Not Entirely Flattering: Revealing Mr Simonelli's Fairy Nature

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Susanna Clarke's first follow-up to hugely successful *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* (2004, hereafter *JSMN*) was a lavishly illustrated volume of short stories, some of which intertwined with the world of her novel. *The Ladies of Grace Adieu and other stories* (2006, hereafter *LGA*) collected mostly previously published stories, illustrated by Charles Vess. The tale 'Mr Simonelli, or the Fairy Widower' first appeared in *Black Heart, Ivory Bones* (2000) and features characters mentioned in the later novel, paving the way for the expanding scope of Clarke's rich alternate history of an enchanted Britain and the other lands which shared its surprisingly porous borders, including—but not limited to—Faerie.

In the course of the story the titular figure transforms from an arrogant Cambridge scholar to agonized suitor and finally to a true fairy. Simonelli is persuaded to leave an enviable position at the college when an attractive country living as a rector becomes available, only to find he has been tricked into accepting a poor parish in the rustic borderlands. While the family history supplied by the fairy John Hollyshoes upon his arrival in Allhope reveals the truth of their shared fairy inheritance, Simonelli discovers that he has unwittingly been performing as fairy all along as if performativity were akin to invoking a charm. The rituals to make one's way in polite society may not be so different from magic: we perform what we wish to be.

What Simonelli considered to be a peculiarity of temperament, fueled by his recognition of class difference within the hallowed halls of Cambridge and his own discomfort about his illegitimacy, turns out instead to be part of his non-human nature. Is his performance as human or fairy more convincing? Which is 'truer'? Almost nothing in the story is what it seems to be at first, but when the truth is uncovered, it is Simonelli's turn to tell lies, half-truths and misdirect others. In the Butlerian sense, he seizes 'the reiterative power of discourse' to sway the narrative and characters to his will (1993 xii).

However, revelation of his 'true' nature does not entirely switch his orientation nor his loyalties from the human to the fairy. He works to save human women from the predations of his relation

Hollyshoes—even going so far in later years, we are told, to work for the education of women generally, as well as for the improvement of fairy morals—a sharp contrast to his earlier dismissive misogyny. Finding himself unstable between categories in time and social space, Simonelli has to forge a new path. As Sara Ahmed argues, 'If orientations point us to the future, to what we are moving toward, then they also keep open the possibility of changing directions, of finding other paths' (2006: 178). Akin to the queering Ahmed locates within these 'possibilities' Simonelli's 'departure from the straight and narrow' allows him to learn that his body encompasses much more than he had thought (human *and* fairy) and uses that knowledge to alter his situation. Perhaps fairy orientation need *not* live up to Mr Norrell's dismissal of the 'race' as 'poisonous' and 'inimical to England' and all human life (57). Perhaps there is not only benefit from the fairy Other, but it may be as much a part of England as the humans it faces.

As Simonelli discovers, the fairy body is multivalent. It has the combination of familiarity and strangeness that disrupts the usual process of encountering the stranger, much like the queer body as Ahmed describes it. As will become clear in Simonelli's case—and in his initial encounter with the fairy John Hollyshoes—the queerness of the fairy body initially provokes a feeling of discomfort and difference. As Ahmed argues, 'Discomfort is not simply a choice or …but an effect of bodies inhabiting spaces that do not take or 'extend' their shape', however given the fluidity of the fairy identity—particularly if one can take up fairy magic when one is not fairy (Norrell) or not yet recognised as fairy (Simonelli)—the stranger might be able to comfortably take up a position within the community and not be seen as stranger. 'Bodies that can move with more ease may also more easily shape and be shaped by the sign "queer"' as Ahmed says, but the reverse can also be true (2014: 152). The particular abilities of the fairy allow that strangeness to be glimpsed, acknowledged and then redefined as a new kind of authenticity and with a sense of belonging, as the exchange between Hollyshoes and Simonelli regarding the 'foreignness' of his father demonstrates:

> 'Oh that is easily explained…For though we have lived in this island a very long time—many thousands of years longer than its other inhabitants [e.g. the English]—yet still we hold ourselves apart and pride ourselves on being of quite other blood' (137).

