practice, since once the children began to look thin and wasted, they would receive less attention or affection from their parents, leading to more malnutrition and stupor – and so on, until they were no longer regarded as human at all. Something similar happens in the modern syndrome of 'failure to thrive'. This is a psychological diagnosis rather than a supernatural one, but the background – failures in family affection, leading to listless, ravenous and freakish children – is very similar to that of the



legends (Munro 1991). And failure to thrive can be treated. Within weeks of a change in treatment or environment, the children put on life and weight.

Could changelings be treated, too? The horrific accounts of their ritualised murder need to be set against other stories, which never appeared in the newspapers, in which the ceremony of banishment seems to have been successful. Little Meg, a nine-month-old from Shetland, was taken by the trows as she lay asleep in the cradle, while her mother was milking the cow.

> While thus engaged, she heard the child utter a terrible scream, and rushing into the house she found the bairn struggling and crying in a most excited manner...Poor Meg cries and will not be comforted. She gets blue in the face and hoarse in the throat, and altogether so changed that even the mother cannot recognise her once thriving child. At last an old woman is brought to the house, and she declares that the bairn is "hurted frae da grund".
>
> A bucket of salt water is fetched out of the breaking sea, and three small ebb-stanes. A large fire is put on the hearth and the stones are placed in it. The sea water is poured into the meat kettle, and the stones when red hot are thrown into it. Meg is stripped and placed in this bath. She is turned round in the kettle, three times with the sun and thrice in the opposite direction. The child is now placed on a wet blanket, and passed through the flame of the peat fire three times. She is then swathed in this sheet and put to bed, after which she is burned in effigy… Meg lived to a good old age, and often related the story of her recovery.
>
> 'Meg', Shetland, ?1820s
>
> (Spence 1899: 146–8)

Here violence, by both fire and water, is obvious but so is concern for the child. The burning and drowning was largely symbolic while the concern was very real, but the fairy doctor seems to have must have known that violence must be there as well as love. The image of the changeling is capable of expressing many things about children, even those who are not disabled, or not even ill. The goblin stranger of the stories is old-looking, ravenously hungry, and not very responsive to

love and affection – very much like an ordinary new-born, in short, when the idealising gaze of parenthood is lacking or at a low ebb. There is something of the demon about every baby, especially at two in the morning.

Babies become changelings when they are seen as unlovable. To save them from this fate, it is necessary to talk them up into something fine, nurtured and well-loved. This comes over clearly in a tale from the Highlands:

> The fairy woman came into the house, and she seized the child in the cradle… She was fain to carry him off, and she said to the child's mother, "Is not thy child red, woman?". "He has come from a big fire". "Is not thy child green, woman?". "The grass is green, and it grows". "Is not thy child heavy, woman?". "Every fruitful worldling is heavy". "Is not thy child pinched, woman?" "He is as the God of grace created for him, and be thou going, thou brazen hussy without manners, thou shalt not lift my child this year". "Thou hadst need of that, little woman, that thou hadst the three answers for me, or there is no knowing in the hard shrivelling world what would befall thyself and thy child", said the fairy woman, as she went home to the knoll.
>
> Hebrides, 1900s
>
> (Carmichael 1928–71: 5.239, from the Gaelic)

This is one of many traditions about dialogue with Otherworlders in which the humans, though apparently powerless, triumph through a quick wit and a gift for having the last word. The ballad of 'The Fause Knicht on the Road' (Child 1882–98: 1.20–2, no.3) turns on the same point. But the characters in the cradle songs are really one person in two voices. The mother sings, impersonating the fairy: 'He is my ungraceful child,/ Withered, bald, and light-headed,/ Weak-shouldered, and weak in his equipments,/ That have not been put to use'. And then she changes voice to her own real self: 'He is my ruddy child, plump and praiseworthy;/ My yew-tree, my rush, raised to women…' (Campbell 1895). As Diane Purkiss notes, 'The song gives the bad voice expression while allowing the mother to disavow it; it is not me who feels these things about my baby' (Purkiss 2000: 58).

So it was possible to keep the fairies at bay. When a pregnant woman was expecting her delivery in the Western Isles, the house would be

full for three to eight days with female neighbours, each one of them recommending some kind of barrier. 'A row of iron nails were driven into the front board of the bed; the smoothing iron or a reaping hook was placed under it and in the window; an old shoe was put in the fire; the door posts were sprinkled with *maistir*, urine kept for washing purposes – a liquid extremely offensive to the Fairies; the Bible was opened, and the breath blown across it in the face of the woman…The father's shirt wrapped round the new-born babe was esteemed a preservative' (Campbell 1900: 36–7). Many of these items are already familiar from their use to guard the house against the fairies. Here they represent a kind of inner ring of homely and family identity, wrapped tight around the mother and baby. And then came baptism, which gave contact with the sacred and – most important – an identity. In societies where to be a human was to be Christian, the unbaptised child was a dangerous anomaly, a nameless thing in the home.

What if, after all these protections, the child still failed to thrive? 'The neighbours came to the conclusion that it was a sheeoge that Katty was slaving her life out for. Katty's family came next into the same persuasion, and lastly, but with some doubts, Katty herself. At a family and neighbourly council, held round the fire, after the children had been sent to bed, they proceeded to get rid of the little wretch…' (Kennedy 1866: 95). This is fiction, but it makes sense – the rituals of the fairy doctor were intended to bring about exactly this unanimity of response. Isobel Haldane of Perthshire was called in by the Morrisses when their child looked like being a *sharg* or changeling. The wife had 'thryse for Goddis saik askit help to hir bairne that wes ane scharge: And scho send furth hir sone to gether sochsterrie leaweis, quhairof scho directit the bairnes mother to mak a drink' (Pitcairn 1833: 2.535–8). But the child died. The grieving mother insisted that this business of the sharg had all been Haldane's idea, and wanted her punished for it; this being the 1620s, it ended in a trial for witchcraft rather than murder.

The predicament of Isobel Haldane explains why there were stories about changelings – quite involved stories, too – and not just a simple affirmation of their existence. In other societies, such as classical antiquity or pagan Scandinavia, deformed children were killed and that was that. But before members of a Christian community could put a child out on the dunghill, they had to feel absolutely certain that it was not human. The stories explore ways in which this could be proved. Here is the dialogue between Mrs Sullivan, who has a sick baby, and Ellen Leah the cunning woman.

"You're in grief this morning, Mrs. Sullivan".

"You may say that, Ellen, and good cause I have to be in grief, for there was my own fine child whipped off from me out of his cradle, without as much as by your leave or ask your pardon, and an ugly dony bit of a shrivelled up fairy put in his place".

"Will you take an old woman's advice?" says Ellen Leah.

"Can you get me back my child, my own child, Ellen?", asks Mrs. Sullivan, with great energy.

"If you do as I bid you, you'll know. Put down the big pot, full of water, on the fire, and make it boil like mad; then get a dozen new-laid eggs, break them, and keep the shells, but throw away the rest; when that is done, put the shells in the pot of boiling water, and you will soon know whether it is your own boy or a fairy. If you find that it is a fairy in the cradle, take the red-hot poker and cram it down his ugly throat, and you will not have much trouble with him after that, I promise you".

[So she gets the eggs and the cooking-pot, and sets to work, with the poker set to redden in the fire. "What are you doing, mammy?", asks the thing in the cradle. "I'm brewing eggshells, *a mhic*", says Mrs Sullivan.]

"Oh!", shrieked the imp, starting up in the cradle, and clapping his hands together, "I'm fifteen hundred years in the world, and I never saw a brewery of eggshells before!". The poker was by this time quite red, and Mrs. Sullivan seizing it ran furiously towards the cradle; but somehow or other her foot slipped, and the poker flew out of her hand. However, she got up without much loss of time and went to the cradle, intending to pitch the wicked thing that was in it into the pot of boiling water, when there she saw her own child in a sweet sleep.

'Mrs Philipps', County Cork, 1820s

(Croker 1825–8, abbreviated)

A mother does not hurt her child without some clear proof that she ought to do so – and narratives like this show how clear that proof

could be, at least in the ideal world of story. For some reason it is always the same extravagance, a brewery of eggshells, which provokes the changeling to clap its hands and cry out with wonder (Hartland 1891: 114–6). Brewing and cooking are women's business, so this particular test is in the hands of the mother, who more than anyone else needs to be convinced that the baby is a fraud. And the twin moments of discovery and attack are set at the heart of the story, just as the poker and the cooking-pot are heating at the same fire; as soon as the changeling reveals that he is no charming baby, but a scheming old fairy, his mother is a mother no longer and can make a lunge for him without any guilt.

There is a second tale of how the changeling was discovered, and this has a more masculine cast:

> A man and his wife were not long married, and they had a wee kiddie called Johnnie, but he was always crying and never satisfied. There was a neighbour near, a tailor, and it came to market day, and Johnnie was aye greeting, and never growing. And the wife wanted to get a day at the market, so the tailor said he'd stay and watch wee Johnnie. So he was sitting sewing by the fire, and a voice said: "Is ma mother and ma faither awa'?". He couldn't think it was the baby speaking, so he went and looked out of the window, but there was nothing, and he heard it again. "Is ma mother and ma faither awa'?". And there it was, sitting up, with its wee hands gripping the sides of the cradle. "There's a bottle of whiskey in the press", it says. "Gie's a drink". Sure enough, there was one, and they had a drink together. Then wee Johnnie wanted a blow on the pipes, but there was not a set in the house, so he told the tailor to go and fetch a round straw from the byre, and he played the loveliest tune on the pipes through the straw. They had a good talk together, and the wee thing said, "Is ma mother and ma Faither coming home?". And when they came, there he was "Nya, nya, nya", in the cradle. By this time the tailor knew it was a fairy they had in there.
>
> Andrew Stewart, Perthshire, 1950s
>
> (Briggs 1970–1: B1.290)

Clearly this changeling is indulging in what the child psychologists call 'inappropriate behaviour', what with all that drinking and wild music. Other masculine diversions are sometimes mentioned – "redden the pipe for me, Derby, and give me a smoke", says a Kerry changeling (Gatty 1931: 366–7). There is a lively Manx version in which the tailor is practising the fiddle and strikes up a hymn tune, which won't do at all for his charge. ' "Drop that, Hom beg, I tell ye, an' give us something light an' handy", says the lil fella back to him, middling sharp… In a crack the lil fella bounced from his cradle on to the floor with a 'Chu!' and began flying around the kitchen. "Go to it Hom,– face your partner,– heel and toe does it. Well done, Hom,– jog your elbow, man". Hom plays faster and faster, till me lad was jumping as high as the table' (Morrison 1910).

It is a queer sort of party, this dance of the fairy and the tailor. Both of them have suppressed masculinities. The changeling is pretending to be immature, while tailors, in traditional lore, are timid unmanly creatures. They sit at work over needle and cotton, in the women's domain of the home, but precisely because of this they are able to go from house to house and carry stories with them. Many a travelling tailor must have taken the opportunity to make himself the little hero of a tale like this (Mac Philib 1991: 128). Besides, the tailor in these versions does what would otherwise have to be carried out by a fairy doctor – or a passing beggar man, or some such substitute. He reveals the changeling's true identity so that it can be banished. Even in these highly fictional narratives, the story-tellers are looking to escape the idea that somebody *decided* to get rid of the child.

