

***VARIOUS***



***FOLK-  
LORE AND  
LEGENDS:  
ENGLISH***

**Various**

# **Folk-Lore and Legends: English**

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# A DISSERTATION ON FAIRIES.

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BY JOSEPH RITSON, ESQ.

The earliest mention of Fairies is made by Homer, if, that is, his English translator has, in this instance, done him justice:—

“Where round the bed, whence Achelöus springs,  
The wat’ry Fairies dance in mazy rings.”

(*Iliad*, B. xxiv. 617.)

These Nymphs he supposes to frequent or reside in woods, hills, the sea, fountains, grottos etc., whence they are peculiarly called Naiads, Dryads and Nereids:

“What sounds are those that gather from the shores,  
The voice of nymphs that haunt the sylvan bowers,  
The fair-hair’d dryads of the shady wood,  
Or azure daughters of the silver flood?”

(*Odyss.* B. vi. 122.)

The original word, indeed, is *nymphs*, which, it must be confessed, furnishes an accurate idea of the *fays* (*fées* or *fates*) of the ancient French and Italian romances; wherein they are represented as females of inexpressible beauty, elegance, and every kind of personal accomplishment, united with magic or supernatural power; such, for instance, as the Calypso of Homer, or the Alcina of Ariosto. Agreeably to this idea it is that

Shakespeare makes Antony say in allusion to Cleopatra—

“To this great fairy I’ll commend thy acts,”

meaning this grand assemblage of power and beauty. Such, also, is the character of the ancient nymphs, spoken of by the Roman poets, as Virgil, for instance:

“Fortunatus et ille, deos qui novit agrestes,  
Panaque, Sylvanumque senem, Nymphasque  
sorores.”

(*Geor.* ii. 493.)

They, likewise, occur in other passages as well as in Horace—

“—gelidum nemus  
Nympharumque leves cum Satyris chori.”

(*Carmina*, l., O. 1, v. 30.)

and, still more frequently, in Ovid.

Not far from Rome, as we are told by Chorier, was a place formerly called “Ad Nymphas,” and, at this day, “Santa Ninfa,” which without doubt, he adds, in the language of our ancestors, would have been called “The Place of Fays” (*Recherches des Antiquitez, de Vienne*, Lyon, 1659).

The word *faée*, or *fée*, among the French, is derived, according to Du Cange, from the barbarous Latin *fadus* or *fada*, in Italian *fata*. Gervase of Tilbury, in his *Otia Imperialia* (D. 3, c. 88), speaks of “some of this kind of *larvæ*, which they named *fadæ*, we have heard to be lovers,” and in his relation of a nocturnal contest between two knights (c. 94) he exclaims, “What shall I say? I know not if it were a true *horse*, or if it were a fairy (*fadus*), as men assert.” From the *Roman de Partenay*, or *de Lezignan*, MS. Du Cange cites—

“Le chasteau fut fait d’une fée  
Si comme il est partout retrait.”  
Hence, he says, *faërie* for spectres:  
“Plusieurs parlant de Guenart,  
Du Lou, de l’Asne, et de Renart,  
De faëries, et de songes,  
De fantomes, et de mensonges.”

The same Gervase explains the Latin *fata* (*fée*,  
French) a divining woman, an enchantress, or a  
witch (D. 3, c. 88).

Master Wace, in his *Histoire des Ducs de Normandie*  
(confounded by many with the *Roman de Rou*), describing  
the fountain of Berenton, in Bretagne, says—

“En la forest et environ,  
Mais jo ne sais par quel raison  
La scut l’en les fées veir,  
Se li Breton nos dient veir, etc.”

(In the forest and around,  
I wot not by what reason found,  
There may a man the fairies spy,  
If Britons do not tell a lie.)

but it may be difficult to conceive an accurate idea, from  
the mere name, of the popular French *fays* or *fairies* of the  
twelfth century.

In Vienne, in Dauphiny, is *Le puit des fées*, or Fairy-well.  
These *fays*, it must be confessed, have a strong  
resemblance to the nymphs of the ancients, who inhabited  
caves and fountains. Upon a little rock which overlooks the  
Rhône are three round holes which nature alone has formed,  
although it seem, at first sight, that art has laboured after

her. They say that they were formerly frequented by Fays; that they were full of water when it rained; and that they there frequently took the pleasure of the bath; than which they had not one more charming (Chorier, *Recherches*, etc.).