Simonelli mistakes him, asking whether they are Jews, as this is the only people he knows of who live in Britain and are yet not part of Britain (the long-standing history of Britsih anti-Semitism is surely known to the Cambridge scholar). Despite misunderstanding one another in regard to what Hollyshoes means to say, Simonelli has recognised the queerness of the fairy body though he—like Hollyshoes in many situations—is able to perform in a human enough way to fit comfortably within many human spaces. A fairy can pass as human in many circumstances, particularly with the advantage of a longer life to observe and mimic human culture.

What is it to be fairy? It clearly involves a certain amount of performance. As the scholarly footnotes in *JSMN* explain, 'Many English men and women think that we are surrounded by fairies every day of our lives. Some are invisible and some masquerade as Christians and may in fact be known to us. Scholars have debated the matter for centuries but without reaching any conclusion' (57n4). In *LGA* the fictional professor of *Sidhe* Studies, James Sutherland of Aberdeen, suggests that in his account of his adventures Simonelli 'at every turn displays the conceit and arrogance of his race' but rather than attributing it to his fairy nature, the Scot clarifies that he means the English (2). English and fairy nature can be easily confused. The stories of this collection are presented by Sutherland for the readers' edification on the subject nonetheless, for 'it is through stories such as these that the serious student of *Sidhe* culture may make a window for herself into Faerie and snatch a glimpse of its complexity, its contradictions and its perilous fascinations' (2).

As in *JSMN* the variety of faerie experiences show that their nation lies both within and without England and that they are sometimes visible and sometimes not. They can masquerade as 'Christians'—the designation generally used to indicate human regardless of belief—but also the reverse. While Simonelli takes advantage of his own indeterminate nature to act as he has seen one fairy do, in *JSMN* Jonathan Strange is able to learn from faerie behaviour and reproduce faerie magic by intuition alone it is beyond the scope of this essay to investigate the question of whether Jonathan Strange's mother might have had some connection to faerie lands that gave him the ability to do magic as 'a sensation like music playing at the back of one's head' (233), though the prejudice against faerie folk might explain the bitterness of Strange's widowed father toward their son.

What performative fairy qualities does Simonelli demonstrate? Vision, charm, arrogance and masquerade: though they often overlap, I will attempt to deal with each in turn.

Vision

From the very start, Simonelli demonstrates a keen, almost brutal ability to see through the surface of situations to get to their very heart. This penetrating insight has an uncanny edge, which results in alienating his colleagues in Cambridge. 'I have no money, no prospects of advancement and no friends to help me' (114). An unenviable position, but he is quick to evolve a plan: matrimony. A bookseller's widow he knows to be 'quite desperately in love' with him, who also has a fortune of fifteen thousand pounds seems to offer a way out of his current situation. The scholar sighs at such a prospect, but needs must.

An enemy offers a second avenue: to become the rector of a small country parish. Simonelli is penetrating enough to see that Dr Prothero has an ulterior motive. His only mistake is to assume that the motive is steering a nephew into his position at Corpus Christi, 'Yet it would be wrong, I think, to refuse such an opportunity merely for the sake of spiting him' (115). Of course, his rival is even more devious than he supposed, for instead of a snug country parish for a gentleman scholar, Allhope turns out to be in that liminal part of England where nature reminds the English that they are not native to the land.