The image of a cosy blokes' night in, with drinking and smoking, would hardly work if the changeling was a girl; but then 'it is unusual to find tales of female changelings' (Briggs 1967: 7). Like Meg from Shetland, they appear in real-life accounts, but not in the longer fictions. This subliminal concern with masculinity can make for some odd stories. At Kington in Herefordshire a baby lay, year after year, in the cradle, never growing up until his brother came home. This brother had been a soldier in the wars and knew a thing or too, so he tried the eggshell trick. ' "I am old, old, ever so old", said the changeling, "but I never saw a soldier brewing beer in an egg shell before". Then he gave a terrible shriek, for the soldier went for him with a whip, chasing him round and round the room what had never left his cradle! At last he vanished through the door' (Leather 1912: 46–7). It holds up the narrative somewhat, to have the changeling whinging in the cradle for twenty years or so while his brother grows up; but evidently this

inconsistency was worthwhile if it allowed the image of a manly soldier bringing peace to the home.

At the centre of changeling lore, whether it takes the form of rituals or fictions, there is a man threatening a child. 'He got the man of the house to redden the fire iron, to have it very red, and to sharpen a pointed knife or a skewer or something like that, very, very sharp and to start cursing. And there was some terrible curses had to be said! And the woman went out and they got around the cot and they began to put the iron towards the child… They were cursing and they were prodding at the child – they didn't actually prod the child – and holding the iron' (Lysaght 1991: 34–5).

'They didn't actually prod the child'. This is the rub – violence is offered to the changeling, but it is always controlled violence. It is held on a shovel over the coals, or the tongs are heated red-hot to grip its nose, but just at the critical moment the substitution takes place, the false baby flies up the chimney, and the real one is found plump and smiling outside the door. There are other methods of banishing a changeling, but fire is the most common. It is almost as if a peevish, unwanted brat was being cooked into the rosy-cheeked, desired baby. And since in real life these two opposites are actually one and the same child, the passage through fire serves to mark the difference, and to make a new beginning. It is quite clear that some of those who carried out changeling rituals did not intend, subliminally or otherwise, to kill the child. 'My second sister, whose delicacy, when an infant, excited remark, was, about 1842, taken out by a servant to be exposed on a shovel on the doorstep at Carnally. The angry and hasty intervention of another servant saved the child, but the would-be 'exposer' was convinced of the propriety of her attempt 'to get back the real child' from the fairies' (Westropp 1910: 198).

Nevertheless, danger – controlled but potentially fatal danger – was part of the required ritual. Fire was not the only agent for this; poison would do instead. In County Leitrim, the child was dosed with the juice of foxglove (*lus mor*), three drops on the tongue and three in each ear; then the parents would place it on a shovel, walk to the door, and carefully swing the shovel out of the house three times, saying 'If you're a fairy, away with you!' each time they swung the shovel. 'If it is a fairy child, it will die that night; but if not, it will surely begin to mend' (Duncan 1895: 163). The concentrated juice of foxglove contains digitalis, which can cause death by heart spasm; about a tenth of an ounce of dry leaf is fatal for a adult, while a malnourished child

would respond to a lesser dose. 'The mother… went out and she got some of the leaves of the Lus-Mor, and she brought them in and put them on him; and he went, and her own child came back again' (Gregory 1920: 1.173). The death of a changeling from foxglove poisoning was reported from Caernarvonshire in 1857 (Sikes 1880: 57).

Less medically sophisticated was the practice of controlled exposure, as practised in the 1730s at Easter Suddie in Ross-shire. Parents would go to Hurdyhill, which overlooked the church and had a well on its summit. 'When children happen to be sick and languish long in their malady, so that they almost turn skeletons, the common people imagine they are taken away at least the substance by spirits called Fairies, and the shadow left with them so at a particular season in summer, they leave them all night themselves watching at a distance, near this well and this, as they imagine, will either end or mend them and they say many more do recover than do not' (Macfarlane 1906–8: 1.207–8). Where people lived along the sea-edge, the beach takes over as a place for controlled abandonment. In a story from Benbecula, the child's mother is advised by a kindly old man: 'Go to the shellfish strand, and place the changeling stretched out at the margin of the wave, and put a slumber-croon in his ear to send him to sleep. When the first wave of the rising tide strikes him the changeling will wail, but take nothing to do with him and do not betray thyself at all, that thou hast seen aught or heard a cheep. When thou reachest home thou shalt find thine own soft pretty youngster there in the cradle' (Carmichael 1928–71: 5.255–65).

The sea will wash the unwanted child away. Many of the changeling folktales end with the false children banished, not by a poker or the red-hot shovel, but by being thrown into water, which sweeps them away before they can do any more harm.

> There is an old story current among us concerning a woman whose children had been exchanged by the *Tylwyth Teg*… The woman whose two children had been exchanged, chanced to overhear the two fair heirs, whom she got instead of them, reasoning with one another beyond what became their age and persons. So she picked up the two sham children, one under each arm, in order to go and throw them from a bridge into a river, that they might be drowned as she fancied. But

> hardly had the one in his fall reached the bottom when
> he called out to his comrade in the following words:
>
> Grippiach Greppiach
> Keep thy hold on the hag.
> It got too late, thou urchin –
> I fell into the rough ground.
>
> Lewis Morris, 1720s, Anglesey
>
> (Rhys 1901: 2.450–1, from the Welsh)

This is the earliest example from a group of Welsh tales in which there is not one changeling, but two. Twins have been regarded with suspicion in many cultures, but early modern Britain was not one of them, and it seems that this narrative twist is there for the same reason that other storytellers introduced the tailor and the bagpipes. It proves that something uncanny is going on, but this time without needing to introduce an outside character, since the twins are heard talking amongst themselves. In a Cornish story, the changeling gives himself away by calling out to a neighbour fairy, explaining how comfortable his life is and why he can't be bothered to come home:

> What care I for wife or child,
> When I ride on Dowdy's back to the Chapel Well,
> And have got pap my fill?
>
> (Bottrell 1870–80: 2.200–5; cf. Hunt 1865: 1.79–85).

He was being carried to Chapel Uny Well on the slopes of Carn Brea, in the hope that turning him three times through the water would effect the change, especially if it was done for three successive Wednesdays. After that his mother resorted to stronger measures, beating the child with a broom and leaving him under the old church stile until the change was effected. But elsewhere, holy wells were the recommended way to banish a changeling. In Galloway 'the child is undressed and laid out in unbleached linen new from the loom. Water is brought from a *blessed well*, in the utmost silence, before sunrise, in a pitcher never before wet; in which the child is washed, and its clothes dipped by the fingers of a virgin (Cromek 1810: 307). This sounds like an imitation of baptism; if the real sacrament had failed to bring the child into a community of healthy Christians, then perhaps its magical re-enactment would make everything well. Baptism itself was regarded as a cure-all for childhood diseases.

The changeling of Brea Vean had a wife and family, although he was in no hurry to go home to them. As soon as she discovers this, his supposed mother is disgusted, and cannot wait to get the thing home and beat it up. This exchange, like the motif of the brewery of eggshells, serves to prove how very old the stranger must be. At the literal level, you would have thought that a baby fairy would have been just as unwelcome a substitute for the real child as an elderly, pipe-smoking, hard-drinking, wife-abandoning roué. But at another level, the story is telling us what a baby should be – chubby and innocent – and to make this point, the contrast with the changeling has to be as great as possible.

The difference between the wizened changeling and the adored, plump baby is as great as that between the shrewish wife-substitute and the loved, lost wife in the fairy hill. Thinking on these lines, storytellers were happy to take plot-lines from the narratives of women who were Taken, and transfer them to accounts of children who had been swapped for changelings. The familiar story about the rescue of a wife, as she rides out of the fort on a white horse, could be re-imagined as the saving of a child:

> In glittering arms the little horsemen shine;
> Last, on a milk-white steed, with targe of gold,
> A fay of might appears, whose arms entwine
> The lost, lamented child! The shepherds bold
> The unconscious infant tear from his unhallowed hold
>
> (Henderson and Cowan 2001: 99)

In a story from County Clare, the hero, as so often, is a tailor:

> When he was coming in around the corner o' the house, he seen a fairly tall woman standing by the kitchen window. And when she saw him she vanished away. He couldn't see her at all then. But he went over to the window, to see what she was doing at the window. And the kitchen window was wide open. There was another one inside and she had the child, and she was handing him out, as she thought, to the woman outside. But when she handed him out 'twas the tailor standing there. The tailor took the child, put him under his coat, and away he went home. He went in, told his mother what had happened, and asked would she nurse the child along with him until morning…

> But when the morning came, and the day broke, the tailor said to the mother, "I'll go back, now, to the house, until I see what's going on". So he did. And when he was coming very near the house, he heard the hullabaloo and the crying… "Only look at our little baby there in the cot and he's stone dead".
>
> "That's not your baby at all. I have your baby high and dry beyond. My mother is minding him, and he's well fed and well looked after. That's not your baby at all", he said.
>
> They sent for the priest. And the priest came and read over the cot. And what appeared after a few minutes when he was reading? Only a broom o' heather. The priest got the tongs, fixed up the fire, caught the broom o' heather, and shoved it into the fire. And up it went, up the chimney in flames.
>
> County Clare, ?1970s
>
> (Lenihan 2003: 300–302)

This is a common Irish legend, known also in Scotland (Mac Philib 1991: 124). It is a transformed version of the other typically Irish story – of a wife who seemed dead but was carried off by the fairies, and how a stranger rescued her and took her back to the house, where they found that a stock had been substituted for her. Either way, the tale ends happily with the harmony of the family restored by the return, and subsequent good behaviour, of the baby or wife. Stories of fairy substitution are like this: they are told to nudge people into line with what is expected of them by their community. This is why fairies are always supposed to carry off women and children – vulnerable types who should really have been under the control of others in the first place, and who need to be rescued from the fairy hill by their parents, brothers or husbands.

16: Her eyes were wild: fairies and seduction

Sexual themes in folktales have been explored at length, first by psychologists and now by the writers of fantasy as well. But discussion is usually limited to the classic fairytales – Little Red Riding Hood's relationship with the wolf, and so on – rather than actual legends about fairies. The one book which deals with this topic, Maureen Duffy's *Erotic World of Faerie*, is Freudianism of the old school, and no less entertaining for that. 'The girl set a bowl of milk by the hearth and lay upstairs in bed imagining a naked hairy man working in her churn'. Well, that makes a certain amount of sense; stories of the household familiar do place a lot of stress on the shaggy wildness and strength of this stranger, whose nakedness offends the modesty of the girls in the kitchen. Heaven knows what deviant practices are represented by mowing, threshing and foddering cows, but Duffy would probably have been equal to the task. After a few more pages we find that almost any activity can be an image of sex. 'Sometimes they taught tunes and instruments to the mortals they caught, which is a way of presenting in a mythological, and therefore artistic form, pleasurable masturbating while under an obsessive fantasy' (Duffy 1972: 85, 91). Fingering your pipes, you see.

After a chapter or two, the innuendo starts to get a bit wearisome. This is a pity, because behind the nonsense there is a real insight; many of these traditional stories about fairies do indeed portray them as sexual partners. But they don't need any mythological or artistic cover for it. The relationship is quite openly acknowledged in the story – or, sometimes, in real life. Grant Stewart met an old shoemaker at Tomintoul in Banffshire who confessed, with a twinkle in his eye, to having had relations when he was young with a *leannan sith* or fairy mistress (Stewart 1823: 108). Quite what this meant in practical terms is anyone's guess. A man at Port Erin was well known for his dealings with a *lhiannan shee*, as it is spelt in Manx. 'He was like other people, but he had a fairy sweetheart; but he noticed her, and they do not like being noticed, the fairies, so he lost his mind. Well, he was quite quiet like other people, but at night he slept in the barn; and they used to

hear him talking to his sweetheart, and scolding her sometimes; but if anyone made a noise he would be quiet at once' (Campbell 1860: 2.70). Here we seem to have a psychosis embodying itself in the language of tradition, although the details are left vague.

