

***T. F. THISELTON-  
DYER***

A landscape photograph showing a wide valley with a winding river or path. The hills are covered in green grass, and the sky is filled with soft, grey clouds. The lighting is diffused, creating a calm and somewhat somber atmosphere.

***FOLK-LORE  
OF SHAKESPEARE***

**T. F. Thiselton-Dyer**

# **Folk-lore of Shakespeare**

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# **PREFACE.**

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IT would be difficult to overestimate the value which must be attached to the plays of Shakespeare in connection with the social life of the Elizabethan age. Possessed of a rich treasury of knowledge of a most varied kind, much of which he may be said to have picked up almost intuitively, he embellished his writings with a choice store of illustrations descriptive of the period in which he lived. Apart, too, from his copious references to the manners and customs of the time, he seems to have had not only a wide knowledge of many technical subjects, but also an intimate acquaintance with the folk-lore of bygone days. How far this was the case may be gathered from the following pages, in which are collected and grouped together, as far as arrangement would permit, the various subjects relating to this interesting and popular branch of our domestic history. It only remains for me to add that the edition of the poet's plays made use of is the "Globe," published by Messrs. Macmillan.

T.F. THISELTON DYER.

## **FOLK-LORE OF SHAKESPEARE.**

# CHAPTER I.

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## FAIRIES.

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THE wealth of Shakespeare's luxuriant imagination and glowing language seems to have been poured forth in the graphic accounts which he has given us of the fairy tribe. Indeed, the profusion of poetic imagery with which he has so richly clad his fairy characters is unrivalled, and the "Midsummer-Night's Dream" holds a unique position in so far as it contains the finest modern artistic realization of the fairy kingdom. Mr. Dowden, in his "Shakspeare Primer" (1877, pp. 71, 72) justly remarks: "As the two extremes of exquisite delicacy, of dainty elegance, and, on the other hand, of thick-witted grossness and clumsiness, stand the fairy tribe and the group of Athenian handicraftsmen. The world of the poet's dream includes the two—a Titania, and a Bottom the weaver—and can bring them into grotesque conjunction. No such fairy poetry existed anywhere in English literature before Shakspeare. The tiny elves, to whom a cowslip is tall, for whom the third part of a minute is an important division of time, have a miniature perfection which is charming. They delight in all beautiful and dainty things, and war with things that creep and things that fly, if they be uncomely; their lives are gay with fine frolic and delicate revelry." Puck, the jester of fairyland, stands apart from the rest, the recognizable "lob of spirits," a rough, "fawn-faced, shock-pated little fellow, dainty-limbed shapes

around him.” Judging, then, from the elaborate account which the poet has bequeathed us of the fairies, it is evident that the subject was one in which he took a special interest. Indeed, the graphic pictures he has handed down to us of

“Elves of hills, brooks, standing lakes and groves;  
And ye, that on the sands with printless foot,  
Do chase the ebbing Neptune, and do fly him  
When he comes back; you demy-puppets that  
By moonshine do the green-sour ringlets make  
Whereof the ewe not bites,” etc.,

show how intimately he was acquainted with the history of these little people, and what a complete knowledge he possessed of the superstitious fancies which had clustered round them. In Shakespeare’s day, too, it must be remembered, fairies were much in fashion; and, as Johnson remarks, common tradition had made them familiar. It has also been observed that, well acquainted, from the rural habits of his early life, with the notions of the peasantry respecting these beings, he saw that they were capable of being applied to a production of a species of the wonderful. Hence, as Mr. Halliwell-Phillipps<sup>[1]</sup> has so aptly written, “he founded his elfin world on the prettiest of the people’s traditions, and has clothed it in the ever-living flowers of his own exuberant fancy.” Referring to the fairy mythology in the “Midsummer-Night’s Dream,” it is described by Mr. Keightley<sup>[2]</sup> as an attempt to blend “the elves of the village with the fays of romance.” His fairies agree with the former in their diminutive stature—diminished, indeed, to dimensions inappreciable by village gossips—in their



fondness for dancing, their love of cleanliness, and their child-abstracting propensities. Like the fays, they form a community, ruled over by the princely Oberon and the fair Titania. There is a court and chivalry; Oberon would have the queen's sweet changeling to be a "knight of his train, to trace the forests wild." Like earthly monarchs, he has his jester, "that shrewd and knavish sprite called Robin Goodfellow."