> Allhope appeared very wild and almost uninhabited. There were steep, wooded valleys, rivers of white spurting water, outcrops of barren rock surmounted by withered oaks, bleak windswept moorland…it spoke very eloquently of extreme seclusion and scarce society characterized by ignorant minds and uncouth manners. (116)

In Clarke's Britain, this is exactly the land where we expect to encounter fairy, 'the most retired parts of England and Scotland and Ireland (where magic was strongest)' (2004: 6), thus fairies have names that link them to nature such as Hollyshoes and Fairwood. While one might expect Simonelli to be dispirited by the bleak landscape and tedious journey, his eyes are sharp. When he comes upon three people talking, he is quick to notice the quality of the horses two ride despite his lack of knowledge about equestrian matters. Beyond the confirmation of the steeds, what Simonelli chiefly notices is something beyond human vision (though he does not immediate realise that): 'The chestnut, in particular, appeared to be the only bright thing in the whole of Derbyshire; it glowed like a bonfire in the grey, rainy air (116). He notices one of the riders make a singular

gesture above the head of the ‘old bent man’ he addresses and astutely attaches importance to it. Though ignorant of its meaning, he goes to the trouble of making ‘a sort of diagram or drawing to shew precisely’ the nature of the sign (117). This will of course be useful to him in time.

Discovering that the riders seek medical help for a birth, Simonelli offers himself as an expert though his ‘experience’ consists only? of a lively correspondence with the renowned Matthew Baillie of Great-Windmill Street. Several further clues reveal the fairy nature of his new acquaintances: while the Reverend catalogues the details, he does not yet draw conclusions. The men are both ‘amazingly dirty’ (119); the horse he rides despite never having mounted one before carries him at ‘Godlike speed’ through ‘ancient woods of oak and ash and holly’ past ‘a ruined chapel’ to ‘a very ancient-looking place…in a state of the utmost neglect’ (121). Surprised that his guest is not taken in by the glamours cast to make the house look opulent, Hollyshoes exclaims, ‘What excellent eyesight you must have, Mr Simonelli!’ (125)

When they usher Simonelli in to see the labouring mother, he finds himself appalled at the squalor surrounding her, from the elderly attendant with ‘long coarse hairs’ growing from her cheeks that ‘resembled nothing so much in the world as porcupine quills’ to the bedclothes ‘crawling with vermin of all sorts’ and even more; he is surprised that this was a grime which yet was not poverty, though ‘a most extraordinary muddle’ and ‘an extraordinary blending of magnificence and filth’ (122), a phenomenon that appears often in Clarke’s fairy worlds akin to many Midwife to the fairies tales (ML 5070: see for example Haase 301). The strangeness of the child’s appearance he attributes to medical causes, using logic and not yet insight. Only later does he fit together all the strangenesses of Hollyshoes’ house: it adds up to faerie.

Over and over Simonelli’s vision turns to the beautiful charms of nature. By default the mysteries and wonder of nature draw his eye and his imagination. His first daylight view of the Rectory focuses on its natural charms. ‘A silvery rain like smoke blew across the churchyard. A dozen crows in their clerical dress of decent black were idling among the graves. They rose up to flap about me as I came down the lane like a host of winged curates all ready to do my bidding’ (132). One cannot help wondering if the orthodoxy of the church would find itself in harmony with this fanciful magic in the very kirk yard. Even the beauty of the Gathercole sisters cannot mar his

appreciation of the landscape the eldest dismisses as dull, instead calling it, 'the sweetest, most tranquil prospect imaginable; woods, hills, moors and streams' (133).

When he seeks out the stolen Dido (a potent name for a woman held against her will, evoking the Greek queen who fled tyranny to found her own city) Simonelli is able to charm Hollyshoes' chief servant Dando and to see the truth of the situation in which Dido is kept, shackled by an iron bar, manacles and rusty chains (145) though she sees only 'this golden chair set with diamonds and pearls' (146). He unwittingly shares his clear vision with her when 'without thinking' he cleans blood from her left eye with a bit of his spittle, a potent substance in many an indigenous ritual practice (Best 1976 337-9), though probably best known to mainstream audiences from the fairy ointment stories which preserve the practice. This fairy ointment allows the human to see the fairies, and the 'true' nature of the birth chamber. Simonelli does not need the ointment for his vision is bivalent, but the human does.