Earlier sources, particularly the witch trials, are less inhibited. Elspeth Reoch from Kirkwall confessed in 1616 that 'the devell, quhilk she callis the farie man, lay with her'. It is a dark, confused story. He is the devil, he is a fairy, he is her kinsman John Stewart, who died or was Taken at the going down of the sun. Elspeth is already pregnant, illegitimately, but after she has given birth, this man in black will not let her sleep. He stands by the bed and puts his hand on her breast; he sleeps with her, whether she will or not. Then he gives her a power to see things that other people cannot, and makes her dumb so that she cannot reveal them (Purkiss 2000: 90–6).

With those gifts she could have made a living as a cunning woman, if someone could have pulled the *biorán suain* from her mind; but the law caught up with her first. Was it worth the struggle, the rape and the pain? Elspeth seems to have been desperately trying in different ways to wrest control of her body from a world of men – her human lover, her brother, the black fairy. Of course for the men, things were much simpler; the fairies were out there in the night, they wanted to seduce women, and proper safeguards had to be taken against them. A sixteenth-century author says casually in his account of Orkney:

> There are huge monsters that they call Trows, and these often cohabit with the women of the islands. While I was living there, I met a good-looking woman, married to a sturdy crofter. She was troubled by one of these gross spirits, let her husband do what he would, and though they shared a bed, still this spirit coupled with her in the natural manner: there are witnesses. After a time the woman wasted away through the shame of it. I told her that if she wanted to be rid of it, she should pray, give alms and fast, which she did; she was troubled in this way for a whole year. This is what the being was like. It was covered all over in seaweed, it had shaggy hair much like that of a colt, and it had a member like a horse's prick, with heavy balls'.
>
> John Ben, Orkney, 1520s
>
> (Macfarlane 1906–8: 3.304, from the Latin)

In later tradition, the trows would become typical fairies, living in hollow hills under the rule of a king and queen, and so on. Here the experience of the supernatural seems much more raw and confused. The monster is half-man, half-horse; at first it is not obvious where it comes from, but then the covering of seaweed gives its origin away. In drawing on this detail, the persecuted woman seems to have been thinking of a story which was also common throughout the Highlands and Man, of how to recognise the *each uisge* or waterhorse. A girl was sent out with the cattle, to keep an eye on them as they grazed beside the loch. As she sat on her lonesome by the edge of the water, she saw a lad come walking by, and was glad of the company when he stopped to chat. Soon they were friendly enough for him to lie down beside her, and he put his head in her lap, as the young men used to do in those days, and asked her to clean the hair and pick out any lice. So she combed his hair, and as she picked through the locks, she found long strands of the weed that twists at the bottom of loch water – and then she knew what he was. But she didn't start, and she didn't scream; she just kept on combing and parting his hair. By and by he fell asleep in her lap, and when she saw that he was quiet, she slowly untied her apron strings and let his head slip down till it rested on the ground; then up she started, and she ran for home, her heart in her mouth. Now she saw the cottages, and now she saw the door of her father's house, and only then did she dare look back. There was her young man, racing after her in the shape of a great horse. She broke through the door and made herself safe, while the waterhorse raged outside (Campbell 1860: 4.337).

Water stands for danger, as it so often does in these stories, and it is a danger which can be understood on more levels than one. For children, this is a frightening tale about the risk of death if you stray near the lochside; but as the girls grow up they are more likely to remember its advice on how to slip out of a difficult situation with an aggressive young man. By shifting their story into the world of the supernatural, singers were able to weave together ideas which would have felt too raw if they had spoken of earthly men and women – ideas of seduction, menace, violence and desire.

Of course the commerce of the two worlds is not always between fairy men and mortal women – it could as easily be the other way round. Four young men went for a day's hunting in Lochaber, and as darkness fell they took shelter in one of the bothies that had been built for the summer pastures. Lighting a fire, they made themselves comfortable, and wished they had their girls with them:

> Shortly after that four women entered the bothy, having the form and appearance of the sweethearts of the hunters. Three of them went over, and sat beside the three hunters in the corner; but the fourth stood before the hunter who was seated at the fire.
>
> When the hunter sitting at the fire noticed this, he drew his dirk from his scabbard, and laid it across his knees. Then he took two trumps out of his pocket, and began to play on them… She began to come nearer, and tried to lay hold of him with her hand; but he kept her off as well as he could with his dirk. When she failed in getting hold of him in this way, she tried another. "Give me a pinch of snuff", said she. The hunter prepared the snuff, and reached it to her on the point of his dirk. When she saw this, she turned towards him the point of her elbow and said: "Put it there". The hunter understood that the reason for her action was to get an opportunity of seizing the hand in which the dirk was held, and so he was on his guard. As soon as he noticed her going to stretch out her arm while he was reaching her the snuff, he kept the point of his dirk towards her, and gave her one or two prods with it. That was enough. She went back to the other side of the fire, and stood there, irritating him.
>
> At length he heard the crowing of a cock as if on a hill top. "Yonder", said the woman on the other side of the fire, "is the black cock of March; it is time to depart". She said no more, but made for the door, and her three companions sprang out after her. As soon as daylight appeared, the fourth hunter went over to the corner, and found his three companions cold and dead, with their throats cut, and every drop of blood sucked out of their veins.
>
> Argyllshire, 1880s
>
> (MacDougall 1910: 259–61, from the Gaelic)

The *glaistig* – for that is what these women were – is a spirit of lonely places, sometimes appearing as a hag and sometimes as a seductive girl. These young men have paid the price for crossing over into wild country without taking proper cautions; at the literal level, they have mistaken the *glaistigs* for their girlfriends, but the story is also using the

supernatural image to express a view of what real women are like. Girls, it seems to say, are to boys as the high summer pastures are to the village in the valley – exciting, strange and risky. And the legend, erring on the side of prudence as traditions usually do, advises that women should be kept at arm's length, literally if need be. There are many stories in which the hero gives snuff to the fairy, and survives only because he has the wit to hold it out on his dirk (Spence 1948: 52). In Irish tradition, it is not the *glaistig* but the banshee who poses a threat. A man is out walking when he sees a comb lying in the road; he admires its delicate workmanship and takes it back home. That night, the banshee comes to the door and demands, in a voice that shakes the house, to be given back her comb. Trembling, the man of the house picks it up with a pair of tongs and passes it through a crack in the door. She whips the comb away, and he pulls back the tongs only to find that she has torn them in half when she took it (Lysaght 1986: 176). Sometimes it is a shovel rather than tongs – anything that hints at the magic of fire and iron will do for the story – but always there is a contrast between the apparent weakness and delicacy of the woman spirit, as she sits combing her long hair, and the supernatural fury that she will display when roused.

When storytellers imagined relations between fairies and mortals, they were speaking of the fear and desire which exists between men and women, each sex apparently convinced that the other is going to devour them. It's a wonder that we're here at all. Perhaps this is because of the appeal of sex as an adventure, something which is also expressed in fairy lore – particularly in one of the most haunting of the ballads, 'Thomas Rymer' (Child 1882-98: 1.317–29, no.37).

True Thomas lay on Huntlie bank – 'the spot lies a little above the North British Railway, at the point where it is crossed by the road to St. Boswells, about a quarter of a mile after leaving Melrose Station' (Murray 1875: li). Be this as it may, the poet is lying on the bank when he sees a lady in green come riding past the Eildon Tree. He bows low, and hails her as the Queen of Heaven; she says no, she is only the Queen of fair Elfland, come to visit him, 'And if ye dare to kiss my lips,/ Sure of your bodie I will be'. Quite undeterred, Thomas kisses the bright lady, and after this he has to serve her for seven years. She takes him riding pillion on her horse and they travel far from living land, first to a garden where he is forbidden to eat of the fruit, and then to a place where the road divides into three. One way leads through thorns and briars, and that is the path of righteousness; one is a broad road, the path of wickedness; but

See ye not that bonny road
That winds about the fernie brae?
That is the road to fair Elfland
Where thou and I this night maun gae.

Forbidden to speak while he is in Faerie, Thomas is returned to this world when the seven years are done, with a livery of grass-green silk and the gift of a tongue that cannot lie.

Such is 'Thomas Rymer' as it was sung in the eighteenth century, but the roots of the story can be traced long before that. It is one of a small group of ballads ('Sir Cawline', with its fight between a mortal and an elf-knight, is another) which adapt the subject matter of the old metrical romances. For True Thomas, the source was *The Romance of Thomas of Erceldoune*, composed at some date between 1390 and 1440 (Henderson and Cowan 2001: 142–5). The romance, in jog-trot metre, is really intended as an introduction to the prophecies which were fathered on Thomas, a real character who was active in the Borders about 1290. If anyone asked how this obscure poet was able to predict the battles of Halidon Hill, Falkirk and Bannockburn, the fairy story was as good an answer as any.

The fame of the prophecies, which continued to be consulted by the curious until well into the seventeenth century, carried the romance with them, until eventually it was the introductory story and not the long lists of battles which attracted readers. The ballad is clearly derived from the written romance, not from any independent tradition, but it has been greatly improved in the process. Two dozen laborious lines are distilled into one eerie stanza:

For forty days and forty nights
They rode through red blood to the knee
And they saw neither sun nor moon
But heard the roaring of the sea.

The sequence of events is the same in both, except that the romance tells us straight out that Thomas sleeps with the fairy queen, and it is this that gives her power over him. There is much more talk of hell and the fiend in the medieval text: the lady, far from acting as a free agent, has a husband, 'kynge of this Countree', who may be the fairy king, though he might well be something worse. At this point the ballad tradition breaks off, although the romance goes on to tell how Thomas is whisked away from the fairy court before the fiend can claim him.

If the Devil is so prominent in the pre-Reformation romance, how come he has disappeared from a version that was sung in Calvinist Aberdeenshire – and by a minister's wife, too? (Buchan 1972: 117–120). The ballad seems to be staking out some kind of neutral ground, most famously in the passage where paths diverge in the Otherworld. The third road, the one that winds about the fernie brae has been quoted many times as a defence of the imagination (e.g. Tolkien 1964: 12). But it is not there in the medieval original. This has four paths, not three, of which two lead to Heaven and two to Hell. Instead we have the ballad-singer's fantasy of Faerie, a respite (if only a temporary one) from those dread alternatives. Anna Gordon learnt her ballads from working-class women. Maybe they had their own reasons for shaping the song until it omitted everything apart from the flight of two lovers, their discovery of a place somewhere beyond the boundaries of the moral world, 'where thou and I this night maun gae'.

In medieval romances, the fays or fairies spread their beautiful pavilions in the forest, and will sleep with any knight shortly after being introduced, reflecting no doubt an element of wish-fulfilment amongst the male story-tellers. True Thomas has a more mature outlook – he recognises that there is a price to be paid, that to love is to give someone else power over him. But unlike the dirk-wielding heroes of the more misogynist tales, he does not reject contact because of this. Sex with fairies, like fairy gifts, can create obligations, but it is not to be shunned for all that.

Thomas, like Elspeth Reoch and other cunning folk, acquires a visionary power from his fairy lover. But prophecy was not the only skill that could be brought from that country. It was from the fairies that the gift of music came to the MacCrimmons, who played for Macleod of Macleod, and were the greatest pipers among the Gael. There was a man that had three sons; he himself was an indifferent piper, and the eldest and the second son were no better and no worse. As for the third, they kept him to do the work about the house, and if he had the chance to blow into the bag of the pipes, he thought himself lucky.