Pomponius Mela, an eminent geographer, and, in point of time, far anterior to Pliny, relates, that beyond a mountain in Æthiopia, called by the Greeks the “High Mountain,” burning, he says, with perpetual fire, is a hill spread over a long tract by extended shores, whence they rather go to see wide plains than to behold [the habitations] of Pans and Satyrs. Hence, he adds, this opinion received faith, that, whereas, in these parts is nothing of culture, no seats of inhabitants, no footsteps—a waste solitude in the day, and a mere waste silence—frequent fires shine by night; and camps, as it were, are seen widely spread; cymbals and tympan sound; and sounding pipes are heard more than human (B. 3, c. 9). These invisible essences, however, are both anonymous and nondescript.

The *penates* of the Romans, according to honest Reginald Scot, were “the domesticall gods, or rather divels, that were said to make men live quietlie within doores. But some think that *Lares* are such as trouble private houses. *Larvæ* are said to be spirits that walk onelie by night. *Vinculi terrei* are such as was Robin Goodfellowe, that would supplie the office of servants, speciallie of maides, as to make a fier in the morning, sweepe the house, grind mustard and malt, drawe water, etc. These also rumble in houses, drawe latches, go up and down staiers,” etc. (*Discoverie of Witchcraft*, London, 1584, p. 521). A more modern writer says “The Latins have called the fairies *lares* and *larvæ*,



frequenting, as they say, houses, delighting in neatness, pinching the slut, and rewarding the good housewife with money in her shoe" (*Pleasaunt Treatise of Witches*, 1673, p. 53). This, however, is nothing but the character of an English fairy applied to the name of a Roman *lar* or *larva*. It might have been wished, too, that Scot, a man unquestionably of great learning, had referred, by name and work and book and chapter, to those ancient authors from whom he derived his information upon the Roman *penates*, etc.

What idea our Saxon ancestors had of the fairy which they called *ælf*, a word explained by Lye as equivalent to *lamia*, *larva*, *incubus*, *ephialtes*, we are utterly at a loss to conceive.

The nymphs, the satyrs, and the fauns, are frequently noticed by the old traditional historians of the north; particularly *Saxo-grammaticus*, who has a curious story of three nymphs of the forest, and Hother, King of Sweden and Denmark, being apparently the originals of the weird, or wizard, sisters of Macbeth (B. 3, p. 39). Others are preserved by Olaus Magnus, who says they had so deeply impressed into the earth, that the place they have been used to, having been (apparently) eaten up in a circular form with flagrant heat, never brings forth fresh grass from the dry turf. This nocturnal sport of monsters, he adds, the natives call The Dance of the Elves (B. 3, c. 10).

“In John Milesius any man may reade  
Of divels in Sarmatia honored,  
Call'd *Kottri*, or *Kibaldi*; such as wee  
Pugs and Hob-goblins call. Their dwellings bee

In corners of old houses least frequented,  
Or beneath stacks of wood: and these convented,  
Make fearfull noise in buttries and in dairies;  
Robin Goodfellowes some, some call them fairies.  
In solitarie roomes these uprores keepe,  
And beat at dores to wake men from their sleepe;  
Seeming to force locks, be they ne're so strong,  
And keeping Christmasse gambols all night long.  
Pots, glasses, trenchers, dishes, pannes, and  
kettles,  
They will make dance about the shelves and  
settles,  
As if about the kitchen tost and cast,  
Yet in the morning nothing found misplac't."

(Heywood's *Hierarchie of Angells*, 1635, fo. p. 574.)

Milton, a prodigious reader of romance, has,  
likewise, given an apt idea of the ancient fays—  
"Fairer than famed of old, or fabled since  
Of fairy damsels met in forest wide,  
By knights of Logres, and of Liones,  
Lancelot or Pelleas, or Pellenore."

These ladies, in fact, are by no means unfrequent in those fabulous, it must be confessed, but, at the same time, ingenious and entertaining histories; as, for instance, *Melusine*, or *Merlusine*, the heroine of a very ancient romance in French verse, and who was occasionally turned into a serpent; *Morgan-la-faée*, the reputed half-sister of King Arthur; and *the Lady of the Lake*, so

frequently noticed in Sir Thomas Malory's old history of that monarch.

Le Grand is of opinion that what is called Fairy comes to us from the Orientals, and that it is their *génies* which have produced our *fairies*; a species of nymphs, of an order superior to those women magicians, to whom they nevertheless gave the same name. In Asia, he says, where the women imprisoned in the harems, prove still, beyond the general servitude, a particular slavery, the romancers have imagined the *Peris*, who, flying in the air, come to soften their captivity, and render them happy (*Fabliaux*, 12mo. i. 112). Whether this be so or not, it is certain that we call the *auroræ boreales*, or active clouds, in the night, *perry-dancers*.

After all, Sir William Ouseley finds it impossible to give an accurate idea of what the Persian poets designed by a *Perie*, this aërial being not resembling our fairies. The strongest resemblance he can find is in the description of Milton in *Comus*. The sublime idea which Milton entertained of a fairy vision corresponds rather with that which the Persian poets have conceived of the *Peries*.