Charm

Although fairies are said to be able to change their appearance through glamours, there is no evidence that Simonelli attempts this. Instead it is the more human type of allure that he uses. Though Simonelli regards the Gathercole sisters as the embodiment of charm, it is he who manages to spellbind each and every one of them into agreeing to marry him in order to preserve them from the threat of John Hollyshoes. His cleverness and multiplicity of talents (French, Italian, history, mathematics and poetry) come in handy for entertaining the sisters, though one could image a less congenial tutor quickly being dropped even in the dull borderlands of Allhope. The sisters are drawn by more than their studies. A poor clergyman is certainly not their mother's hope and Simonelli is delighted to know that it is 'particularly galling to Mrs Gathercole that I am such a favourite with all her daughters' (135). Not content to win a single heart, the fairy cleric must have them all—for a good reason.

From the start we know Simonelli's appearance to be attractive, for as he says, 'This queer face of mine is my only capital now and must, I fear, be made to pay' (114). His discomfort comes not from the queer nature of his visage but from 'selling' himself like a bride. His misogyny is such at the start of his adventures that he can only imagine '*female* conversation' as involving bonnets and

ribbons. He is confident that his looks can easily secure him a bride if he wishes, though he much prefers the studious life.

When he meets John Hollyshoes, Simonelli notices very specific aspects of his appearance: 'He bent upon me a countenance thin, dark, eager. His eyes were exceptionally fine and bright and their expression unusually intelligent' (118). It is but a little time later that Hollyshoes himself recognises a familial similarity between the two of them in those attractive faces. 'I am quite struck by your face! Those lustrous eyes! Those fine dark eye-lashes! Those noble eyebrows! Every feature proclaims your close connexion with my own family' (125). Viewing their two attractive faces side by side, Simonelli must admit despite differences in palette, 'the resemblance was, I confess, remarkable. Everything which is odd or unsettling in my own face, I saw repeated in his' down to the 'little black mole just below the right eye' (125). This resemblance sets Hollyshoes off to uncover the link between them.

Simonelli returns to Allhope—the village, for Hollyshoes explains that Allhope House has become separated from it over the years (not surprising, given the traditional faerie aversion to the church and 'Christians')—somewhat dishevelled and disappointed to find that his Rectory will be nothing like what he imagined as a scholar's retreat. He convinces the gentlewomen there, Mrs Gathercole and her late husband's sister, Mrs Edmond, that despite his name he is an Englishman. It is another lie, but more of a lie than he knows, as he will soon learn. Nonetheless they attribute his appearance to the land of his surname: 'So that is Italian beauty! Quite remarkable. I do not thing I ever saw an example of it before' (130).

When he learns the power of fairy charms, Simonelli is more ambivalent about the powers of that attractive face.

> I have been staring in the mirror for an hour or more. I was always amazed at Cambridge how quickly people appeared to take offence at everything I said, but now I see it plainly that it was not my words they hated—it was this fairy face. The dark alchemy of this face turns all my gentle human emotions into fierce fairy vices. Inside I am all despair but this face shews only fairy scorn. My remorse becomes fairy fury and my pensiveness is turned to fairy cunning. (149)

Nonetheless, it is his fairy charms which allow him to rescue poor Dido and to save the Gathercole sisters from the fate of John Hollyshoes' previous wife who dies delivering the child. He succeeds in secretly engaging himself to all five sisters in the course of a single day, thus preserving them from the predations of the would-be suitor who does not deem the women's lack of interest sufficient to dissuade him but fortunately seems to value an existing matrimonial claim.

In releasing Dido from her bondage, Simonelli appropriates the double weapons of charm and fairy arrogance to deal with Dando. The rudeness of his manner exerts a kind of power, but persuasiveness is key. 'Dando is a clever sprite, but I am a cleverer. My story was so convincing that he soon went and fetched the key to unlock Dido's fetter' (153). Together they escape from what Simonelli has begun to call End-Of-All-Hope House.

