Introduction

On the west wall of the south transept of Peterborough Cathedral, the last great Norman building of medieval England, is a curious and much-worn limestone Roman relief depicting two dancing figures in flowing robes, wearing pointed hats (Plate 1). The sculpture was reworked in the Middle Ages and long misidentified as a portrayal of two medieval abbots. In reality, the figures represent a man and a woman; they do not hold croziers but spears, and wear not mitres but the Roman *pileus* (the emblem of freedom), while they carry a bivalve shell between them to evoke their watery identity. Peterborough's dancing figures are, in all likelihood, 'a water god and his nymph consort' once worshipped at the Romano-British shrine that almost certainly once stood on the bank of the River Nene where the medieval cathedral would one day come to be built.[1]

As in so many cases where we encounter unique religious iconography from Roman Britain, we know nothing of the dancing godlings of Peterborough; except that by some strange chance their images survived in a Christian church, mistaken for something else, while the cult images of so many other shrines were buried, lost or defaced. Yet these dancing figures are at once strange denizens of an entirely alien religious world and

[1] Coombe et al., 'A Relief Depicting Two Dancing Deities', pp. 26–42.

unexpectedly familiar figures. For we know these divine dancers of unearthly beauty, unconstrained by human rules, albeit under another name and accompanied by a different set of cultural associations. All that remains of the divine dance of the nymphs is the ring of mushrooms or lush grass that children call a fairy ring, while the *pileus* now seems reduced to the red hat of the garden gnome.

This book is about those lesser divinities of Britain who, like the Peterborough pair, dance their way in one way or another through the history of the island: 'small gods', to borrow a phrase coined by the fantasy author Terry Pratchett. The 'small gods' or godlings are the nymphs, the gods of nature, the fauns and satyrs and the deities of fate and chance. They are a class of beings that while difficult to define, were still known to the inhabitants of this island in 1300 as they had been a thousand years earlier: before Christianity, before England and before the English language. Yet these small gods were by no means a fixed class of beings, and the godlings of 1300 and the godlings of 300 looked very different indeed. Whether any direct lines of descent can be traced between the godlings of medieval England, Wales and Scotland and the small gods of Roman Britain is a difficult question that this book seeks to address. But the story of Britain's godlings is more interesting than a mere narrative of survival: it is a story of loss, invention, re-invention, imagination, subversion and the re-animation of belief.

Folklorists do not always spend very much time examining the origins of popular beliefs. An earlier generation of scholars was excessively confident in simplistic explanations for the origins of folkloric beings; partly in reaction to that, folklore studies has drifted towards

comparative studies less focussed on the question of origins, while few historians have shown an interest in the roots of folklore. The idea that the building blocks of British folklore emerged in the post-Roman twilight of early medieval Britain is, in and of itself, uncontroversial; but it is an assertion often presented as an epistemological 'black box'. Romano-Celtic and Germanic beliefs went in and, somehow, fairly familiar supernatural and folkloric beings came out. What happened in between is often presented as an irrecoverable mystery. It is the contention of this book that the black box is worth examining, especially in light of new methodologies and perspectives. Questions that seemed not only unanswerable but even *unaskable* a few decades ago are worth revisiting in light of the most recent scholarship, and among those questions is 'Where did the supernatural beings of British folklore come from?'

The purpose of this book is to draw on the latest perspectives and methodologies to examine the origins of Britain's folkloric fauna. It explores Britain's godlings in the *longue durée* of the millennium between the Claudian and Norman invasions, and on into the High Middle Ages to the threshold of the early modern era. In doing so, *Twilight of the Godlings* deliberately transgresses the usual scholarly divide placed between Classical and medieval studies, which has traditionally been a particularly stark one in British history. But it is precisely the fact that folkloric beings seem to bridge the unbridgeable chasm in time between Roman and early medieval Britain that makes them a particular object of interest, and of importance not only for the history of belief but also for understanding the origins of medieval Britain.

Ever since Stuart Clark argued that 'thinking with demons' was a key to unlocking some little-understood aspects of the early modern world,[2] historians have been increasingly willing to accept that studying culturally constructed beings – whether demons, angels, saints, or 'small gods' – has the capacity to illuminate the past in a unique way. The question of whether supernatural beings 'exist' is, of course, beyond the capacity of the historian or the folklorist to answer – but that they exist as cultural artefacts there can be no doubt, and they are more than simply ideas. In societies where they are accepted as real, supernatural beings function as a category of person, and have all the capacity of real people to be embodiments of a society's preoccupations. The supernatural beings whose existence is accepted (or indeed contested) within a community reveal its self-understanding, its inner tensions, its taboos and its understanding of the familiar and the unfamiliar, the normal and the strange.

