

SPECIAL ISSUE: PERFORMING FAIRY

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Beltane Fire Society, Edinburgh, 2018. Photography by Daniel Rannoch.

Introduction

*Heere is the queene of fayerye,
With harpe and pipe and symphonye,
Dwellynge in this place.*

The Shipman's Tale, Chaucerⁱ

From Chaucer to Shakespeare, Spenser to Tennyson, there has long been an element of performance in the perceived nature of fairies and their representation. Both the narrative content and the tradition that preserves and develops it operates upon this performativity. Ritualised practice, dances, and spells draw elements of theatre and literature into the creation of magic, and the subsequent tradition bearers – teller of tale and singer of songs – conjure fairy with their words and music.

Adopting Husserl's definition of phenomenology, examining the properties and structures of experience and consciousness of objects (Husserl, E., 2012) is it possible to define a 'phenomenology of fairy', where the object is the supernatural? What is being accessed or recreated by participants in their lifeworlds? Do any common features emerge in the individual 'act-quality' of *noesis* and the 'act-matter' of the *noematic act*? (Rassi, F., Shahabi, Z., 2015: 29-34)? What is being experienced by the reader, the viewer, the audience? Is this the same as that intended by the creator, writer, performer? Were fugue states entered into by the creative during their process of creation – and can any analogies be drawn with folkloric material in which the protagonist enters a liminal space, encounters supranatural beings, and receives a gift of inspiration, musical ability, or heightened perception? Is the act of 'performing fairy' – on page, stage, screen, studio or meadow – a form of Lévy-Bruhl's *participation mystique* (Lévy-Bruhl, 1910), in which the boundaries between subject and object blur? What, if anything, can be achieved by such sympathetic magic? How does performing fairy critique or subvert dominant discourse – that of a reductionist empiricism (or more topically, a utilitarian philistinism)?

Despite the many taboos and warnings, humans have found the fairy world perennially fascinating. As an anti-Enlightenment project, the idea of fairy offered a conciliatory corrective to the hard materialities of Empiricism and Atheism – a counter discourse to the Age of Reason, the Industrial Revolution, Modernism, the Atomic Age, and now, the Digital. Lovers of folklore and culture continue to turn to the alluring nexus of the supernatural, the otherworldly, and the hauntingly beautiful. Perhaps this is not surprising. JRR Tolkien cited 'escape' as one of the functions of the fairy-story, defending this emancipatory quality robustly: "Why should a man be scorned, if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls?" (Tolkien, 1997: 148). And in the mass appeal of Fantasy novels, TV series, films, computer games, comic books, cos-play, LARP, and other media which draw upon tropes derived from fairy traditions, we can see evidence of this on a large scale: a sustained effort of Tolkienian 'escape', to breach the walls of reality, or at least experience for a little while *re-enchantment* – through a wilful reimagining and repurposing of consensual reality. Some go beyond this to actively engage with fairy ideals in ritualistic ways – contemporary Pagans, modern 'fairy pilgrims', participants in events like the Beltane celebrations in Glastonbury and Edinburgh.

Within contemporary culture there are fertile examples of ‘performative fairy’, which demonstrate a lively cross-fertilisation of modes, disciplines, and traditions. In the online opening of the Centre for Fantasy and the Fantastic, the writer and editor Ellen Kushner, ‘performed’ fairy via a reading from her 1990 novel *Thomas the Rhymer*. She also performed fairy even more directly by singing parts of the original supernatural ballad in her talkⁱⁱ – weaving verses into her discussion on the nature of Fantasy, and thus ‘walking between the worlds’ of the creative and critical, of practice and theory.^{iv}

Performances of fairy in mainstream media achieve vary levels of success. The Netflix film, *Bright* (Ayer, 2017) presented crude racial stereotypes in a blended world scenario in which elves and orcs co-exist with humans in modern-day Los Angeles. Instead of providing a critical discourse of issues around equality, injustice, and representation, the film reified the endemic tensions that beset Trump’s America, with Will Smith’s character, a policeman with the LAPD, simply projecting his racism onto the thinly-veiled ‘others’. A still flawed but more conscionable attempt was the drama, *Carnival Row* (Echevarria and Beacham, 2019), which also imagined otherworldly beings co-existing with humans in racially segregated ghettos. As a way of ‘addressing’ integration, representation, and diversity in casting, it once more cast multiracial actors as the ‘exotic’ races – but at least did so with some knowingness, and some attempt at breaking down the prejudices of the human characters towards their fellow inhabitants.