Of the fairy characters treated by Shakespeare may be mentioned Oberon, king of fairyland, and Titania, his queen. They are represented as keeping rival courts in consequence of a quarrel, the cause of which is thus told by Puck ("Midsummer-Night's Dream," ii. 1):

"The king doth keep his revels here to-night:  
Take heed the queen come not within his sight;  
For Oberon is passing fell and wrath,  
Because that she as her attendant hath  
A lovely boy, stolen from an Indian king;  
She never had so sweet a changeling;  
And jealous Oberon would have the child  
Knight of his train, to trace the forests wild;  
But she perforce withholds the loved boy,  
Crowns him with flowers and makes him all her joy;  
And now they never meet in grove or green,  
By fountain clear, or spangled starlight sheen," etc.

Oberon first appears in the old French romance of "Huon de Bourdeaux," and is identical with Elberich, the dwarf king of the German story of Otuit in the "Heldenbuch." The name Elberich, or, as it appears in the "Nibelungenlied," Albrich,

was changed, in passing into French, first into Auberich, then into Auberon, and finally became our Oberon. He is introduced by Spenser in the "Fairy Queen" (book ii. cant. i. st. 6), where he describes Sir Guyon:

"Well could he tournay, and in lists debate,  
And knighthood tooke of good Sir Huon's hand,  
When with King Oberon he came to faery land."

And in the tenth canto of the same book (stanza 75) he is the allegorical representative of Henry VIII. The wise Elficleos left two sons,

"of which faire Elferon,  
The eldest brother, did untimely dy;  
Whose emptie place the mightie Oberon  
Doubly supplide, in spousall and dominion."

"Oboram, King of Fayeries," is one of the characters in Greene's "James the Fourth."[\[3\]](#)

The name Titania for the queen of the fairies appears to have been the invention of Shakespeare, for, as Mr. Ritson[\[4\]](#) remarks, she is not "so called by any other writer." Why, however, the poet designated her by this title, presents, according to Mr. Keightley,[\[5\]](#) no difficulty. "It was," he says, "the belief of those days that the fairies were the same as the classic nymphs, the attendants of Diana. The fairy queen was therefore the same as Diana, whom Ovid (Met. iii. 173) styles Titania." In Chaucer's "Merchant's Tale" Pluto is the king of faerie, and his queen, Proserpina, "who danced and sang about the well under the laurel in January's garden."[\[6\]](#)

In “Romeo and Juliet” (i. 4) she is known by the more familiar appellation, Queen Mab. “I dream’d a dream to-night,” says Romeo, whereupon Mercutio replies, in that well-known famous passage—

“O, then, I see Queen Mab hath been with you,”

this being the earliest instance in which Mab is used to designate the fairy queen. Mr. Thoms[\[7\]](#) thinks that the origin of this name is to be found in the Celtic, and that it contains a distinct allusion to the diminutive form of the elfin sovereign. *Mab*, both in Welsh and in the kindred dialects of Brittany, signifies a child or infant, and hence it is a befitting epithet to one who

“comes

In shape no bigger than an agate-stone

On the fore-finger of an alderman.”

Mr. Keightley suggests that Mab may be a contraction of Habundia, who, Heywood says, ruled over the fairies; and another derivation is from Mabel, of which Mab is an abbreviation.

Among the references to Queen Mab we may mention Drayton’s “Nymphidia:”

“Hence Oberon, him sport to make

(Their rest when weary mortals take,

And none but only fairies wake),

Descendeth for his pleasure:

And Mab, his merry queen, by night

Bestrides young folks that lie upright,” etc.

Ben Jonson, in his "Entertainment of the Queen and Prince at Althrobe," in 1603, describes as "tripping up the lawn a bevy of fairies, attending on Mab, their queen, who, falling into an artificial ring that there was cut in the path, began to dance around." In the same masque the queen is thus characterized by a satyr.

"This is Mab, the mistress fairy,  
That doth nightly rob the dairy,  
And can help or hurt the churning  
As she please, without discerning," etc.

Like Puck, Shakespeare has invested Queen Mab with mischievous properties, which "identify her with the night hag of popular superstition," and she is represented as

"Platting the manes of horses in the night."