Arrogance

Simonelli observes the arrogant assumption of John Hollyshoes when he approaches one of his own affianced young ladies, and connects it to his fairy nature. He confesses, 'Everything about John Hollyshoes struck fear into my heart, from the insinuating tilt of his head to the enigmatic gesture of his hands' (152). Yet stealing Dido away from the house requires the scholar to act in a manner like Hollyshoes: making fierce threats to Dando, including 'beatings, incarcerations, and enchantments' (153). Simonelli easily assumes the mantle.

John Hollyshoes recognises the similarity between them early on, before Simonelli himself does. They compare themselves side by side in the mirror, as noted above, but to the physical similarities Simonelli attaches a psychological component, noting they share, 'the same curious slant to the eye-lid which bestows upon the face an expression of sleepy arrogance' (125). This quality initially seems to belong not to fairy folk but to Cambridge scholars. Simonelli refers more than once to his 'numerous enemies' back at that institution (129).

In his introduction to the volume Professor Sutherland refers to Simonelli as 'a monstrously irritating writer' with all the 'conceit and arrogance of his race', then clarifies 'And I am talking here of the *English* and not of anyone else' though we soon discover the other part of his identity. The editorial details Sutherland offers, however, hint at that other identity; not only does Simonelli revise his published diaries about every twenty years, but we learn that his 'extraordinary career'

stretches from that first publication in 1820 through the 'early twentieth century': an extraordinarily long career whatever the turnings of it, though among his varied interests are 'the improvement of *Sidhe* (fairy) morals' (2). Whether this is evidence of his chastened nature or simply an arrogance toward his fairy fellows is unclear.

From the start of the story itself, Simonelli embodies arrogance fully. The tale opens with a letter of apology that lacks any tone of remorse. Though the letter begins by avowing he will not try Mrs Gathercole's patience, it seems that his own has already been exhausted. His tone can be seen in the italics he uses for *written evidence, your own character* and *not entirely flattering*. As an apology it is less than repentant: 'You will hear no entreaties from me, madam. Write to the Bishop by all means' (113). Though this is the beginning of the tale for the reader, it comes from the end of this particular adventure, and might be expected to carry some evidence of the chastening its author has received and the narrow escape from danger, but it does not. He may sign himself as humble and obedient, though there is little to convey it.

Part of this attitude to Mrs Gathercole may arise from his general misogyny, a central component of his original arrogance. When contemplating matrimony as an escape from penury, he sneers that he has 'been too long accustomed to the rigours of scholarly debate to feel much enthusiasm for *female* conversation' (emphasis original) which he imagines means passing his time 'attending to a discourse upon the merits of a bonnet trimmed with coquelicot ribbons' (114). It is striking that a bachelor scholar should know such a specific technical details of millinery.

His arrogance and lack of empathy end up changing his fate. Had he remained in Cambridge or married the widow, Simonelli might never have learned his true nature. However, arriving in Allhope and overhearing Hollyshoes' need for a midwife, he feels obligated to offer his entirely theoretical skills, proclaiming his study of law and divinity as well as medicine. The latter consists entirely of 'a correspondence with one of the most eminent physicians of the age' (119). Thus prepared, he finds himself troubled by the young age and poor physical condition of the patient who soon tries his patience: 'Although I have read a great deal upon the subject, I found it more difficult than I had imagined to make the lady attend to what I was saying. My instructions were exceptionally clear and precise, but she was weak and in pain and I could not persuade her to listen to me' (122-3). His knowledge gleaned from books and letters was insufficient to leaven his

arrogance with any empathy. He is unmoved when the mother dies, more concerned that the father of the child may be angry, but full of admiration when Hollyshoes proves to be unruffled by the loss. Likewise he is untroubled when the involuntary wetnurse Dido first disappears from her home, saying, 'She is uneducated, illiterate, and probably never thought seriously upon ethical questions in her life' (131). The irrationality of women is of little interest to the scholar.

Perhaps the final arrogance—beyond engaging himself to five women in one day—is Simonelli's confidence that he can work the lethal magic he glimpsed but once. Having taken careful notes including 'a sort of diagram or drawing to shew precisely the gesture the man made' (117) and bolstered by the news of his true parentage, Simonelli boldly performs the magic. Unlike the delayed death of poor Jemmy, the midwife's widower, the charm works on Hollyshoes quickly, for at once he 'lay in two neat halves upon the snow' (157).