> On a certain day, his father and his two brothers went to the fair, and left him alone at home. After they had gone, he got hold of his chanter, and began to play on it. And in the midst of the playing, who should come upon him but the fairy woman of the *dùn*.
>
> "Thou art busy discoursing music, lad", said she. He answered that he was. "Which wouldst thou prefer, skill

> without success, or success without skill?" said she then. He answered that he would rather have skill without success. She pulled a hair from her head, and asked him to put it round the reed of the chanter. When he had done that, she said to him: "Place now thy fingers on the holes of the chanter, and I will lay my fingers on thy fingers". As soon as that was done, she said: "When I shall lift my finger, lift thou the finger which happens to be under it. Think now of any tune thou pleasest, and play it with me in the way I have told thee". He did so, and played the tune skilfully. When he had finished the tune, she said: "Now thou art the king of pipers. Thine equal was not before thee, and thine equal shall not be after thee".
>
> Skye, 1880s
>
> (MacDougall 1910: 175–9, from the Gaelic)

There is a touch of intimacy about this fairy, who puts her hands over those of the boy as she teaches him how to play, and gives him something that will make his reputation as a man. There were different versions of the story, though it was generally accepted that the family had an heirloom called 'the silver chanter of the fairy woman'; some said that the first of the MacCrimmons, Iain Òg, learnt the art from a *leannan sith* while others thought he acquired it from the fairies, but without any suggestion of a relationship (Campbell 1900: 140–1; Carmichael 1928–71: 2.354). But all agreed that the music had to be transmitted by touch. Nic Iain Fhinn of Vatersay had a fairy lover, and with his parting kiss he left her the art of poetry. For a French kiss, she would have got the gift of music as well, but she was afraid of him and would not do it. So she could compose verses, but could never put a tune to them (Ó Madagáin 1989: 31).

There was a price to be paid for these gifts. 'A young man in the Burren Hills told me that he remembers an old poet, who made his poems in Irish, and who met, when he was young, one who called herself Maive, and said she was a queen among them, and asked him if he would have money or pleasure. He said he would have pleasure, and she gave him her love for a time, and then went from him, and ever after he was very sad' (Yeats 1993: 145). This motif of the lover's choice is the same as in the MacCrimmon story, although it sounds a little too poetic to be true, especially coming from Yeats. Most stories of the fairy mistress were recorded in the nineteenth century and it is

hard to know to what extent they adapted tradition to suit literary themes, especially when the fairy mistress is presented in Romantic style as a seductive woman who saps a man's life, strength and general uprightness (Silver 1999: 178–183). In the Highlands there are certainly traditions like that of the *glaistig* which represent women as the dangerous Other, but mostly the *leannan sith* was imagined in more mundane terms – though her habit of thrashing her admirers at night has a certain period kinkiness. After their first meeting, the man would be put under compulsion to return to her every evening, on pain of one of these beatings. She would help him with skills on the farm or in his trade, as long as he remained faithful; but if he tried to leave, her anger could be fatal (Campbell 1900: 41–2, 105–8).

In short, the fairy mistress of folklore was not a vampire muse but a woman, albeit of a strange and passionate race. The stories credit her with ordinary feminine feelings, heightened by awareness of her supernatural power, and the risks involved in loving and leaving her were those to be expected from any broken relationship. If the man got married, he should never forget the implacable jealousy that his first partner would hold for the mortal woman who had supplanted her.

In South Uist there was a young man, a hunter, who had left his fairy mistress to take an earthly wife. His wife was in childbirth with her first child, and it was a long hard labour. He left home to climb over the hills and fetch a midwife, and as he ran through the glen where he used to meet his fairy sweetheart, there he saw her, standing by the road:

> "What are thine own tidings, O hunter?", said the fairy woman. "Not a word have I rare or strange", said the hunter, "but one thing that pained me as I came down the mountain, to see a goat putting forth a kid into the world, and she not succeeding". "Well, that seems strange to myself, a goat putting forth a kid into the world, and she not succeeding, though the smooth fairy flax was under her foot. But whither art thou thyself going today, hunter of the hill? I am sure that not without cause hast thou left thine own soft, obese, sallow wife". "I am going to the townland to seek a midwife for my wife, and she in the cold clasps of death". "Well, thou needst go no further", said she. "I will give thee a gauzy gossamer girdle to place around

the loins of thy wife that would bring her back from death to life though the nine deaths were in her mouth"…

The fairy woman gave the gauzy gossamer girdle to the hunter, and he set out to return; but he remembered the goat and the fairy flax, and he took the fairy flax home to his wife. He placed the smooth blessed fairy flax beneath her on the floor-bed, and immediately she was whole. He then placed the fairy woman's girdle on a round pillar-stone before the door, and the pillar burst asunder in fragments. What was it, beloved of men, but the fairy woman seeking to destroy the hunter's wife. The fairy women are like the world women, cold and keen and cutting to her who has come between themselves and the heart of the son of man. God be between us and the envy of every fairy woman and every world woman so long as we are in the worldly frame!'.

Mary MacMillan, South Uist, 1900s

(Carmichael 1928–71: 5.127–131, from the Gaelic)

17: The host of the air: fairies and anger

‘ “Tam Lin“ is probably the best-known of the traditional fairy ballads. In many ways, it is *the* canonical ballad. Featuring a maid named Janet, the Queen of Elfland, and a handsome hero imprisoned under the Hill; recorded by both Steeleye Span and Fairport Convention; turned into a picture book by Jane Yolen and a coming-of-age novel by Pamela Dean, it is also the inspiration for a raft of other beloved fantasy novels…’ (Marmor 2003). Quite a pedigree. What’s it all about?

In a wood there is a well, and by that well there stands someone or something called Tam Lin. In most versions of the ballad, the wood is a place called Carterhaugh, on the outskirts of Selkirk. All the girls of the town are forbidden to go there, for fear that they might lose a ring, or a dress, or their maidenhead. When she is told of this, young Janet tucks up her skirts and is off to the wood. Tam Lin is not there, but she conjures him up by pulling a rose; he asks why she comes to Carterhaugh without her command, but Janet says she will come and go as she pleases.

Time passes, and Janet is pregnant. She refuses to marry anyone apart from her elfin lover, and returns to the well, where she conjures up Tam Lin once more. Urgently she asks him what manner of man he is, and whether he has ever been baptised. Yes, he says; he is an earl’s grandson, who was out hunting when he fell from his horse and was Taken by the queen of fairies.

> And pleasant is the fairy land
> But, an eerie tale to tell,
> Ay at the end of seven years
> We pay a teind to hell;
> I am sae fair and fu o flesh,
> I’m feard it be myself.
> The night it is good Halloween
> When fairy folk will ride,

> And they that wad their true-love win,
> At Miles Cross they maun bide
>
> (Child 1882–98: 1.335–8, no.39)

Janet must wait by the cross as the fairy ride goes past; first there will be a black horse, then a brown, and then a milk-white steed on which her lover is riding. Quickly, she must pull him down. And so she does; but the fairies turn Tam Lin into horrid shapes – a snake, a bear, a lion, a red-hot iron bar, and then at last a burning coal. Janet hurls her scorching burden into a well and out from the water steps Tam Lin, naked. She wraps him in her mantle, and they prepare to return to town. The ballad ends with a riposte from the angry queen of fairies:

> "Shame betide her ill-far'd face,
> And an ill death may she die,
> For she's taen awa the bonniest knight
> In a' my companie.
> But had I kend, Tam Lin", she says,
> "What now this night I see,
> I wad hae taen out thy twa grey een,
> And put in twa een o tree".

It is a chilling threat, but the queen has good reason for it, for she is as jealous as any fairy mistress deserted by her mortal lover. The popularity of 'Tam Lin' stems from just this combination of eerie imagery with very human issues. Janet is a magical figure, who can cross the boundaries between worlds and wrestle with a lion or a burning coal; but she is also a girl facing pregnancy, isolation and dishonour unless she can get her lover to marry her. The ballad celebrates her courage and determination by transposing them into the supernatural realm.

Indeed, some appreciations of her character read more like fan letters. 'The gloriously self-willed Janet, beautiful, bold, brazen and tenacious as she is, represents the ideal of womanhood' (Henderson and Cowan 2001: 92). Certainly she dominates the ballad – the fairy queen is a forceful character, but it is Janet who makes the action, breaking the injunction not to go to Carterhaugh and hauling out Tam Lin from wherever it is he belongs. The only other male character, Janet's 'meek and mild' father, is introduced in a stanza where he says 'ever alas, sweet Janet' on hearing she is pregnant – rather a muted response, even by today's standards, let alone those of the pungent sixteenth century. Again, it is Janet who conjures Tam Lin up a second time, demands to know if he is suitable husband material, and then makes

plans for his rescue. He has been captured by one woman when he fell off his horse, he is retrieved by another when she pulls him down, and you can't help wondering if he ever really notices the difference.

All in all, 'Tam Lin' has a feisty view of womanhood – that's part of its appeal to a modern audience. But it is not a modern text. It was being sung in its present form in the eighteenth century, and probably much earlier, since 'a ballet of Thomalyn' was mentioned in 1558. The world was a very different place then and we might well wonder if the heroine was originally meant to be a role model, or whether the happy ending of the ballad might not have been seen as a rescue for both Tam Lin and Janet; for him, from unmanly captivity, and for her, from unwomanly self-reliance.

Something like this is suggested by way that fairy tradition is adapted, or rather inverted, in 'Tam Lin' – for this ballad is the only story of a fairy rescue in which a woman recaptures a man. The usual story, told as part of the lore of fairy abduction, centres on the grieving husband of a women who has died or been Taken – she appears to him, tells him to wait at a certain place (sometimes a crossroads), perhaps to make a circle with holy water (in some texts of 'Tam Lin' Janet is instructed to do this) and often to wait until the first or second horse has passed. Then, when the white horse goes by, he can pull down the lost wife (Lyle 1968). All these motifs are present in 'Tam Lin', but the other way round – *she* pulls down *him*, and a wedding follows the story rather than coming before it. In fact the draw of the traditional narrative was so strong that one version of 'Tam Lin', sung by Eddie Butcher of County Derry, has reverted to type and deals with the rescue of a wife by her husband (Munnelly 1992–3, 181).

In the stories, a wife who has been Taken asks her husband to wait for her on a certain night, but we are not told which it must be. In 'Tam Lin' it is Halloween, and this is typical of the ballads; 'Allison Gross' speaks of 'last Hallow-even/ When the seely court was ridin by' (Child 1882–98: 1.313-5, no.35). There was a widespread Scottish tradition that the fairies were abroad at this time, known in Gaelic-speaking areas as the night of Samhain, when the hollow hills were open and contact was possible with the Otherworld. Kirk believed that all four of the Scottish Quarter Days (Candlemas, May Day, Lammas and Halloween) were marked by fairy activity, and so evidently did his parishioners, since attendance at services in Aberfoyle increased marvellously as occasional churchgoers hastened to 'hallow themselves, their corns and cattell, from the shots and stealth of these

wandring Tribes; and many of these superstitious people will not be seen in Church again till the nixt quarter begin, as if no dutie were to be learned or don by them, but all the use of worship and sermons were to save them from these arrows that fly in the dark' (Kirk 1976: 51).