The merry Puck, who is so prominent an actor in "A Midsummer-Night's Dream," is the mischief-loving sprite, the jester of the fairy court, whose characteristics are roguery and sportiveness. In his description of him, Shakespeare, as Mr. Thoms points out, "has embodied almost every attribute with which the imagination of the people has invested the fairy race; and has neither omitted one trait necessary to give brilliancy and distinctness to the likeness, nor sought to heighten its effect by the slightest exaggeration. For, carefully and elaborately as he has finished the picture, he has not in it invested the 'lob of spirits' with one gift or quality which the popular voice of the age was not unanimous in bestowing upon him." Thus (ii. 1) the fairy says:

“Either I mistake your shape and making quite,  
Or else you are that shrewd and knavish sprite,  
Call’d Robin Goodfellow: are you not he  
That frights the maidens of the villagery;  
Skim milk; and sometimes labour in the quern,  
And bootless make the breathless housewife churn;  
And sometime make the drink to bear no barm;  
Mislead night-wanderers, laughing at their harm?  
Those that Hobgoblin call you, and sweet Puck,  
You do their work, and they shall have good luck:  
Are not you he?”

The name “Puck” was formerly applied to the whole race of fairies, and not to any individual sprite—*puck*, or *pouke*, being an old word for devil, in which sense it is used in the “Vision of Piers Plowman:”

“Out of the poukes pondfold  
No maynprise may us fecche.”

The Icelandic *puki* is the same word, and in Friesland and Jutland the domestic spirit is called Puk by the peasantry. In Devonshire, Piskey is the name for a fairy, with which we may compare the Cornish Pixey. In Worcestershire, too, we read how the peasantry are occasionally “poake-ledden,” that is, misled by a mischievous spirit called *poake*. And, according to Grose’s “Provincial Glossary,” in Hampshire they give the name of Colt-pixey to a supposed spirit or fairy, which, in the shape of a horse, neighs, and misleads horses into bogs. The Irish, again, have their Pooka,[\[8\]](#) and the Welsh their Pwcca—both words derived from Pouke or

Puck. Mr. Keightley[9] thinks, also, that the Scottish *pawkey*, sly, knowing, may belong to the same list of words. It is evident, then, that the term Puck was in bygone years extensively applied to the fairy race, an appellation still found in the west of England. Referring to its use in Wales, “there is a Welsh tradition to the effect that Shakespeare received his knowledge of the Cambrian fairies from his friend Richard Price, son of Sir John Price, of the Priory of Brecon.” It is even claimed that Cwm Pwcca, or Puck Valley, a part of the romantic glen of the Clydach, in Breconshire, is the original scene of the “Midsummer-Night’s Dream.”[10]

Another of Puck’s names was Robin Goodfellow, and one of the most valuable illustrations we have of the “Midsummer-Night’s Dream” is a black-letter tract published in London, 1628, under the title of “Robin Goodfellow: His Mad Pranks, and Merry Jests, full of honest mirth, and is a fit medicine for melancholy.”[11] Mr. Halliwell-Phillipps,[12] speaking of Robin Goodfellow, says, “there can be no doubt that in the time of Shakespeare the fairies held a more prominent position in our popular literature than can be now concluded from the pieces on the subject that have descended to us.” The author of “Tarlton’s News out of Purgatory,” printed in 1590, assures us that Robin Goodfellow was “famosed in every old wives chronicle for his mad merry pranks;” and we learn from “Henslowe’s Diary” that Chettle was the writer of a drama on the adventures of that “merry wanderer of the night.” These have disappeared; and time has dealt so harshly with the memory of poor Robin that we might almost imagine his spirit was still leading us astray over massive volumes of

antiquity, in a delusive search after documents forever lost; or, rather, perhaps, it is his punishment for the useless journeys he has given our ancestors, misleading night-wanderers, “and laughing at their harm.”[\[13\]](#) He is mentioned by Drayton in his “Nymphidia:”

“He meeteth Puck, which most men call  
Hob-goblin, and on him doth fall,” etc.,

“hob being the familiar or diminutive form of Robert and Robin, so that Hobgoblin is equivalent to Robin the Goblin. *i.e.*, Robin Goodfellow.”[\[14\]](#) Burton, in his “Anatomy of Melancholy,” alludes to him thus: “A bigger kinde there is of them, called with us hobgoblins and Robin Goodfellows, that would, in superstitious times, grinde corne for a mess of milk, cut wood, or do any manner of drudgery work.” Under his name of Robin Goodfellow, Puck is well characterized in Jonson’s masque of “Love Restored.”[\[15\]](#)

Another epithet applied to Puck is “Lob,” as in the “Midsummer-Night’s Dream” (ii. 1), where he is addressed by the fairy as