To Clark's 'thinking with demons' Simon Ditchfield later added the idea of 'thinking with saints',[3] while others have made a similar case for the historiographical potential of belief in angels.[4] Michael Ostling, meanwhile, has advocated 'thinking with small gods' (the enduring godlings of folklore) as a means of engaging with wider questions of 'continuity and change, tradition and modernity, [and] indigenous religion and its redefinition'.[5] This book takes Ostling's observation as its inspiration, arguing that understanding the 'small gods' of Britain in the

[2] Clark, *Thinking with Demons*.
[3] Ditchfield, 'Thinking with Saints', pp. 157–89.
[4] Raymond, 'Introduction', pp. 1–21.
[5] Ostling, 'Introduction: Where've All the Good People Gone?', p. 2.

longue durée opens hitherto unexplored perspectives on questions of cultural and religious survival, creativity and adaptation in the millennium-long transition from the Romanised Iron Age society of Roman Britain to the medieval Christian world.

'Folkloric beings' are non-human supernatural entities of folklore, usually endowed with a human-like personality or living in human-like societies, and called by a great variety of names across cultures (and even within the cultures of the island of Great Britain). As I shall argue in Chapter 1, the names by which these beings are called are usually less important than the cultural 'niches' they occupy. Indeed, focusing on names can be a hindrance to historical understanding, cementing stereotypical and limiting notions of what we expect these beings to be. Because they are cultural creations, folkloric beings can change almost unrecognisably over time, and names thus serve as a poor guide to their nature. The 'demon' of today's Christian mythology is quite different from the *daimōn* of ancient Greece; and if we did not know the process by which a name given to godlings and spirits in Greek religion came to be adopted for evil spiritual beings in modern Christianity, the etymological connection between the two words, in and of itself, would be almost entirely useless.

While the existence of folkloric beings undoubtedly helped people in the past to account for events and aspects of the surrounding world that were not otherwise explicable or subject to their control,[6] reductive

[6] On the possible 'functions' of fairy belief see Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, pp. 730–34.

or functional explanations of such beliefs are ultimately inadequate because the things people believed about godlings and fairies clearly far exceeded any functional social, psychological or 'pre-scientific' purpose we might propose. Godlings cannot simply be 'explained away' as psychosocial phenomena, because these beings caught people's imaginations. While speculations as to the functions of popular belief can have value – and this book does not entirely hold back from such speculations – if we are forever seeking 'rational explanations' for folkloric narratives, there is a danger that we will be blinded to the significance of those narratives to most people at the time when they were originally told. This book therefore approaches godlings as experiential and cultural realities in the period under discussion, because that was how they were encountered by people at the time.

Supernatural Beings: The Search for Origins

The story of the search for the origins of Britain's supernatural beings is part of the history of the study of folklore, whose beginnings can perhaps be traced to the development of ethnography in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries – which was in turn a response to the need to understand unfamiliar cultures left unexamined by ancient ethnographers like Herodotus. Margaret Meserve has linked the rapid appearance of the Ottoman Turks in Asia Minor and the cultural trauma of the Ottoman capture of Constantinople in 1453 with an explosion of learned interest in the Turks, as well as other Asian peoples such

as the Mongols and Tatars.[7] I have shown elsewhere that European authors began to take a detailed interest in the pagan peoples of the Baltic at the same time.[8] However, it was the European encounter with the indigenous peoples of the New World that brought true urgency to the ethnographic project, for here were culturally alien peoples without writing, and without a presence in the Classical record, who could be understood only via ethnography and the recording of their stories and customs.[9] Dan Ben-Amos has argued that the encounter with the New World and the ethnographical literature it produced influenced early antiquarians in Britain (such as William Camden) to pay attention to stories and popular customs as an integral part of the antiquarian project.[10]

If the recording of folklore was part of the early modern antiquarian project from the very beginning, the first British antiquarian to devote a book solely to 'popular antiquities' (what would later come to be known as folklore) was John Aubrey. In his *Remaines of Gentilisme and Judaisme*, compiled in 1687–1688 but not published until the late nineteenth century, Aubrey presented a miscellany of folklore set alongside allusions to Classical literature that seemed to Aubrey to resemble English folk beliefs and customs. Aubrey's work imitated the structure of Ovid's *Fasti* (a series of poetic aetiologies of Roman customs and rituals), and there was nothing new about using the Classical record as a comparative interpretative framework to understand other cultures.

[7] Meserve, *Empires of Islam*, pp. 152–53.
[8] Young (ed.), *Pagans in the Early Modern Baltic*, pp. 19–24.
[9] Davies, *Renaissance Ethnography*, pp. 23–24.
[10] Ben-Amos, *Folklore Concepts*, pp. 8–22.