But not everyone was in church that night. 'Seers or men of the Second Sight… have verie terrifying encounters with them, even on high-wayes' says Kirk, and though his informants tried to shun the experience, others did not. Isobel Sinclair of Orkney referred to the quarter days as the 'reathes of the year', when 'shoe hath bein controlled with the Phairie; and that be thame, shoe hath the second sight' (Dalyell 1834: 470). It was on Halloween, shortly before 1572, that Jonet Boyman of Edinburgh spoke to 'the fayrie men and wemin', whom she also calls the seelie wights (that is, the blessed spirits) and the good neighbours – this is apparently the first recorded use of these evasive turns of phrase (Henderson and Cowan 2001: 127–9). Jonet was in deadly earnest, but the poet Alexander Montgomerie, who arrived at court in Edinburgh a few years later, found the good neighbours a source for rollicking mockery:

> In the hinderend of harvest, on ane alhallow evin,
> When our goode nichtbouris ryddis, if I reid richt,
> Sum buklit on ane bunwyd [ragwort] and sum on ane bene,
> Ay trippand in trowpis fra the twie-licht,
> Sum saidlit ane scho aip [she-ape] all grathit [clothed] into grene
> Sum hobling on hempstaikis, hovand on hicht.
>
> (Montgomerie 2000: 1.144)

This is a very different picture from the stately ride implied by 'Tam Lin', but the fairies were generally understood to be masters of deception, so what seemed to be finely caparisoned horses might very well turn out to be ragwort stems and hempstalks when viewed with a disenchanted eye. Montgomerie's ride belongs to literature rather than tradition; he is imagining what the fairies are like in themselves, and not what might happen to a mortal who encountered them. But there is plenty more to the same effect in popular storytelling; indeed, 'if you come across a ragwort that has been pulled up by the roots and thrown carelessly on the grass, you may suspect that a fairy has been riding it, especially if the plant is a tall, strong one' (Mac Manus 1973: 100).

A man was walking in the twilight along the shores of Lough Neagh when he saw the fairies, who were preparing to ride out for the night. They darted in and out of the stalks of ragwort, pulling them up and turning them into horses; feeling suddenly bold, the man shouted out "Pull one up for me, too!", only to be told by the captain of the fairy troop that there were no more horses. He could ride a bull, if he liked. The man took up the offer and scrambled on the beast's rough back, being warned very strictly that he must not speak, whatever he might see or hear.

They tore off through the night, round the shores of the lough and so to the Ballinderry River. The water was wide, but each fairy put his horse to it in grand style, and they crossed like a flight of swallows. There was nothing for it, the bull would have to cross too, and he did. As his mount slapped down in the mud on the far side, the man said approvingly "That was a damned fine leap for a bull!" – and all at once his mount was gone, the night air whistled by and he found himself on the wrong side of the Ballinderry (Foster 1951: 74).

There are many versions of this tale; sometimes it is a bull, sometimes a rush or straw or cabbage stalk that the fairies have transformed, and sometimes an old plough that had been left standing in the fields, but always a word out of season breaks the spell (Spence 1948: 63, 93). Details of this sort might be varied at the fancy of the story-teller, but no-one seems to have doubted that individuals had in fact been lifted by the fairy ride and had been carried for great distances. People who did it on a regular basis were nicknamed so-and-so of the fairies – Tomás na bPucaí, Dòmhnull Ruadh nan Sìthehean (Campbell 1900: 71–2; Lenihan 2003: 259–61). Very similar accounts were known in other cultures, which told how the wild company might come and carry a seer far away, so that he could take part in their contests or discover the hidden things on which the life of the sleeping community depended. It was part of a narrative stock-in-trade by which the cunning folk tried to explain their art. Maybe the fairy doctors of the Atlantic zone had meant something similar when they spoke about their abduction by the *slua sí*, the fairy host. But such connections could be more a burden than an asset. In Mingulay there was a man called Neil who went bird's-nesting on the rock, where he came to a point where he could neither climb up nor down. He looked down at the sea and the sharp rocks, and hoped that someone, anyone would rescue him. All at once he found himself on the grass at the top of the cliffs – but there was a price to be paid, and ever after, when he was called, he had to come.

> Neil was in Canna and he had a call to go to Barra – and up he went – and across he went, and he landed in the Island of Flodday, which is at the back of Fuiay. It was in March, and the woman of the house, the crofter's wife, was pouring gruel in two wooden bowls – pouring from one to the other – and immediately Neil came inside and he asked was there anything to eat, she said, "Hold on a minute, Neil, until I cool this, and I will give you a bowl of it". And she gave him barley bread and butter and the bowl of gruel, and Neil started to eat the bread and butter, and drink out of the bowl, and he did not get the job finished when he was called away again.
>
> Away he went and he was landed at Bachd, between Borve and Tangusdale on Barra. Well, he went in and there was a shoemaker there. He knew Neil, too, and he asked Neil where he came from, and was he hungry. And he says, "No, I'm not hungry – I took a bite of bread and butter and gruel on Flodday". And he was not long there when a call came again that took him to Mingulay…
>
> John MacPherson 'the Coddy', Barra, 1950s
>
> (Mac Pherson 1960: 178–9)

Eventually Neil emigrated to Canada, where the fairy host seem to have left him alone. But that is a rather lame sort of happy ending, and previous generations of story-tellers had worked over the idea of the midnight ride to provide a tale with a much more satisfying conclusion – though food and drink were still involved. In Cornwall, a boy from Porthallow was sent out one afternoon to pick up some groceries from the shop at neighbouring Polperro. Dusk had come on by the time he returned home, and he was glad to hear company on the road ahead; someone said "I'm for Porthallow Green", and the lad shouted out "I'm for Porthallow Green, too". Quick as thought, he found himself flying through the air amongst a company of piskies, and landed on the green. The adventure could have stopped there, but when he heard them cry "I'm for Seaton Beach", he could not resist the temptation to join in, and so he found himself whirled another seven miles along the coast, though he dropped his parcel on the sand. Then the cry went up "I'm for the King of France's cellar", and what should he do but join in that as well – and this was much more to his liking than the beach at

Seaton, for the cellar was full of choice wines, and he and the piskies had a fine time sampling them all. Then they weaved their way through grand rooms full of splendid furnishings, and came to a chamber which had been set up for a feast, with food on gold and silver plates. The boy could not resist picking up a silver cup, and just then the piskies all shouted "I'm for Seaton Beach", and he was whisked back, in time to pick up his parcel before the tide could carry it away. Then it was back to Porthallow Green, and so home, where they asked him anxiously where he had got to. Being a truthful lad, he told them; and he would have been at risk of a whipping for impertinence, if he had not cut the discussion short by pulling the cup out of his pocket, which was all the proof that anyone could wish for. It was kept in the family for many years as an heirloom (Quiller Couch 1855: 398).

The piskies seem to have been happy enough with their new friend, but they did not actually need his company in any way. Things are different in Ireland, where tradition often hints at a kind of mysterious interdependence between the human and fairy worlds. This is why Patch Gallagher was taken up by the fairies:

> One night at a late hour, Patch was crossing the strand on his way home from Rossport, where he had been visiting, when he met a host of people walking very swiftly. The leader said "You are the man we want". "What do ye want me for, or who are ye at all?" queried Patch.
>
> "We are the *slua sí* and we are going to a hurling match which is taking place tonight between the teams of Connacht and Ulster. The latter team will have a living man playing on their side, a fact which gives great advantage, and we must try to get a similar man. Being a fine strapping young man, you will suit our purpose to perfection, so you had better come along with us to the playing venue".
>
> On looking around at the coastline, Patch discovered that he was then travelling on the sea between Rinroe Head and Swallow Rock and heading for the Stags of Broadhaven. Soon the whole company had reached the Stags and here was assembled the greatest multitude of people Patch had ever seen. The goal posts were at the Stags at one end, and at Killybegs on the other, about

> sixty miles apart. Patch was placed in goal for Connacht, and right well did he acquit himself. The whole play and players were most mystifying to patch. Every puck of the ball went about twenty miles, and players ran faster than the wind.
>
> It was, according to accounts, a terrific match which was won by the *slua* of Connacht, and it was said Patch Gallagher played a noble part in goal. By their victory Connacht had secured a bumper harvest that year, and times were good for the ensuing twelve months.
>
> Michael Corduff, County Mayo, 1950s
>
> (Ó Catháin 1980: 19–21, abbreviated)

This is one of many stories which describe contests between the *sí* of the ancient provinces; Connacht, under the leadership of Finbhearra, fights against Munster under the banner of Donn Fírinne, and so on until an entire shadow geography has been worked out. These night battles are mostly presented as hurling matches rather military encounters, but that does not diminish their importance, especially when the future of the year's crop depends on the outcome (MacNeill 1962: 408).

At the back of these stories, there may be explanatory legends – myths, even – about a supernatural contest for the fruits of the harvest. But this is not the most obvious feature of the stories. Instead, the tales of a night out with the fairy host are all variations on an ideal of male strength and skill. It is a young man or a boy who is whisked away. He may play football, or he may go hurling like Patch Gallagher, who picked up skills that night which made him the best goalkeeper in Mayo. He may be called on to help in a battle or a fight; he may race over the fields, effortlessly leaping wide rivers on his mount; or he may settle down with his new mates for a carouse in a cellar. In short, whatever form the incidents of the night may take, they all involve some serious male bonding.

One of Eddie Lenihan's informants from County Clare recalled how he was out one night on *cuaird* with his uncle, rambling from house to house in search of entertainment. They heard a noise behind them, and the uncle told him that if he wanted to see something new, he had only to shout 'A cap and a horse for me!'. As soon as he did so, they were off – 'no idea in God's glory where we went, but we were travelling for a long time'. The troop stopped at a field by the side of a

grove where 'there was terrible sound o' people now and again, great commotion o' talk. But every now and then a light would flash over and hither, and it seems a football match was on'. Everywhere there were fairies, dressed in white and green. After the match they mounted their horses again, crossing the Shannon in one great leap, and so back to the roadside where they had begun, and the first light of day around them. 'Wasn't that something? Wasn't that an experience? And my uncle says to me. "If they ask you where you was", he said, "say we were playing cards. Don't let on we were out driving". So I never told anyone for years where we was that night' (Lenihan 2003: 65–7).

This is a queer story indeed, with a hallucinatory touch to it that puts new life into the old traditional episodes. But it was possible for young men to have similar experiences, without any supernatural element at all. At least, it was possible for them to join a male group, to go travelling long distances at night, to engage in plays or sports, and all the time to keep strict secrecy about what they were doing. The results could be alarming.

Sometime in the 1870s, the people of an Orkney farmhouse were aroused by a tap at the door. It was about eight o'clock, and their young boy was not yet in bed, so he was sent to answer the call. At once he raced back into the furthest corner of the house, yelling and sobbing "They're a' white, they're a' white – will they take us, do you think?" Then a moment later his mother came past, shrieking that her kitchen was full of fairies; and after that the man of the house was about to get his gun, and it was only with difficulty that others could dissuade him. Meanwhile the sources of all this confusion were filing into the house. 'There they stood like as many statues, one of whom was far above the rest, and of gigantic dimensions. Eyes, mouths or noses, they had none; nor the least trace of a countenance. They kept up an incessant grunt, grunt, grunt, or a noise partly resembling swine and partly turkey cocks. Their outer garments were white as snow, and consisted of petticoats below, and shirts on the outside, with sleeves and collars' (Fergusson 1883: 91–2). Something about the shirts and petticoats must have suggested that they were not creatures of another world, and the housewife's fears were finally put to rest when they passed the hat round for contributions and said a gruff "Goodnight" in a disguised voice before moving on to the next farmhouse. They were guisers.