Masquerade

As noted above, the multivalent fairy body encompasses a broad range of states: 'Some are invisible and some masquerade as Christians' (JSMN 57 n4), rendering them uncanny to the human imagination. When the powerful fairy known as 'the gentleman with thistle-down hair' meets his end, there is an unmaking that distinctly marks him as not-human, suggesting that his human look is a glamour: 'In his fury and his hatred he began to lose his resemblance to human kind: his eyes grew further apart, there was fur upon his face and his lips rolled back from his teeth in a snarl' (JSMN 765). Similarly, when Simonelli has dispatches John Hollyshoes, he notes that 'the fairy's bisected corpse had some curious features. I append here a rough sketch and a few notes describing the ways in which Fairy anatomy appears to depart from Human anatomy' (157-8). However the corpse disappears before he can return to the woods, leaving him fuming.

His first glimpses of the creatures at End-Of-All-Hope House likewise suggest a difference not just in the cosmetic or magical but in the physical—at least in his goblin servants which provokes a larger question: is 'goblin' a distinct racial group or just another name for near-human creatures? He dismisses their strange otherness at first, but when he and Dido leave the house she confirms that through her un-enchanted eye the servants had 'goblin forms and faces' (154) though they looked upon her departure with kindness. In a scene reminiscent of Bosch or more directly perhaps

Christina Rosetti's *Goblin Market*, John Hollyshoes' servants appear in their uncanny profusion, prodding, pinching and pulling the hair of the fleeing pair:

> There were horned heads, antlered heads, heads carapaced like insects' heads, heads as puckered and soft as a mouldy orange; there were mouths pulled wide by tusks, mouths stretched into trumpets, mouths that grinned, mouths that gaped, mouths that dribbled; there were bats' ears, cats' ears, rats' whiskers; there were ancient eyes in young faces, large dewy eye in old worn faces, there were eyes that winked and blinked in parts of the anatomy where I had never before expected to see any eyes at all. The goblins were lodged in every part of the house: there was scarcely a crack in the wainscoting which did not harbour a staring eye, scarcely a gap in the banisters without a nose or snout poking through it. (154)

This profusion adds uneasiness to the queerness of the fairy house that even Simonelli himself finds distinctly unsettling. He definitely shifts toward his human aspect in this moment, aligning himself with the wetnurse Dido rather than his relation, John Hollyshoes.

But in this Othering goblin market we may also find a hint that they are somehow distinct from the master they serve. Multivalent the fairy body may be, but are its goblin servants yet another distinct group? Or are they all on the same continuum with humans? Physicality is very difficult to parse here. What seems more convincing is the performance of fairy magic. Thus Dido can see their Other nature with her un-enchanted eye, whilst Simonelli benefits as much from his scholarly discernment as from his fairy heritage. The embodiment of a glamour seems an unstable magic that has as much to do with performance as with any magical skill.

In speaking of Disorientation and Queer Objects, Ahmed writes of this shifting situation, 'if the object slips away, if its face becomes inverted, if it looks odd, strange, or out of place, what will we do?...A queer phenomenology would involve an orientation toward queer, a way of inhabiting the world by giving "support" to those whose lives and loves make them appear oblique, strange and out of place' (2006: 179). Perhaps the phenomenology of fairy (ironically) reproduces the same need to distinguish between the phenomena and performance rather than any theorized and essentialized 'nature' of fairy. After all, as the scholarly narrator of JSMN admits, 'Scholars have debated the matter [of fairy nature] for centuries but without reaching any conclusion' (57n4). Perhaps it is as the street magician Vinculus prophesied, '*Magic shall be written on the faces of the stony hills, but their minds shall not be able to contain it'* (JSMN 184); the scholars cannot survive the disorientation that would allow them to glimpse the truth of the fairy performance.

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