“Thou lob of spirits.”[\[16\]](#)

With this we may compare the “lubber-fiend” of Milton, and the following in Beaumont and Fletcher’s “Knight of the Burning Pestle” (iii. 4): “There is a pretty tale of a witch that had the devil’s mark about her, that had a giant to be her son, that was called Lob-lye-by-the-Fire.” Grimm[\[17\]](#) mentions a spirit, named the “Good Lubber,” to whom the bones of animals used to be offered at Mansfeld, in Germany. Once more, the phrase of “being in,” or “getting into Lob’s

pound,” is easy of explanation, presuming Lob to be a fairy epithet—the term being equivalent to Poake-ledden or Pixyled.<sup>[18]</sup> In “Hudibras” this term is employed as a name for the stocks in which the knight puts Crowdero:

“Crowdero, whom in irons bound,  
Thou basely threw’st into *Lob’s pound*.”

It occurs, also, in Massinger’s “Duke of Milan” (iii. 2), where it means “behind the arras:”

“Who forc’d the gentleman, to save her credit,  
To marry her, and say he was the party  
Found in Lob’s pound.”

The allusion by Shakespeare to the “Will-o’-the-Wisp,” where he speaks of Puck as “sometime a fire,” is noticed elsewhere, this being one of the forms under which this fairy was supposed to play his midnight pranks.

Referring, in the next place, to the several names of Shakespeare’s fairies, we may quote from “The Merry Wives of Windsor” (iv. 3), where Mrs. Page speaks of “urchins, ouches, and fairies”—urchin having been an appellation for one class of fairies. In the “Maydes’ Metamorphosis” of Lyly (1600), we find fairies, elves, and urchins separately accommodated with dances for their use. The following is the *urchin’s* dance:

“By the moone we sport and play,  
With the night begins our day;  
As we frisk the dew doth fall,  
Trip it, little urchins all,



Lightly as the little bee,  
Two by two, and three by three,  
And about goe wee, goe wee."

In "The Tempest" (i. 2) their actions are also limited to the night:

"Urchins  
Shall, for that vast of night that they may work,  
All exercise on thee."

The children employed to torment Falstaff, in "The Merry Wives of Windsor" (iv. 4), were to be dressed in these fairy shapes.

Mr. Douce regards the word *urchin*, when used to designate a fairy, as of Celtic origin, with which view Mr. Thoms<sup>[19]</sup> compares the *urisks* of Highland fairies.

The term *ouphe*, according to Grimm, is only another form of the cognate *elf*, which corresponds with the Middle High-German *ulf*, in the plural *ulve*. He further proves the identity of this *ulf* with *alp*, and with our English *elf*, from a Swedish song published by Asdwiddson, in his "Collection of Swedish Ballads," in one version of which the elfin king is called Herr *Elfver*, and in the second Herr *Ulfver*.

The name *elf*, which is frequently used by Shakespeare, is the same as the Anglo-Saxon *alf*, the Old High-German and the Middle High-German *ulf*. "Fairies and elvs," says Tollet, "are frequently mentioned together in the poets without any distinction of character that I can recollect."

The other fairies, Peas-blossom, Cobweb, Moth, and Mustard-seed probably owe their appellations to the poet

himself.

How fully Shakespeare has described the characteristics of the fairy tribe, besides giving a detailed account of their habits and doings, may be gathered from the following pages, in which we have briefly enumerated the various items of fairy lore as scattered through the poet's writings.

Beauty, then, united with power, was one of the popular characteristics of the fairy tribe. Such was that of the "Fairy Queen" of Spenser, and of Titania in "A Midsummer-Night's Dream." In "Antony and Cleopatra" (iv. 8), Antony, on seeing Cleopatra enter, says to Scarus:

"To this great fairy I'll commend thy acts,  
Make her thanks bless thee."

In "Cymbeline" (iii. 6), when the two brothers find Imogen in their cave, Belarius exclaims:

"But that it eats our victuals, I should think  
Here were a fairy."[\[20\]](#)

And he then adds:

"By Jupiter, an angel! or, if not,  
An earthly paragon! behold divineness  
No elder than a boy."