Guising or mumming is a tradition by which people dress up in costumes which muffle their true identity, and go out on the roads at

the dark time of the year, at Christmas or Halloween. The costumes are outlandish, often shaggy or animal in form, so that they can look quite terrifying; nevertheless they demand entry to people's houses. Once they are over the threshold they cannot be barred out, and can demand food, but this does not matter as they bring good luck. Sometimes they are full of mischief, making noises and breaking things; sometimes they sing and dance, teasing the girls. They reward hospitable behaviour, but can punish selfishness; it is best to keep on the right side of them, as they can turn rough. They conceal their names, just as they put on a false shape, but if you can guess who they really are then you get power over them and can banish them out of the house.

In other words, guisers are very much like fairies. Their night journey, their changes in shape, their attempts to gain entry to the house are all familiar from fairy tradition – so is their right to offerings of food and their threats of poltergeist activity if none is forthcoming. Ordinary people can only get power over a guiser if they guess his true name, and this is also the basis for fairy stories of the Whuppity Stoorie type. Guising and fairy lore are parallel traditions – one is a drama, the other a narrative, but in both of them there is something eerie and aggressive that irrupts from the darkness into the kindly light of home.

As the incident in Orkney shows, parallels between fairies and guisers are not just the kind of pattern that folklorists like to see; people were well aware of it at the time. The same comparison was made in other regions with Scandinavian culture. Grýla, a troll-woman, used to descend on farms in the Faeroes, and guisers from these islands made allusion to her in a couplet which described their own arrival at these farms; the same analogy seems to have been current in Shetland (Gunnell 2001).

So it was possible to confuse fairies with guisers. In fact it might be a very good idea to confuse them, because not every masked stranger that you met at night was going to a party. In the 1820s, Pat Riordan of Limerick thought he saw the *slua Dhuin*, the host of Don Fírinne, on the road. But they were not fairies – they were the Whiteboys, disguised members of a rural secret society, and they wanted him to help pull down a mail-coach which was carrying a hated lawyer (Müller-Lisowski 1948: 157). A gang of heavies was employed by a landlord in eighteenth-century Kerry to keep taxmen at bay. Disguised as women by day, and going about with blackened faces and white

shirts by night, they were called Mr Daniel Mahoney's Fairies (Froude 1872–4: 1.452–3).

Disguise was very important if you were joining the Whiteboys, or any of the other rural risings which used the props of masks and mummery. It made you a faceless figure as far as the authorities were concerned, and if it didn't make you quite as anonymous to your mates and neighbours, it gave a heavy hint that they were not to recognise you. Fairies had traditionally offered a useful way of not knowing too much. While Daniel Mahoney was active in Kerry, there were parts of County Cork which stood effectively outside the law, and here, if one man happened to owe money to another, the only redress was to steal his cow or sheep – this was known as a fairy process. It was so effective a system that even magistrates, when they received complaints about some outstanding debt, used to tip a wink, recommend the fairies, and return to their own business (Bennett 1869: 383–4).

In South Brent on Dartmoor, the horses that farmers left out at night were often found quite exhausted in the morning, as if they had been ridden hard during the hours of darkness. Dearie me! It must have been the pixies, who were well known for their wild galloping. Some even said they had seen them at this sport. But it was really the smugglers, who needed packhorses for the run inland, and were prepared to return them with a keg of brandy if no questions were asked (Crossing 1890: 81–2).

You could join the fairies for the night, if you wanted to start a new life, or to carry out acts that you could not have imagined yourself doing by daylight. Once there was a boy in County Mayo called Guleesh, who was turned out of doors because he had quarrelled with his father. As he sat gazing sullenly at the moonlight, he heard the fairies rush past: "By my soul", says he, "but you're merry enough, and I'll follow ye". He learnt from them how to call for a horse and saddle, and how to rush through the air until they overtook the wind that was before them, and the wind that was behind them could not keep pace. Then they tell him the purpose of the wild journey:

> "The daughter of the king of France is to be married to-night, the handsomest woman that the sun ever saw, and we must do our best to bring her with us, if we're only able to carry her off; and you must come with us that we may be able to put the young girl up behind you on the horse, when we'll be bringing her away, for it's not lawful for us to put her sitting behind ourselves.

> But you're flesh and blood, and she can take a good grip of you, so that she won't fall off the horse. Are you satisfied, Guleesh, and will you do what we're telling you?".
>
> Shamus O'Hart, County Roscommon, 1880s
>
> (Hyde 1890: 104–128, from the Irish)

Naturally, since this is a legend, it all ends for the best, with Guleesh marrying the king of France's daughter. But behind its rollicking spirit, the folktale hints at how a woman could be carried off in real life – something which was not uncommon. 'At that time you could not be sure of a woman until you were married to her… A man could come from another place and take the woman from you if you were not already married to her' says a storyteller, and goes on to explain how a young men, hearing that one of these raiding parties was on the way, hid his girl on an island; and how it happened that while she was there, the fairies carried her off. So in this instance, the actual practice and its supernatural analogue were confounded with each other (Ó hEaochaidh 1977: 47).

Certainly the legend and the practice of abduction seem closely related. And if this is true of stories where the fairies carry off young women, what are we to make of those where they maim and kill? 'I have heard of good sensible men whom the hosts took', said a woman in the Western Isles; they would toss them on the winds between South Uist and Barra, and give them cruel orders:

> There was a man who had only one cow and one daughter. The daughter was milking the cow at night when the hosts were passing, and that human being whom the hosts had lifted with them was her father's neighbour. And this neighbour was ordered by the hosts to shoot the daughter as she was milking, but, knowing the father and daughter, he shot the cow instead. The next morning he went where the father was and said to him, "You are missing the cow". "Yes", said the father, "I am". And the man who had shot the cow said, "Are you not glad your cow and not your daughter was taken? For I was ordered to shoot your daughter and I shot your cow, in order to show blood on my arrow".

> "I am very glad of what you have done if that was the case", the father replied.
>
> Marian Maclean, Barra, 1900s
>
> (Evans-Wentz 1911: 109)

Stories like this were common in the Hebrides, a region where people still kept memories of the continuous, bloody clan warfare of the seventeenth century. Many a raiding host had come to the islands in those days, driven by the wind over the sea to plunder and kill, and the *sluagh* (as it appears in Gaelic spelling) was only doing the same. But that does not account for all aspects of the tradition – in particular, the unwillingness of the wretched mortal carried by the host and forced to do their work. There is no question of good fellowship here, as there is in the stories of hurling, riding, or visits to the King of France's cellar. When the *sluagh* took their victims, they rolled them in the mud and the mire. 'A man in Benbecula was taken up several times. His friends assured me that night became a terror to this man, and that ultimately he would on no account cross the threshold after dusk. He died, they said, from the extreme exhaustion consequent on these excursions' (Carmichael 1928–71: 2.357–8).

In Man a woman was taken up by the fairies, and they came past a house where two girls had been at work all day, waiting for the sow to farrow. The girls were asleep outside, and Themselves wanted to carry them off, but the older woman prevented this. They were so angry that they killed her, and next morning a pool of blood was found outside the door (Killip 1975: 32). And yet, despite the brutal nature of these Scots and Manx stories, they have something in common with the Irish traditions of a ride with the fairies. In both narratives, the presence of a mortal is somehow mysteriously necessary to the success of the fairy host. The fairies cannot win a fight or a hurling match unless there is a man of flesh and blood on their side; they cannot carry off a girl unless she grips onto a real human; and they cannot kill unless a mortal shoots the dart.

The killing was done with something called a *saighead shìth* or fairy arrowhead (Carmichael 1928–71: 2.346). Like the men who shot them, these arrowheads came from the real, physical world but were caught up in a supernatural drama. To the eyes of scholarship, they were prehistoric worked flints. 'When a boy, I was an ardent archaeologist… I was fortunate enough on that occasion to find a flint

arrow-head – the only one I ever did find. This I showed to an old fellow who was hedging; without hesitation he pronounced it to be an elf-stone, declaring that the elves were evil spirits, who in days past used to throw them at the kie' (Blakeborough 1898: 142). This was in Yorkshire, where the tradition was dying, but further north it was still part of contemporary life. Campbell of Islay was shown a flint or stone arrowhead and told 'That is a fairy dart, which a man brought me a few days ago. He said he had heard a whistling in the air, and that it fell at his feet in the road, and he picked it up, and brought it away with him' (Campbell 1860: 4.340).

It is a hard thing, as you look at these artefacts laid out on the museum wall, to recall the wonder that they once inspired. They were precious objects, worth showing off to a passing bishop; sometimes they were set in silver, as a relic or a healing charm might be (Rowling 1976: 29; Penney 1976: 73–4). And like a charm, they were dipped in water so that the water could be drunk by those who had suffered from elfshot (Bonser 1926: 355–6). For Kirk, they were a complete mystery. He had no idea of knapping or pressure flaking, and supposed them to have been whittled like wood; and how could this have been done in the obdurate flint? (Kirk 1976: 58–9).

Well, there was one person who could have told him, had she not been burned to ashes thirty years before – Isobel Gowdie.

> As for Elf-arrow heidis, the Divell shapes them with his awin hand, and syne deliveris thame to Elf-boyes, who whettis and dightis them with a sharp thing lyke a packing needle; bot whan I was in Elfland I saw them whetting and dighting them… Those that dightis thame are little ones, hollow and boss-baked. They speak gowstie lyke…
>
> I had a little horse, and would say, "Horse and hattock in the Divellis name!". And then we wold flie away whair we wold, be even as straws would flie upon an hieway. We will flie lyke straws whan we please; wild-straws and corn-straws will be horses to us, and we put thame betwixt our foot, and say "Horse and hattock, in the Divellis name!". And whan any sees these straws in a whirlwind, and do not then sanctifie themselves, we may shoot them dead at our pleasure. Any that are shot by us, their sowell will go to Hevin, bot their bodies

> remains with us and will flie as horsis to us, als small as straws.
>
> Isobel Gowdie, Nairnshire, 1660s
>
> (Pitcairn 1833: 3.602–16, adapted from Scots)

Other women had come unwillingly before the court, the fear of death in their eyes. Everything that they knew or thought they knew about fairies and the Devil had to be elicited bit by bit, in response to leading questions. By contrast, there was no stopping Isobel Gowdie. Yes, she had been with Thomas the Faerie, and with many another spirit – with Robert the Jakis, and Sanderis the Read Reiver, and Swein the Roaring Lion. And with Thieffe of Hell, too, and Makhectour and Rorie. Would they know more? She would tell them about the elfbulls that ramp and roar at the gateway to the hollow hills. She would tell them of the Queen of Faerie, and of her husband, a very braw man. She would tell them about the Devil. She would tell them everything.

Isobel made a voluntary confession, because she wanted to repent of all the things that she had done (or, to be more literal-minded about it, that she *hadn't* done). She was sorry that she had flicked those lethal darts; 'that quhich troubles my conscience most, is the killing of severall persones, with the arrows quhich I gott from the divell'. But behind the sad, crazy talk of the penitent, there are words that suggest another personality – that of the proud, triumphant witch, who soars on the wind and cries 'We may shoot them dead at our pleasure!'. Yes, she – Isobel Gowdie, housewife of Auldearn – had dined with her good friends the King and Queen of Faerie; she had held the power of life and death on her thumbnail. Let them remember that, when they came to tie her to the stake.

Everything in Isobel's stories is already familiar; the elf-arrows, the fairy wind, the straws that become horses. She was not the first to cry 'Horse and hattock'; the Laird of Duffus had done the same, according to family tradition, when he heard the magic words being spoken from a passing whirlwind. The wind took him up, and carried him through the air to the palace of the King of France; there he followed his new companions down to the cellar, got drunk, and was found the next morning clutching, as is usual in these stories, a silver cup. It all took a bit of explaining. John Aubrey, who was told the story in 1695, discovered that the present Lord Duffus still had the cup, and knew all about the story – 'but that he thinks it fabulous' (Aubrey 1972: 94–5).