In ‘amateur’ forums these exoticized ‘others’ are reclaimed by individuals who wish to self-identify as a character from a particular comic book, film, TV show, or computer game, at least for the duration of the convention, through ‘cos-play’ – the hobby of dressing as, and pretending to be, a fictional character. It would seem people are drawn to Science Fiction and Fantasy because it invites a playful destabilisation of gender roles, ethnicities, and other identities. The human is seen as a mutable concept and identity takes on a morphean, often ludic quality, that is mutually empowering. Everyone who joins in helps to validate everyone else. That fact that fan-bases from all around the world can take part in cos-play with great enthusiasm and creativity demonstrates the important play space it provides. By performing a favourite character a fan can experience viscerally alterity – embodying sexualities, genders, nationalities, backgrounds and abilities often radically divergent to their own, although strong characters from their own demographic or culture provide important role models too (such as the Muslim Marvel superhero, Ms Marvel). Increasingly bold ‘colour-blind’ and ‘gender-blind’

casting has enabled even iconic characters from myth and legend or comic book pantheon to be more representative – even iconoclastic, e.g. a black Heimdall or a female Thor.

At a grassroots level fairy has been a popular trope in seasonal and modern Pagan celebrations, such as Glastonbury's cycle of Dragon Festivals – most significantly the Beltane (May Day) Festival, which sees a whole swathe of green men and women take to the streets of the alternative Somerset town, alongside giants and dragons, nymphs, dryads, goblins, and druids. Yet with the impact of Covid-19 in 2020 many such events were forced to either cancel or to migrate online. In the midst of the United Kingdom's lockdown, the Edinburgh based celebrants of the Beltane Fire Society^v created a virtual version of their festival, BOnFire^{vi}, which featured an inventive cross-section of multimedia 'performances' of aspects of the Beltane Eve 'narrative', traditionally performed on Calton Eve on 30th April (May Eve) each year. The site is significant as being associated with the folktale, 'The Fairy Boy of Leith', which suggests Calton Hill is the site of a portal to the Otherworld – a place of continuous music, dancing, and revelry. An overt dialogue is created between the site's historicity or psychogeography and the contemporary celebrants and members of the public, who become immersed in the intense, viscerality, of the night-time festival. In their online Hearth Fire^{vii}, a 'Digital Samhuinn Fire Festival', and 'BOnFire' earlier in May, the Beltane Fire Society once again used an inventive multimodal approach in a 2 hour virtual 'performance' streamed on YouTube. Divided into 'chapters' charting the Cailleach's journey into winter, the geographically and socially-distanced members of the community deployed costume, dance, music, storytelling, poetry, animation, and video art to collectively dramatize the seasonal shift. It was an international ensemble performance that poignantly reflected on the challenges of the pandemic, as they expressed in their introduction: 'The winds of change are upon us, and an uncertain Winter lies ahead. But we can still find ways to gather together' (Beltane Fire Society, 2020).

Traditionally, agrarian-based rites such as Beltane, were specifically intended to ensure the survival of the respective community: Samhuinn in particular was a nervously critical time when hard decisions had to be made about what to cull and what to keep. Only judicious preparation would enable the respective community to survive the hardships of winter. Created against a backdrop of Covid-19 cancelled arts events, and streamed on the eve of a second national lockdown, this 'digital fire festival' seemed to articulate a cri-de-coeur for the arts themselves, a sector in which self-employed and freelance creatives have been especially hard

hit. And yet, despite the grimness of the context, a ludic, ‘fairy’ energy pervaded. And in the end credits the source of much of the lore that their collective virtual rite brought to life is acknowledged:

With thanks to

Reverend Robert Kirk

We wouldn’t exist without him. If you want to avenge your lost innocence, tough luck. He’s been dead for centuries now. The Secret Commonwealth he spoke of, on the other hand, will be around much longer than us all.

(Beltane

Fire

Society,

2020)

Kirk, in his proto-anthropological survey of the ‘Subterraneans’, as he termed them in *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies* ([1691]1815), described how they mirrored the culture and customs of the country they dwelled in. Citing anecdotal accounts from Highlanders, Kirk identifies endemic traits in this ‘hidden race’, among them a particular penchant for enchantment, or *glamourye*: a weaponisation of illusion to deceive, seduce, control, terrify, bewilder, or drive to madness. Beauty is their weapon. Icily amoral and wearily immortal, fairies find amusement in mortals’ fleeting lives. Supernatural border ballads, such as ‘Thomas the Rhymer’ and ‘Tam Lin’, describe perilous encounters between fairy and mortal. Numerous folk tales dramatise similar bitterly won wisdoms – fortune may be bestowed but lost in a flash. Those who encounter the deadly glamour may become ‘fey’ and fade away, pining to death for the elusive sublime. Whatever we decide to make of the anecdotal evidence gathered in this monograph, it is hard to deny its continuing power to inspire, as the Beltane Fire Society, and numerous artists, musicians, and writers demonstrate^{viii}.