The fairies, as represented in many of our old legends and folk-tales, are generally noticeable for their beauty, the same being the case with all their surroundings. As Sir Walter Scott,[\[21\]](#) too, says, "Their pageants and court entertainments comprehended all that the imagination

could conceive of what were accounted gallant and splendid. At their processions they paraded more beautiful steeds than those of mere earthly parentage. The hawks and hounds which they employed in their chase were of the first race. At their daily banquets, the board was set forth with a splendor which the proudest kings of the earth dared not aspire to, and the hall of their dancers echoed to the most exquisite music.”

Mr. Douce[22] quotes from the romance of “Lancelot of the Lake,” where the author, speaking of the days of King Arthur, says, “En celui temps estoient appelees faees toutes selles qui sentre-mettoient denchantemens et de charmes, et moult en estoit pour lors principalement en la Grande Bretagne, et savoient la force et la vertu des paroles, des pierres, et des herbes, parquoy elles estoient tenues et jeunesse et en beaulte, et en grandes richesses comme elles devoient.”

“This perpetual youth and beauty,” he adds, “cannot well be separated from a state of immortality;” another characteristic ascribed to the fairy race. It is probably alluded to by Titania in “A Midsummer-Night’s Dream” (ii. 1):

“The human mortals want their winter here.”

And further on (ii. 1), when speaking of the changeling’s mother, she says:

“But she, being mortal, of that boy did die.”

Again, a fairy addresses Bottom the weaver (iii. 1)—

“Hail, mortal!”

—an indication that she was not so herself. The very fact, indeed, that fairies “call themselves *spirits*, ghosts, or shadows, seems to be a proof of their immortality.” Thus Puck styles Oberon “king of shadows,” and this monarch asserts of himself and his subjects—

“But we are spirits of another sort.”

Fletcher, in the “Faithful Shepherdess,” describes (i. 2)—

“A virtuous well, about whose flow’ry banks  
The nimble-footed fairies dance their rounds,  
By the pale moonshine, dipping oftentimes  
Their stolen children, so to make them free  
From dying flesh, and dull mortality.”

Ariosto, in his “Orlando Furioso” (book xliii. stanza 98) says:

“I am a fayrie, and to make you know,  
To be a fayrie what it doth import,  
We cannot dye, how old so e’er we grow.  
Of paines and harmes of ev’rie other sort  
We taste, onelie no death we nature ow.”

An important feature of the fairy race was their power of vanishing at will, and of assuming various forms. In “A Midsummer-Night’s Dream” Oberon says:

“I am invisible,  
And I will overhear their conference.”

Puck relates how he was in the habit of taking all kinds of outlandish forms; and in the "Tempest," Shakespeare has bequeathed to us a graphic account of Ariel's eccentricities. "Besides," says Mr. Spalding,[\[23\]](#) "appearing in his natural shape, and dividing into flames, and behaving in such a manner as to cause young Ferdinand to leap into the sea, crying, 'Hell is empty, and all the devils are here!' he assumes the forms of a water nymph (i. 2), a harpy (iii. 3), and also the Goddess Ceres (iv. 1), while the strange shapes, masquers, and even the hounds that hunt and worry the would-be king and viceroys of the island, are Ariel's 'meaner fellows.'" Poor Caliban complains of Prospero's spirits (ii. 2):

"For every trifle are they set upon me;  
Sometimes like apes, that mow and chatter at me,  
And after bite me: then like hedgehogs which  
Lie tumbling in my bare-foot way, and mount  
Their pricks at my footfall; sometime am I  
All wound with adders, who, with cloven tongues  
Do hiss me into madness."

That fairies are sometimes exceedingly diminutive is fully shown by Shakespeare, who gives several instances of this peculiarity. Thus Queen Mab, in "Romeo and Juliet," to which passage we have already had occasion to allude (i. 4), is said to come

"In shape no bigger than an agate stone  
On the fore-finger of an alderman."[\[24\]](#)

And Puck tells us, in “A Midsummer-Night’s Dream” (ii. 1), that when Oberon and Titania meet,

“they do square, that all their elves, for fear,  
Creep into acorn cups, and hide them there.”

Further on (ii. 3) the duties imposed by Titania upon her train point to their tiny character:

“Come, now a roundel and a fairy song;  
Then, for the third part of a minute, hence;  
Some to kill cankers in the musk-rose buds,  
Some war with rere-mice for their leathern wings,  
To make my small elves coats.”

And when enamoured of Bottom, she directs her elves that they should—

“Hop in his walks and gambol in his eyes;  
Feed him with apricocks and dewberries,  
With purple grapes, green figs, and mulberries;  
The honey bags steal from the humble-bees,  
And for night tapers crop their waxen thighs  
And light them at the fiery glow-worm’s eyes,  
To have my love to bed, and to arise;  
And pluck the wings from painted butterflies  
To fan the moonbeams from his sleeping eyes.”