It was not that Isobel's stories were new, then, nor was it surprising to think that they might have really happened; after all, Aubrey had been prepared to suppose that the adventure of the silver cup might be real, too. What made them different was their frank acknowledgement of the Devil. In the conventional tale of a man lifted by the host, he was always taken against his will, and when ordered to shoot, he chose an animal and not a human target. 'Black Donald of the Multitude… said he had done no harm while away, except that the fairies had made him throw an arrow at, and kill, a speckled cow in Skye' (Campbell 1900: 68–9). But Isobel said that she had deliberately gone out to kill, and she had succeeded. The difference between Donald and Isobel is one which anthropologists often make when they distinguish the sorcerer from the witch. The sorcerer has a calamitous power to do harm, an inner hunger or an evil eye, which horrifies them as much as it does everyone else, and which they try to repress. The witch does evil because she enjoys it.

Amongst the things which Isobel enjoyed, in her proud imagination, was tearing down the barriers which had separated Hell from Faerie. Many thoughtful men and women had found ways of keeping the two apart. The vision of the three different roads in 'Tam Lin' is one way of doing it; so is the complex, often-repeated tale of how the fairies approach a priest (or a minister, or a bible-reader, or whoever sounds right for a particular community) and ask if they have a share in Christ. Sometimes the holy man says no – he never says yes – but Irish versions are subtler and the question is often twisted or evaded or left on the back boiler till the Day of Judgement (Petzoldt 1996: 610–1). The Scottish stories are less accommodating; Yeats, who had an eye for most things, noticed this. 'You have discovered the fairies to be pagan and wicked. You would like to have them all up before the magistrate' (Yeats 1893: 192).

It was the Scots who suspected a secret deal between the fairies and their neighbours. 'Ay at the end of seven years', says Tam Lin, 'we pay a teind to hell'. This tradition goes back to the *Romance of Thomas of Erceldoune*, in which Thomas is warned to leave Faerie in a hurry because 'to morne, of helle the foulle fende/ Amange this folke will feche his fee' (Murray 1875: 16). The episode formed part of the original ballad of 'Thomas Rhymer', and from there it migrated to 'Tam Lin', becoming more sinister as it went – the original *fee* or *kane* (a payment of rent to an overlord) turned into a *teind*, which could also mean a feudal payment but was much more likely to be understood as

a tithe. Already in 1588, Aleson Peirsoun thought that the fairies had to pay a tenth of their people every year to the Devil (Lyle 1970: 178–9). There was a Queen of Elfame, to be sure, and Alesoun was on very good terms with her; but the Devil was the feudal overlord and it was he who set the terms. Another of these fairy doctors, Andro Man from Aberdeenshire, took his inspiration from the ballads – he was the new Thomas the Rhymer, for he had slept with the fairy queen (they had numerous children) and she had given him authority to carry out healing rituals. As the questioners become more probing, Andro's tale starts to turn incoherent and out peeps the cloven hoof. Yes, there is the fairy queen, but there is also a mysterious figure called Christsonday, who is perhaps an angel, but who will certainly be cast into the fire at the end of time. Next year, says Andro – reverting to type as a prophet – the price of corn will go up. Maybe it did; he never lived to see his words fulfilled (Purkiss 2000: 133–9).

From the thousands of people who were tried for witchcraft under Scottish law, some forty are known to have talked of fairies when they were interrogated. This would be only one in every hundred of the accused, and since the authorities had the power through torture to make people admit to virtually anything, it seems that they were not particularly interested in extorting fairy confessions. Some of the people who caught up in laws against witchcraft were professional cunning folk, who had learnt how to exercise their powers of divination by dealing with the other crowd. Others, and most especially the women, had gone through a personal crisis which made sense to them afterwards when they realised that they had been in the hands of the fairies. Often they, too, were picking up the threads of their lives with a new reputation for healing and foretelling. No-one, apart from Isobel Gowdie, believed that they had made a deliberate compact with Hell. And yet diabolical imagery runs through many of their confessions, and it cannot all have been elicited by leading questions from the bench.

So much of what people knew about fairies could be seen, with a little twist in perspective, as a description of witchcraft (MacCulloch 1921; Henderson and Cowan 2001:137–8). Shooting with elf-arrows was only the beginning; there were dozens of stories telling how witches could get on some ordinary household implement (not just a broom) and make it fly through the air, as the fairies used their transformed cabbage sticks and straws. Witches, like fairies, would descend on people's houses – often down the chimney – and steal the nourishment

out of their food. They might slip their way into someone's cellar and spend the night drinking – anyone who had joined their company and forgotten the words of flight would be found the next morning, just like the Laird of Duffus. There was music and dancing at their gatherings, and a Sabbat, the great festival to which the witches were heading through the air, sounds uncomfortably like the feast to which travellers were invited in the fairy hill. Certainly it was unwise to partake of the food in either case, or to be enrolled in that company; and the witches, like the fairies, would lose all enchanted fine looks once their fellowship was rejected.

The traditions certainly ran in parallel – but wherever the drift of ideas can be traced, it seems to run from demonology to fairylore, and not vice versa. Consider the story of a broomstick which, by magical art, looks just like the body of someone who is away. We have already met with this as a device used by the fairies to replace someone they have Taken, but it was also a witch's trick. Isobel Gowdie said that she always left a broomstick in her bed when she flew to her Sabbath, and that her husband never noticed the difference. Of course, this may say more about the state of Gowdie's marriage than her powers of transformation; but it must be significant that this notion of a broom substituted for the witch had been spread across Europe by demonological treatises, which were much concerned with ideas of illusion and the abstraction of bodies. On the other hand, the image of a stock as fairy substitute is confined largely to Ireland and the Gaelic Highlands, and it seems likely that this local story is derived from the more universal one. Again, we often find that when someone riding with the fairies speaks out loud – 'That was a damn fine leap for a bull', and so on – he plummets down at once from the enchanted host. There are corresponding stories about a peasant who gets caught up in a ride to the Sabbath, and incautiously cries out on the name of God. It is these holy words which bring the spell to an end – a detail which makes good sense in the diabolical story, but has been lost from the fairy version.

Maybe these traditions of the fairy host and the witches' ride are both derived, at who knows what remove, from some archaic belief or ritual of spirit flight. But by the early modern period they had become separate fields of discourse, even if a canny storyteller could transfer ideas from one to the other. In the demon-haunted imagination of Reformation Scotland, there were those who sought to annihilate these subtle distinctions. As far as they were concerned, all supernatural beliefs which lay outside the remit of the Kirk smelt of sulphur, and

there was no distinction to be made between them – but they failed to convince others that this was true. People were happy enough to let Hell give a frisson of excitement, as it does to 'Tam Lin', but in the end they knew that the fairies belonged to an independent realm – a path across the fernie brae, that ran neither upwards nor downhill, but led to a rich, risky kingdom of the imagination.

Fairy Studies: An update

Time's passage may be imperceptible in Faerie but it hurtles our own world onwards, even in the secret gardens of scholarship. Much has happened in the world of fairy studies since 2004 and many books have been written.

Some fit a familiar template. Dee L. Ashliman's *Fairy Lore: A Handbook* (Greenwood Press 2006) is very much in the tradition of Katharine Briggs, an assemblage of stories from across Europe, grouped by tale-type. Also pan-European is the work of Claude Lecouteux, available in translation as *The Hidden History of Elves and Dwarves: Avatars of Invisible Realms* (Inner Traditions, 2018). He is most at home with the early medieval evidence, identified as the original high point of spirits from which later folklore is a decline. This is a point of view congenial to Pagans, who will also appreciate *The Faerie Queens*, edited by Sorita d'Este and David Rankin (Avalonia, 2013). This brings together magic, romance, the Irish queenly figures and other dominant females in later lore. Similar material is treated with his trademark subtlety and reassessment by Ronald Hutton in *Queens of the Wild: Pagan Goddesses in Christian Europe* (Yale University Press, 2022).

The most innovative comparisons are to be found in *Fairies, Demons, and Nature Spirits: 'Small Gods' at the Margins of Christendom*, edited by Michael Ostling (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). The geographical range of this book extends to Zambia and the Amazon: everywhere we find vernacular relationships with spirits bending to accommodate the official (usually Christian) narrative but always with some elfin difference.

Morgan Daimler, *A New Dictionary of Fairies* (Moon Books, 2020) takes on the hard task of updating Briggs, largely successfully: the Irish element is strongest, as it should be given the predominance of Irish traditions in the recorded folklore of the British Isles. The same geographical trend is found in Richard Suggett's *Fairies: A Dangerous History* (Reaktion, 2018) although here it is inspired by a preference for the eerie, couldn't-have-been-made-up feel of encounter stories and reports from the fairy world. *Magical Folk: British and Irish Fairies 500 AD to the Present*, edited by Simon Young and Ceri Houlbrook

(Gibson Square, 2018) takes Britain and Ireland as its main point of reference, while extending to America; the most local studies are the best.

In *Ireland's Immortals: A History of the Gods of Irish Myth* (Princeton University Press, 2016), Mark Williams successfully interprets scholarship on the medieval *sí* for the general reader, taking the story up to the present in the fields of literature and nationalism. On the folk side there have been studies of fairy doctors in Erin Kraus, *Wise-Woman of Kildare: Moll Anthony and Popular Tradition in the East of Ireland* (Four Courts, 2011), and two papers in *Folklore* 116 (2005): Timothy Corrigan Correll, 'Believers, sceptics, and charlatans: evidential rhetoric, the fairies, and fairy healers in Irish oral narrative and belief' (pp.1–18) and Gearóid Ó Crualaoich, 'Reading the *Bean Feasa*', pp.37–50.

Britain has been ably served by Janet Bord, *The Traveller's Guide to Fairy Sites: The Landscape and Folklore of Fairyland in England, Wales and Scotland* (Gothic Image, 2004). Like Suggett's book this is not referenced but original sources for the stories and place-names can be tracked down without much difficulty. Historical Scottish material can be found in Emily Lyle, *Fairies and Folk: Approaches to the Scottish Ballad Tradition* (Wissenschaftlicher, 2007). Nela Scholma-Mason, 'Those who dwell under the hills: Orkney's mound lore and its wider context', *Folklore* 131 (2020) pp.180–203 has an excellent bibliography. In 'The cult of the seely wights in Scotland', *Folklore* 123 (2012) pp.198–219, Julian Goodare proposed that these were a separate character from the fairies altogether: this has not found universal assent. For Wales, Adam Coward, 'Edmund Jones and the Pwcca'r Trwyn', *Folklore* 126 (2015) pp.177–95, looks at the influence of the religious framework on fairy reporting.

Ronald James argues for the independence of Cornish tradition in 'The other side of the Tamar: a comparison of the pixies of Devon and Cornwall', *Folklore* 131 (2020) pp.76–95, while Paul Manning highlights literary influence in 'Pixies' progress: how the pixie became part of the nineteenth-century fairy mythology' in *The Folkloresque: Reframing Folklore in a Popular Culture World*, edited by Michael Dylan Foster and Jeffrey Tolbert (University Press of Colorado, 2016). English scholarship has, as usual in folklore, tended to the local. Ray Loveday's *Hikey Sprites: The Twilight of a Norfolk Tradition* was privately published in 2009 and revised in 2014. Aidan Turner-Bishop covered 'Fairy and boggart sites in Lancashire' for *Lancashire's Sacred*

Landscape, edited by Linda Sever (History Press, 2010). Francis Young covers medieval to modern in *Suffolk Fairylore* (Lasse Press, 2019) while Jon Dathen's *Somerset Faeries and Pixies* (Capall Bann, 2010) deals largely with contemporary encounters.