However, Aubrey's decision to engage in 'othering his own culture' was unusual;[11] his approach to fairy lore differs markedly from that of his Scottish contemporary Robert Kirk, for example, whose chief aim was to provide a theologically coherent account of what fairies might be rather than tracing the origins of belief in fairies.[12]

In common with his contemporaries, Aubrey's view of pre-Christian religion ('gentilisme') was informed by *interpretatio Romana*, the tendency to interpret all forms of paganism through the lens of Roman religion (a religious hermeneutic for which the Romans themselves were responsible).[13] Aubrey displayed a specific interest in popular belief in folkloric beings, following his methodology of *interpretatio Romana* to conclude that the archetypal English fairy Robin Goodfellow could be identified with the Roman god Faunus.[14] Aubrey identified the fairies with 'the nymphes, the ladies of the plaines,/The watchfull nymphs that dance, & fright the swaine', quoting Theocritus.[15] He also identified Pliny the Elder's report that 'In the solitudes of Africa a kind of men appear on the road, and vanish in a moment' as encounters with the fairies.[16] Although never articulated, the implied hypothesis behind Aubrey's speculations was that, at some time in the past – and presumably at the time of the Roman occupation – the religion of Britain was essentially Roman. The 'Country Gods' of the Romans degenerated into Robin Goodfellow and the fairies.

[11] Williams, *The Antiquary*, p. 119.
[12] Kirk, *Secret Commonwealth*, pp. 5–7.
[13] Ando, 'Interpretatio Romana', pp. 51–65.
[14] Aubrey, *Remaines*, p. 84.
[15] Aubrey, *Remaines*, p. 28. [16] Aubrey, *Remaines*, p. 177.

Aubrey's basic thesis that Britain's folkloric beings were the degenerate remnants of pagan gods remained at the heart of most attempts to understand the origins of folkloric beings into the twentieth century, even if Aubrey's emphasis on Classical and Roman origins was abandoned in favour of a 'British' or 'Celtic' mythology, supposedly more ancient than the imported mythology of Greece and Rome.[17] Even today, the idea that the supernatural otherworlders of European folklore are gods who have somehow been diminished or demoted and become fairies is a dominant strand of thought about the origins of folklore. But while such demotion can sometimes be argued convincingly in individual cases, the idea that all folkloric beings are diminished gods ignores the fact that ancient pagans, too, had minor spirits as part of their belief systems. The application of Occam's razor to the problem should guide us to examine the 'small gods' of antiquity first, before the formulation of any thesis of 'demotion' or diminution becomes necessary.

The idea of 'Celtic' mythology largely derived from the twelfth-century imagination of Geoffrey of Monmouth, giving rise to tales of ancient British kings such as Lear, Cymbeline and (most notably) Arthur. The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rediscovery of the medieval Welsh imaginative literature contained in the *White Book of Rhydderch* and *Red Book of Hergest* (known today as the *Mabinogion*) further transformed understandings of 'Celtic' culture, although perceptions of 'British mythology' were also distorted by the forgeries perpetrated by

[17] Sims-Williams, 'The Visionary Celt', 71–96.

Iolo Morganwg (1747–1826).[18] Directed interest in folkloric beings first stirred at the turn of the nineteenth century, motivated by a mixture of Romanticism, patriotism and literary-critical interest in earlier writers who made use of the fairies, such as Chaucer and Shakespeare.[19]

Sir Walter Scott's 1802 essay 'On the Fairies of Popular Superstition' in his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Borders* represented an early detailed exploration of the origins of fairy lore. Scott argued that the origins of Britain's folkloric beings 'are to be sought in the traditions of the east, in the wreck and confusion of the Gothic mythology, in the tales of chivalry, in the fables of classical antiquity, in the influence of the Christian religion, and finally, in the creative imagination of the 16th century'.[20] Whatever we may now think of Scott's interpretation, his basic insight that the origins of folkloric beings are composite and complex remains valid, and represented a significant advance from Aubrey's simplistic attempt to equate beings across disparate cultures, like Faunus and Robin Goodfellow. In his *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (1830), however, Scott supplemented his earlier theories with an additional hypothesis that would prove very influential throughout the nineteenth century and beyond:

> There seems reason to conclude that these *duergar* [dwarves] were originally nothing else than the diminutive natives of the Lappish, Lettish, and Finnish nations, who, flying before the conquering weapons of the Asae, sought the most retired regions of the north, and there endeavoured to hide themselves from

[18] Constantine, 'Welsh Literary History', pp. 109–28.
[19] Silver, 'On the Origin of Fairies', pp. 141–42.
[20] Scott, *Minstrelsy*, vol. 2, p. 173.