We may compare, too, Ariel’s well-known song in “The Tempest” (v. 1):

“Where the bee sucks, there suck I:  
In a cowslip’s bell I lie;  
There I couch when owls do cry,  
On the bat’s back I do fly  
After summer merrily,  
Merrily, merrily shall I live now  
Under the blossom that hangs on the bough.”

Again, from the following passage in “The Merry Wives of Windsor” (iv. 4) where Mrs. Page, after conferring with her husband, suggests that—

“Nan Page my daughter, and my little son,  
And three or four more of their growth, we’ll dress  
Like urchins, ouphes, and fairies, green and white,  
With rounds of waxen tapers on their heads,  
And rattles in their hands”

it is evident that in Shakespeare's day fairies were supposed to be of the size of children. The notion of their diminutiveness, too, it appears was not confined to this country,[\[25\]](#) but existed in Denmark,[\[26\]](#) for in the ballad of "Eline of Villenskov" we read:

"Out then spake the smallest Trolld;  
No bigger than an ant;—  
Oh! here is come a Christian man,  
His schemes I'll sure prevent."

Again, various stories are current in Germany descriptive of the fairy dwarfs; one of the most noted being that relating to Elberich, who aided the Emperor Otho to gain the daughter of the Paynim Soldan of Syria.[\[27\]](#)

The haunt of the fairies on earth are generally supposed to be the most romantic and rural that can be selected; such a spot being the place of Titania's repose described by Oberon in "A Midsummer-Night's Dream" (ii. 1):[\[28\]](#)

"a bank where the wild thyme blows,  
Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows,  
Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine,  
With sweet musk-roses and with eglantine:  
There sleeps Titania some time of the night,  
Lull'd in these flowers with dances and delight;  
And there the snake throws her enamell'd skin,  
Weed wide enough to wrap a fairy in."

Titania also tells how the fairy race meet



“on hill, in dale, forest, or mead,  
By paved fountain, or by rushy brook,  
Or in the beached margent of the sea.”

In “The Tempest” (v. 1), we have the following beautiful invocation by Prospero:

“Ye elves of hills, brooks, standing lakes, and groves;  
And ye, that on the sands with printless foot  
Do chase the ebbing Neptune, and do fly him  
When he comes back—”

Their haunts, however, varied in different localities, but their favorite abode was in the interior of conical green hills, on the slopes of which they danced by moonlight. Milton, in the “Paradise Lost” (book i.), speaks of

“fairy elves,  
Whose midnight revels, by a forest side  
Or fountain, some belated peasant sees,  
Or dreams he sees, while overhead the moon  
Sits arbitress, and nearer to the earth  
Wheels her pale course, they, on their mirth and  
dance  
Intent, with jocund music charm his ear;  
At once with joy and fear his heart rebounds.”

The Irish fairies occasionally inhabited the ancient burial-places known as tumuli or barrows, while some of the Scottish fairies took up their abode under the “door-stane” or threshold of some particular house, to the inmates of which they administered good offices.[\[29\]](#)

The so-called fairy-rings in old pastures[30]—little circles of a brighter green, within which it was supposed the fairies dance by night—are now known to result from the outspreading propagation of a particular mushroom, the fairy-ringed fungus, by which the ground is manured for a richer following vegetation. An immense deal of legendary lore, however, has clustered round this curious phenomenon, popular superstition attributing it to the merry roundelays of the moonlight fairies.[31] In “The Tempest” (v. 1) Prospero invokes the fairies as the “demy-puppets” that

“By moonshine do the green-sour ringlets make,  
Whereof the ewe not bites; and you, whose pastime  
Is to make midnight-mushrooms.”

In “A Midsummer-Night’s Dream” (ii. 1), the fairy says:

“I do wander everywhere,  
Swifter than the moon’s sphere;  
And I serve the fairy queen,  
To dew her orbs upon the green.”

Again, in the “Merry Wives of Windsor” (v. 5), Anne Page says:

“And nightly, meadow-fairies, look, you sing  
Like to the Garter’s compass, in a ring;  
The expressure that it bears, green let it be,  
More fertile-fresh than all the field to see.”

And once in “Macbeth” (v. 1), Hecate says:

“Like elves and fairies in a ring.”