Changelings are the tale-type which has provoked most interest, with Linda-May Ballard's 'A singular changeling?' in *Folk Life* 52 (2014) pp.137–51, and Audrey Robitaillié's 'The bagpipe player in the cradle, an Irish changeling motif', *Folklore* 128 (2017) pp.376–95 drawing on Séamas Mac Philib's thesis. A paper by John Lindow, 'Changelings, changing, re-exchanges: thoughts on the relationship between folk-belief and legend' in *Legends and Landscape*, edited by Terry Gunnell (University of Iceland Press, 2009) looks at broader issues, as does Magnus Course, 'Changelings: alterity beyond difference', *Folk Life* 55 (2017) pp.12–21; Course treats changeling babies and substitutes for Taken adults as examples of the same thing, which may not be accurate, but his ideas about the Other are interesting.

Steven Tucker, *The Hidden Folk: Are Poltergeists and Fairies just the Same Thing* (Fortean Words, 2016) examines the overlap between brownies, household spirits and paranormal infestations; a good example of the kind of work coming out of fortean studies. Elfshot, another motif of supernatural mischief, gets a sceptical ride (on philological rather than folkloristic grounds) from Alaric Hall in 'Getting shot of elves: healing witchcraft and fairies in the Scottish witchcraft trials', *Folklore* 116 (2005) pp.19–36.

Hall's main thesis is *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England: Matters of Belief, Health, Gender and Identity* (Boydell, 2007), which marshals everything known about an obscure tradition with compelling confidence. Later periods are handled by Richard Firth Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars: Fairy Beliefs and the Medieval Church* (Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016). He moves smoothly between medieval high and folk culture teasing out their commonalities; as in Michael Ostling's collection, these fairies are first shadowed and ultimately eclipsed by the Christianity which demonises them. *Airy Nothings: Imagining the Otherworld of Faerie from the Middle Ages to the Age of Reason*, edited by Karin Olsen and Jan Veenstra (Brill, 2014) is a collection extending from an anatomy of the bullbeggar to Julian Goodare on Scotland. Two books specialise in the literary heritage: Aisling Byrne, *Otherworlds: Fantasy and History in Medieval Literature* (OUP, 2016), and James Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

In later English history, many doctrinal arguments spilled over the borders of fairy ground, and Peter Marshall follows one line of thought in 'Protestants and fairies in Early-Modern England', in *Living with Religious Diversity in Early-Modern Europe* edited by C.S. Dixon, D. Freist and M. Greengrass (Ashgate, 2009). Being rude about fairies was the safest way to develop scepticism about the supernatural itself. Darren Oldridge traces connections with another Protestant bogey in 'Fairies and the Devil in Early Modern England', *The Seventeenth Century* 31 (2016) pp.1–15, as does Daniel Harms, 'Hell and Fairy: the differentiation of fairies and demons within British ritual magic of the early modern period' in *Knowing Demons, Knowing Spirits in the Early Modern Period*, edited by Michelle Brock, Richard Raiswell and David Winter (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). Harms has also edited '"Of Fairies": an excerpt from a seventeenth-century magical manuscript', *Folklore* 129 (2018) pp.192–8, bringing us an otherwise unknown fairy theorist contemporary with and equal to Kirk, with notes on invocations and colour-coded fairies.

Susan Swapper's case, the most compelling English narrative of fairy interaction, has now been studied by Annabel Gregory in *Rye Spirits: Faith, Faction and Politics in a Seventeenth Century English Town* (London: Hedge Press, 2013). A broader context is provided by Emma Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits: Shamanistic Traditions in Early Modern British Witchcraft and Magic* (Sussex Academic Press, 2005), though her view that familiars and fairy helpers were the same has not found universal assent. The career of an unashamed fabulist is followed by Frances Timbers, *The Magical Adventures of Mary Parish: The Occult World of Seventeenth-Century London* (Truman State University Press, 2016).

Regina Buccola in *Fairies, Fractious Women, and the Old Faith: Fairylore in Early Modern British Drama and Culture* (Susquehanna UP, 2006) finds common ground between the epistemic resistance of fairies to authority and the better-documented status of women and Catholics. It's mostly literary, drawing on Shakespeare and Jonson, who appears again in Piot Spyra, 'Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*: the essential guide to early modern fairy belief', *Folklore* 128 (2017) pp. 292–313 and Thomas Willard, 'Pimping for the Fairy Queen' in *Crime and Punishment in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age*, edited by Albrecht Classen and Connie Scarborough (De Gruyter, 2012).

The strongest historical contribution comes from Ronald Hutton, 'The making of the Early Modern British fairy tradition', *The Historical*

Journal 57 (2014) pp.1157–75, with some of the conclusions featuring again in a chapter of *The Witch: A History of Fear, from Ancient Times to the Present* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2017). Hutton rescues fairy tradition from the timeless ethnographic present to see it as something with a history of its own.

Less has been written on fairies in late modernity. Jacqueline Simpson, 'The ambiguity of elves', *Folklore* 122 (2011) pp.76–83 finds folklore analogues for the imagined elves of Tolkien, Pratchett and Rowling. Gail-Nina Anderson provides 'A short history of fairy painting, 1768–1901' for In Fairyland: *The World of Tessa Farmer* , edited by Catriona McAra (Strange Attractor, 2016), a celebratory volume for an artist fascinated by tiny fairy figures, which also contains a paper on small fairies in tradition. And Juliette Wood has written on 'Filming fairies: popular film, audience response and meaning in contemporary fairy lore', *Folklore* 117 (2006) pp278–96.

Twentieth-century fairies are so different from their originals, both as a supernatural character and as a human experience, that scholarship has fought shy of them and research is left mostly to believers (like John Dathen in Somerset). So it is particularly valuable to have the corpus of experiences collected by Marjorie Johnson, written in the 1950s but only now published as *Seeing Fairies: From the Lost Archives of the Fairy Investigation Society, Authentic Reports of Fairies in Modern Times*, edited by Simon Young (Anomalist Books, 2014).

This is Young's second appearance as an editor: he is also co-editing (with Davide Ermacora) the forthcoming *The European Social Fairy: A Supernatural Mirror*. But this is just spare-time stuff for the most prolific British folklorist since Andrew Lang. Since 2012 he has brought out two or three articles a year, often micro-histories or interventions settling some debated point in fairy studies. For a full list, it's best to follow him online, but the most significant papers are: 'Three notes on West Yorkshire Fairies in the nineteenth century', *Folklore* 123 (2012) pp.223–30; 'Fairy imposters in County Longford in the Great Famine', *Studia Hibernica* 38 (2012) pp181–99; 'Three Cornish fairy notes', *Devon and Cornwall Notes and Queries* 41 (2012) pp.1–4; 'Some notes on Irish fairy changelings in nineteenth-century newspapers', *Béascna* 8 (2013) pp.34–47; 'A history of the Fairy Investigation Society, 1927–1960', *Folklore* 124 (2013) pp.139–56; 'Five notes on nineteenth-century Cornish changelings', *Journal of the Royal Institution of Cornwall* 2013 pp.51–79; 'Against taxonomy: the fairy families of Cornwall', *Cornish Studies* 21 (2013) pp.223–37; 'Four

further South-Western fairy notes' *Devon and Cornwall Notes and Queries* 41 (2013) pp. 69–78; 'In search of the fairies of Mellor Moor' *Northern Earth* 138 (2014) pp.19–22; 'In search of England's fairy trees: the Fair Oak of Bowland', *Northern Earth* 147 (2016) pp.16–21; '*Shantooe Jest*: a forgotten nineteenth-century fairy saga', *Supernatural Studies* 3 (2016) pp9–22; 'Pixy-led in Devon and the South West', *Tr. of the Devonshire Association* 148 (2016) pp.311–36; 'Children who see fairies', *Journal for the Study of Religious Experience* 4 (2018) pp.81–98; 'In search of Jenny Greenteeth', *Gramarye* 16 (2019) pp24–38; 'The fairy placenames of Cumbria', *Tradition Today* 8 (2019) pp51–51; 'Public bogies and supernatural landscapes in the North West of England in the nineteenth century', *Time and Mind* 13 (2020) pp1–26; and 'The Mab of folklore', *Gramarye* 20 (2021) pp28–43. Finally came a full-length book, *The Boggart: Folklore, History, Place-Names and Dialect* (University of Exeter Press, 2022). This draws on Young's strengths in local history and the linguistic turn, replacing our book-notions of the boggart as traditional fairy with a survey of the nebulous and spooky meanings that the word actually had for its users in a region centred on Lancashire, through two or three centuries of active engagement.

What next? Fairy scholarship is fast approaching its bicentenary, if we take Keightley's 1828 *Fairy Mythology* as our point of origin. During that period, analysis has pivoted between four ways of thinking: the folkloric, the historical, the mystic and the parapsychological. Each mode has had its influence on writers, often greatest when subliminal. Until recently, for instance, it was usual to treat fairies synchronically: certain things had always been believed about them by the folk (or, from the mystics' point of view, they did certain things) because that was how they were, just as a character in a book is the same person on page 10 and page 90. But for the historians, 'fairies' are not the same over time or cultures, while anthropologists are more inclined to see 'fairy' as a term whose meaning is fixed in relation to other signifiers – 'demon', obviously, but also 'nature', 'fortune', 'child' and many others.

Well and good: but the paranormal and fortean theorists, who tend to get left out of these discussions, have shown that fairies and other spirits often do the same things worldwide even when there is no traditional expectation that they will do so. If that's for real, then like any other reality it impose limits on the range of cultural interpretation. But hypotheses of a fairy-phenomenon which is then somehow processed culturally sound suspiciously like the abandoned folkloric

model of an ancestral core tradition which was distorted by later generations.

Surprisingly little of the recent work on fairies has used the strengths of folklore as a body of material, or as an interpretive tradition. Early modern historians, who are getting close to mining out a limited stock of texts, often pause to explain that these are imperfect elite reportage. But very few publications in the last twenty years have drawn on the vast, primary, non-elite records of fairies from the Irish and Scottish oral archives. English material – even with Young's unequalled skills in unearthing the previously unknown through newspaper search engines – cannot compare. We seem to be looking in the wrong place.

We may also be looking in the wrong way. Historians often venture into folklore with the air of social workers rescuing valuable subjects from the neglect of their slovenly guardians, but a methodology based on texts is not always the best way to deal with motifs and tale-types. The historians' distrust of meta-cultural entities ('the fairy faith') needs to be balanced with the folklorists' recognition that traditions are to a large extent self-reconstituting after their distortion through passive informants. There is a logic to the lore of fairy abduction which suggests that it constituted itself as a single imaginative system over a long time and in many countries.

That raises a final question: should we allow the local scope of 'fairy' to define our topic? Even in the British Isles it is a disputed term, especially in its assumption that social and solitary fairies – the elf and the boggart – are somehow members of a single realm. Some of the most interesting work is being done elsewhere, particularly in Iceland. And our remote successors may remember us, not for having published prolifically on the subjects outlined here, but for having neglected the djinn. I've never met anyone from an Islamic country who didn't take it for granted that djinn were doing, or being reported to have done, most of things fairies do in our texts: and they're doing it now. The future of fairy studies may need to go beyond fairies.

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