

Elf Queens and Holy Friars: Fairy Beliefs and the Medieval Church

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The topic of Green's impressive book sounds at first oxymoronic: "the political significance of fairyland" (8). But for much of the Middle Ages fairies were serious business. Why else would church authorities spend so much ink arguing that these creatures are, in fact, demons? Green's book traces the contours of church efforts to police and demonize fairy beliefs and endeavours to articulate what exactly was at stake in these debates. He frames fairyland as a site of contention between "official and unofficial cultures of the Middle Ages" (2). Although Green is a scholar of Middle English, he incorporates theory from folklore studies as well as the work of Antonio Gramsci who argues that folklore can be an idiom of resistance to hegemony.

In his introduction, Green lays out some important assumptions about his approach to fairy lore, chief of which is the following: "Fundamental to my approach is the assumption that the beliefs of those for who fairies were a living presence were sincerely held and that we would do them the courtesy of taking their beliefs seriously" (2). Green is also clear that this book spurns the problem of fairy taxonomy, either listing different varieties of fairies or attempting to distinguish fairies from elves, sprites, gnomes, or similar creatures. Of his subject, he writes, "I am concerned primarily with that class of numinous, social, humanoid creatures who were widely believed to live at the fringes of the human lifeworld and interact intermittently with human beings" (4). Although Green does not state so explicitly, these criteria arguably apply to demons as well. Another discussion from which Green abstains concerns "the Celtic origins of fairy lore" (5). Fairies, as theorized by Green, are a pan-European phenomenon.

The next two chapters lay out European belief in fairies and the attempts to police "vernacular belief." Green finds the claim that fairies are actually demons expressed explicitly in William of Auvergne's *De Universio* written sometime in the 1230s. However, there is a fascinating pre-history to debates about what sorts of creatures might exist in Christian

cosmology that includes Augustine's discussion of incubi as "Sylvans and Pans" in *The City of God* as well as theological speculation about the possibility of "craven angels" who neither sided with Lucifer nor fought against him. There is also a fascinating tangent addressing claims that UFO abductions are the modern equivalent of medieval fairy belief. Green argues this comparison is limited because UFO belief has always been marginalized, while fairy lore appears to have been a mainstream feature of vernacular medieval culture.

The remaining three chapters each examine specific areas where the church attempted to regulate fairyland. Chapter three, "Incubi Fairies," examines efforts by church authorities to marginalize attitudes about fairies as they relate to copulation, pregnancy and childbirth. Fairies were, by all accounts, highly sexual as well as fecund, and the church spent a great deal of ink reconciling these qualities with the claim that fairies were actually fallen angels. A chief case study in these efforts was the claim that Merlin's father was a demon.

Chapter four has the provocative title of "Christ the Changeling." This chapter explores lore concerning changelings and cambions (demon babies born to human women). As the offspring of God and a human woman, Christ's birth narrative has a certain structural similarity to changeling lore. Green examines a fascinating archive of mystery plays about the life of Christ in which characters (frequently villains such as Herod) blast Christ with such epithets as "elvish godlinge." Green interprets such comparisons – safely framed in the context of a play – as a site of "folkloric resistance" to clerical hegemony (142).

Chapter five, "Living in Fairyland" considers claims about where exactly fairies reside and how such a realm would fit into Christian cosmology. Arthurian legend plays a key role in these debates because fairyland is often described as the resort of old heroes. A postscript considers discussion of fairy lore by sixteenth-century witch hunters. Witch-hunters, Green argues, were interested in fairy lore, which they folded into their demonological theories, however, this connection has been largely overlooked by historians of witch-hunting. Green puts forth the argument that witch-hunting was less severe in England than in Scotland and other countries, in part because England had a discourse of scepticism about both witches and fairies that can be traced in part to Geoffrey Chaucer, who was "a celebrated fairy unbeliever" (9). This is certainly an interesting idea and the reader can judge for themselves whether Chaucer's poking fun at fairies in the fourteenth century spared the life of any accused witches in the sixteenth century.

Green's book is exhaustively researched and features a twelve-page bibliography of primary sources. This is a somewhat daunting book for non-medievalist readers: There are long passages in Middle English, Latin, and other languages, and there are references that readers from other fields will likely be unfamiliar with. As interesting as the topic is, this book is probably not suitable for undergraduate courses. However, it is required reading for anyone doing serious work on medieval fairy lore.