Drayton, in his “Nymphidia” (l. 69-72), mentions this superstition:

“And in their courses make that round,  
In meadows and in marshes found,  
Of them so called the fayrie ground,  
Of which they have the keeping.”

Cowley, too, in his “Complaint,” says:

“Where once such fairies dance, no grass does ever  
grow.”

And again, in his ode upon Dr. Harvey:

“And dance, like fairies, a fantastic round.”

Pluquet, in his “Contes Populaires de Bayeux,” tells us that the fairy rings, called by the peasants of Normandy “Cercles des fées,” are said to be the work of fairies.

Among the numerous superstitions which have clustered round the fairy rings, we are told that when damsels of old gathered the May dew on the grass, which they made use of to improve their complexions, they left undisturbed such of it as they perceived on the fairy-rings, apprehensive that the fairies should in revenge destroy their beauty. Nor was it considered safe to put the foot within the rings, lest they should be liable to the fairies’ power.[\[32\]](#) The “Athenian Oracle” (i. 397) mentions a popular belief that “if a house be

built upon the ground where fairy rings are, whoever shall inhabit therein does wonderfully prosper.”

Speaking of their dress, we are told that they constantly wore green vests, unless they had some reason for changing their attire. In the “Merry Wives of Windsor” (iv. 4) they are spoken of as—

“Urchins, ouches, and fairies, green and white.”

And further on (v. 4):

“Fairies, black, grey, green, and white.”

The fairies of the moors were often clad in heath-brown or lichen-dyed garments, whence the epithet of “Elfin-grey.”[\[33\]](#)

The legends of most countries are unanimous in ascribing to the fairies an inordinate love of music; such harmonious sounds as those which Caliban depicts in “The Tempest” (iii. 2) being generally ascribed to them:

“The isle is full of noises,  
Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt  
not.  
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments  
Will hum about mine ears, and sometime voices  
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,  
Will make me sleep again.”

In the “Midsummer-Night’s Dream” (ii. 3), when Titania is desirous of taking a nap, she says to her attendants:

“Come, now a roundel, and a fairy song.”

And further on (iii. 1) she tells Bottom:

“I’ll give thee fairies to attend on thee,  
And they shall fetch thee jewels from the deep,  
And sing, while thou on pressed flowers dost sleep.”

The author of “Round About our Coal Fire”[\[34\]](#) tells us that “they had fine musick always among themselves, and danced in a moonshiny night, around, or in, a ring.”

They were equally fond of dancing, and we are told how they meet—

“To dance their ringlets to the whistling wind;”

and in the “Maydes’ Metamorphosis” of Lyly, the fairies, as they dance, sing:

“Round about, round about, in a fine ring a,  
Thus we dance, thus we dance, and thus we sing a,  
Trip and go, to and fro, over this green a,  
All about, in and out, for our brave queen a,” etc.

As Mr. Thoms says, in his “Three Notelets on Shakespeare” (1865, pp. 40, 41), “the writings of Shakespeare abound in graphic notices of these fairy revels, couched in the highest strains of poetry; and a comparison of these with some of the popular legends which the industry of Continental antiquaries has preserved will show us clearly that these delightful sketches of elfin enjoyment have been drawn by a hand as faithful as it is masterly.”

It would seem that the fairies disliked irreligious people: and so, in “Merry Wives of Windsor” (v. 5), the mock fairies are said to chastise unchaste persons, and those who do not say their prayers. This coincides with what Lilly, in his “Life and Times,” says: “Fairies love a strict diet and upright life; fervent prayers unto God conduce much to the assistance of those who are curious hereways,” *i.e.*, who wish to cultivate an acquaintance with them.

Again, fairies are generally represented as great lovers and patrons of cleanliness and propriety, for the observance of which they were frequently said to reward good servants, by dropping money into their shoes in the night; and, on the other hand, they were reported to punish most severely the sluts and slovenly, by pinching them black and blue.[\[35\]](#) Thus, in “A Midsummer-Night’s Dream” (v. 1), Puck says:

“I am sent, with broom, before,  
To sweep the dust behind the door.”

In “Merry Wives of Windsor” (v. 5), Pistol, speaking of the mock fairy queen, says:

“Our radiant queen hates sluts and sluttery;”

and the fairies who haunt the towers of Windsor are enjoined:

“About, about,  
Search Windsor Castle, elves, within and out:  
Strew good luck, oushes, on every sacred room:

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