“Their port was more than human as they stood;  
I took it for a faëry vision  
Of some gay creatures of the element,  
That in the colours of the rainbow live  
And play i' th' plighted clouds.”

(D'Israeli's *Romances*, p. 13.)

It is by no means credible, however, that Milton had any knowledge of the Oriental *Peries*, though his

enthusiastic or poetical imagination might have easily peopled the air with spirits.

There are two sorts of *fays*, according to M. Le Grand. The one a species of nymphs or divinities; the other more properly called sorceresses, or women instructed in magic. From time immemorial, in the abbey of Poissy, founded by St. Lewis, they said every year a mass to preserve the nuns from the power of the *fays*. When the process of the Damsel of Orleans was made, the doctors demanded, for the first question, "If she had any knowledge of those who went to the Sabbath with the *fays*? or if she had not assisted at the assemblies held at the fountain of the *fays*, near Domprein, around which dance malignant spirits?" The Journal of Paris, under Charles VI. and Charles VII. pretends that she confessed that, at the age of twenty-seven years, she frequently went, in spite of her father and mother, to a fair fountain in the county of Lorraine, which she named the "Good Fountain to the Fays Our Lord" (*Ib.* p. 75).

Gervase of Tilbury, in his chapter "of Fauns and Satyrs," says,—“there are likewise others, whom the vulgar call *Follets*, who inhabit the houses of the simple rustics, and can be driven away neither by holy water, nor exorcisms; and because they are not seen, they afflict those, who are entering, with stones, billets, and domestic furniture, whose words for certain are heard in the human manner, and their forms do not appear” (*Otia imperialia*, D. i. c. 18). He is speaking of England.

This Follet seems to resemble Puck, or Robin Goodfellow, whose pranks were recorded in an old song and who was

sometimes useful, and sometimes mischievous. Whether or not he was the fairy-spirit of whom Milton

“Tells how the drudging goblin swet,  
To ern his cream-bowle duly set,  
When, in one night, ere glimpse of morn,  
His shadowy flail hath thresh’d the corn,  
That ten day-labourers could not end,  
Then lies him down, the lubbar fend;  
And stretch’d out all the chimney’s length,  
Basks at the fire his hairy strength;  
And crop-full out of dores he flings,  
Ere the first cock his matin rings.”

(*L’Allegro*).

is a matter of some difficulty. Perhaps the giant son of the witch, that had the devil’s mark about her (of whom “there is a pretty tale”), that was called *Lob-lye-by-the-fire*, was a very different personage from Robin Goodfellow, whom, however, he in some respects appears to resemble. A near female relation of the compiler, who was born and brought up in a small village in the bishopric of Durham, related to him many years ago, several circumstances which confirmed the exactitude of Milton’s description; she particularly told of his threshing the corn, churning the butter, drinking the milk, etc., and, when all was done, “lying before the fire like a great rough hurgin bear.”

In another chapter Gervase says—“As among men, nature produces certain wonderful things, so spirits, in airy bodies, who assume by divine permission the mocks they make. For, behold! England has certain dæmons (dæmons, I call them, though I know not, but I should say secret forms

of unknown generation), whom the French call *Neptunes*, the English *Portunes*. With these it is natural that they take advantage of the simplicity of fortunate peasants; and when, by reason of their domestic labours, they perform their nocturnal vigils, of a sudden, the doors being shut, they warm themselves at the fire, and eat little frogs, cast out of their bosoms and put upon the burning coals; with an antiquated countenance; a wrinkled face; diminutive in stature, not having [in length] half a thumb. They are clothed with rags patched together; and if anything should be to be carried on in the house, or any kind of laborious work to be done, they join themselves to the work, and expedite it with more than human facility. It is natural to these, that they may be obsequious, and may not be hurtful. But one little mode, as it were, they have of hurting. For when, among the ambiguous shades of night, the English occasionally ride alone, the *Portune*, sometimes, unseen, couples himself to the rider; and, when he has accompanied him, going on, a very long time, at length, the bridle being seized, he leads him up to the hand in the mud, in which while, infixed, he wallows, the *Portune*, departing, sets up a laugh; and so, in this kind of way, derides human simplicity" (*Otia imperialia*, D. 3, c. 61).

This spirit seems to have some resemblance to the *Picktree-brag*, a mischievous barguest that used to haunt that part of the country, in the shape of different animals, particularly of a little galloway; in which shape a farmer, still or lately living thereabout, reported that it had come to him one night as he was going home; that he got upon it, and

rode very quietly till it came to a great pond, to which it ran and threw him in, and went laughing away.