New instances of ‘performing fairy’ continue to emerge. Responding to the challenges of the present-day and providing opportunities to participate and co-create an ongoing tradition, an artistic, counter-cultural ‘scene’ enables a sometimes radical play space within its Temporary Autonomous Zones (Bey, 1990), one that allows a ludic critique of hegemonic ‘norms’ of gender, race, sexuality, mental health, and class. The Fairy Tradition provides both a mirror to society (as in Kirk’s subterraneans, whose customs and appearance provide an inverse portrait of our own), and a window to other ways of being.

Examining the role of fairy and its evolution as a cultural marker and interrogator of societal issues across film, TV, literature, video games, art, music or public performance opens up the

debate to include: fairy in music, storytelling and performance poetry; public folklore and rites of fairy; performance of fairy at festivals and events; representations of fairy in popular culture; hoax, reception and legacy; fairy customs in global folk cultures; gender, race and class representation in fairy; fairy tourism; Pagan fairy practitioners and digital fairy. Of course, not all of these can be explored in our initial foray into this lively field, but the contributions contained within this volume touch upon several of the aspects directly or indirectly.

Through this special issue we bring together perspectives on a variety of performed fairy phenomena, including performance of fairy within the issue alongside critical examination of it. The issue opens with ‘The Calling On’, a song written by Hield for the AHRC Modern Fairies project^x, the instigator of the co-editors’ decision to undertake this special edition. A detailed introduction to that project and that ways artists, audiences and the cultural industries related to the performance for fairy follows, and reference to the project are dotted throughout including musician Ben Nicholls’ (one of the project artists) research behind his creative interpretation of Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding’s membership of The Fairy Investigation Society, and Manwaring’s review of ‘The Fairy Gathering’ a public engagement weekend which closed the project. Manwaring provides his own creative practice through the poem ‘Hawk Tongue’ inspired by a fragment of folklore by the metaphysical poet, Henry Vaughan. David Devanny and Rebecca Screeton present poetry and photography, along with a reflection on their artistic response to revisiting a post-industrial Cottingley Beck, the site of the infamous fairy photograph hoax. A final creative piece is supplied by Adam Warne. ‘Fairies Frequented Several’ acknowledges the absence of fairy, how they remain out of sight, focusing instead on the human experience and how their presence remains palpable.

The more theoretical contributions cover diverse contexts and critical angles. Manwaring introduces us to an underexplored manuscript by the Reverend Robert Kirk and asks how it might add authenticity to the portrayal of Kirk as a fictionalised historical figure. Francesca Bihet examines how members of the early London Folklore Society attempted to forge a science of fairy origins, resulting in the deprivation of magical potency through dry discussions of anthropological folklore.

Though we both have a history of practicing and publishing artistic research, the blending of theoretical and performative seems particularly apt to the subject matter of performing fairy. We are delighted at the diversity of voices and topics we have been able to include in this

special edition, and hope that this approach to exploring the critical through artistic practice continues to flourish adding as it does a touch of magic to oftentimes dusty approaches to academia.

Notes

- ⁱ Chaucer, G., 2005, lines 813-816
- ⁱⁱ Centre for Fantasy and the Fantastic, University of Glasgow, 29 September, 2020, available from: <https://fantasy.glasgow.ac.uk/index.php/2020/09/29/centre-for-fantasy-and-the-fantastic-launch-report-and-reactions/>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Ellen Kushner sings ‘Thomas the Rhymer’, launch of the Centre for Fantasy and the Fantastic, 29th September 2020, from 30 mins, available from: <https://youtu.be/-LtdlR0imSQ>
- ^{iv} An approach Kevan Manwaring discusses at length in ‘Walking Between Worlds: in defence of experiential research’, *Writing in Practice*, 2020, Vol. 6, available from: <https://www.nawe.co.uk/DB/current-wip-edition-2/articles/walking-between-worlds-in-defence-of-experiential-research.html>
- ^v The Beltane Fire Society, Edinburgh, available from: <https://beltane.org/>
- ^{vi} BOnFire, available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RXewC64UDJk>
- ^{vii} Hearth Fire, available from: <https://beltane.org/hearth-fire-digital-samhuinn-fire-festival/>
- ^{viii} Examples include: Manwaring, Kevan, *The Knowing: a Fantasy*, Stroud: Goldendark, 2017; Pullman, Philip, *The Secret Commonwealth*, Oxford: David Fickling, 2019; Hield, Fay, *Wrackline*, London: Topic Records, 2020; Terri Windling, Fay Hield, Sarah Hesketh and Sarra Culleno, *Hare Spell*, Alternative Stories and Fake Realities podcast, 2020.
- ^{ix} Project website featuring works created and reflection on the process by the artists <http://www.modernfairies.co.uk/>

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