He further says there is, in England, a certain species of demons, which in their language they call *Grant*, like a one-year old foal, with straight legs, and sparkling eyes. This kind of demon very often appears in the streets, in the very heat of the day, or about sunset; and as often as it makes its appearance, portends that there is about to be a fire in that city or town. When, therefore, in the following day or night the danger is urgent, in the streets, running to and fro, it provokes the dogs to bark, and, while it pretends flight invites them, following, to pursue, in the vain hope of overtaking it. This kind of illusion provokes caution to the watchmen who have the custody of fire, and so the officious race of demons, while they terrify the beholders, are wont to secure the ignorant by their arrival (Gervase, D. 3, c. 62).

Gower, in his tale of Narcissus, professedly from Ovid, says—

“——As he cast his loke  
Into the well,—  
He sawe the like of his visage,  
And wende there were an ymage  
Of such a nympe, as tho was faye.”

(*Confessio amantis*, fo. 20, b.)

In his *Legend of Constance* is this passage:—

“Thy wife which is of fairie  
Of suche a childe delivered is,  
Fro kinde, whiche stante all amis.”

(*Ibid.* fo. 32, b.)

In another part of his book is a story “Howe the Kyng of Armenis daughter mette on a tyme a companie of the *fairy*.” These “ladies,” ride aside “on fayre [white] ambulende horses,” clad, very magnificently, but all alike, in white and blue, and wore “corownes on their heades;” but they are not called *fays* in the poem, nor does the word *fay* or *fairie* once occur therein.

The fairies or elves of the British isles are peculiar to this part of the world, and are not, so far as literary information or oral tradition enables us to judge, to be found in any other country. For this fact the authority of father Chaucer will be decisive, till we acquire evidence of equal antiquity in favour of other nations:—

“In olde dayes of the King Artour,  
Of which the Bretons speken gret honour,  
All was this lond fulfilled of faerie;  
The elf-quene, with hire joly compaignie,  
Danced ful oft in many a grene mede.  
This was the old opinion as I rede;  
I speke of many hundred yeres ago;  
But now can no man see non elves mo,  
For now the grete charitee and prayers  
Of limitoures and other holy freres,  
That serchen every land, and every streme,  
As thicke as motes in the sunnebeme,  
Blissing halles, chambres, kichenes, and boures,  
Citees and burghes, castles highe and toures,  
Thropes and bernes, shepenes and dairies,  
This maketh that ther ben no faeries.”



(*Wif of Bathes Tale.*)

The fairy may be defined as a species of being partly material, partly spiritual, with a power to change its appearance, and be, to mankind, visible or invisible, according to its pleasure. In the old song, printed by Peck, Robin Goodfellow, a well-known fairy, professes that he had played his pranks from the time of Merlin, who was the contemporary of Arthur.

Chaucer uses the word *faërie* as well for the *individual* as for the *country* or *system*, or what we should now call *fairy-land*, or *faryism*. He knew nothing, it would seem, of *Oberon*, *Titania*, or *Mab*, but speaks of—

“Pluto, that is the King of Faerie,  
And many a ladie in his compaignie,  
Folwing his wif, the quene Proserpina, etc.”

(*The Marchantes Tale*, i. 10101.)

From this passage of Chaucer Mr. Tyrwhitt “cannot help thinking that his *Pluto* and *Proserpina* were the true progenitors of *Oberon* and *Titania*.”

In the progress of *The Wif of Bathes Tale*, it happed the knight,

“——in his way ... to ride  
In all his care, under a forest side,  
Whereas he saw upon a dance go  
Of ladies foure-and-twenty, and yet mo.  
Toward this ilke dance, he drow ful yerne,  
In hope that he som wisdom shulde lerne,  
But, certainly, er he came fully there,  
Yvanished was this dance, he wiste not wher.”

These *ladies* appear to have been *fairies*, though nothing is insinuated of their size. Milton seems to have been upon the prowl here for his “forest-side.”

In *A Midsummer-Night’s Dream*, a fairy addresses Bottom the weaver—

“Hail, *mortal*, hail!”

which sufficiently shows she was not so herself.

Puck, or Robin Goodfellow, in the same play, calls Oberon,

“—King of *shadows*,”

and in the old song just mentioned,

“The King of *ghosts* and *shadows*,”

and this mighty monarch asserts of himself, and his subjects,

“But we are *spirits* of another sort.”

The fairies, as we already see, were male and female. Their government was monarchical, and Oberon, the King of Fairyland, must have been a sovereign of very extensive territory. The name of his queen was Titania. Both are mentioned by Shakespeare, being personages of no little importance in the above play, where they, in an ill-humour, thus encounter:

Obe. Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania.

What, jealous Oberon? Fairy, skip

Tita. hence;

I have forsworn his bed and company.

That the name [Oberon] was not the invention of our great dramatist is sufficiently proved. The allegorical