

TWILIGHT OF THE GODLINGS

Throughout the recorded history of Britain, belief in earthbound spirits presiding over nature, the home and human destiny has been a feature of successive cultures. From the localised deities of Britannia to the Anglo-Saxons' elves and the fairies of late medieval England, Britain's godlings have populated a shadowy, secretive realm of ritual and belief running parallel to authorised religion. *Twilight of the Godlings* delves deep into the elusive history of these supernatural beings, tracing their evolution from the pre-Roman Iron Age to the end of the Middle Ages. Arguing that accreted cultural assumptions must be cast aside in order to understand the godlings – including the cherished idea that these folkloric creatures are the decayed remnants of pagan gods and goddesses – this bold, revisionist book traces Britain's 'small gods' to a popular religiosity influenced by classical learning. It offers an exciting new way of grasping the island's most mysterious mythical inhabitants.

FRANCIS YOUNG has written eighteen previous books in the fields of folklore and the history of religion and supernatural belief, including – most recently – *Magic in Merlin's Realm* (Cambridge University Press, 2022). A Fellow of the Royal Historical Society, he teaches courses on history, myth and religion for the Department for Continuing Education in the University of Oxford. In addition, he broadcasts regularly on folkloric and religious subjects for the BBC, and has been shortlisted three times for the prestigious Katharine Briggs Folklore Award awarded annually by the Folklore Society.

‘As Francis Young acknowledges, folklore studies have moved away from the question of origins because of problematic past approaches. His new book boldly returns us to this question by reminding us of an important fact: that folklore is history and can (and should) be studied from a historical perspective, drawing on literary and material evidence to trace the development of folkloric figures. Because of its novel approach, the book will certainly appeal to historians and folklorists alike, bridging the divide between the two – and, with any luck, convincing each of the benefit of the other’s viewpoint. Because of its accessibility, the book will also attract the general reader interested in folklore and history. *Twilight of the Godlings* is a brilliant achievement.’

– *Ceri Houlbrook, Lecturer in Folklore and History, University of Hertfordshire*

‘This is a bold, erudite, exciting and genuinely original attempt to solve one of the most intractable of questions concerning medieval British culture. It is very readable and enjoyable, and undoubtedly makes a notable contribution to debate.’

– *Ronald Hutton, Professor of History, University of Bristol, author of Pagan Britain (2013)*

‘*Twilight of the Godlings* is nicely combative, making considerable and justifiable claims for its own originality: tracing the history of various folkloric beings through from Roman Britain to the late medieval period. The author firmly eschews outmoded ideas of a ‘Celtic hypothesis’ – the belief that later

Celtic-language tales, in particular in Irish, can explain the origins and development of such creatures. Dr Young has a background in classical literature and an unusual competence in comparative religion, which is very useful in broadening his comparative frame of reference. He writes clearly and authoritatively and his book is both timely and persuasive.'

– *Carolyn Larrington, Professor of Medieval European Literature, University of Oxford, author of The Land of the Green Man: A Journey through the Supernatural Landscapes of the British Isles (2015)*

'This is a magnificent book and I am very proud to have my name associated with it. The real proof of its magnificence is that I disagreed with large parts, but still loved reading it. *Twilight of the Godlings* will stir up debate and act as a fantastic stimulus for supernatural folklore studies. The critical accompaniment is always fascinating and provocative – and at times intoxicating. Packed with fruitful ideas, it is the only post-war volume to look at the development of British fairylore from earliest times to the Middle Ages.'

– *Simon Young, Lecturer in History, University of Virginia (CET), Siena*

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Niamh of the Golden Hair by Alan Lee

TWILIGHT OF THE GODLINGS

*The Shadowy
Beginnings of Britain's
Supernatural Beings*

FRANCIS YOUNG



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For Jimmy Altham
εἶναι γὰρ καὶ ἐνταῦθα θεούς.
— Heraclitus

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CONTENTS

<i>List of Plates</i>	<i>page</i> xii
<i>Preface</i>	xv
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xviii
Introduction	i
Supernatural Beings: The Search for Origins	6
Approach of the Book	25
Sources	30
Structure of the Book	33
1 A World Full of Small Gods:	
Understanding Godlings	37
<i>Di nemorum</i> : Ancient Understandings of Godlings	40
Godlings in the <i>longue durée</i>	47
Animism, ‘Shamanism’ and Therianthropy	
in the British Iron Age	60
One or Many, Male or Female?	70
Godlings, Hags and Witches	74
Spirits of the Waters	78
Conclusion	87
2 Menagerie of the Divine: Godlings	
in Roman Britain	89
<i>Interpretatio Romana</i>	94
The Nymphs	99
Goddesses of Destiny	103
The Lares and Penates	110

Contents

	Faunus, Silvanus and Bacchic Cults	112
	Genii Loci	129
	Conclusion	133
3	The Nymph and the Cross: Godlings and Christianisation	136
	An Interpretative Model: Demonisation, Undemonisation and Re-Personification	142
	Understanding Christianisation and Syncretism	156
	Christianisation and Godlings in Late Roman Britain	167
	The Evidence of Penitentials	181
	Anglo-Saxon Pagans in a Roman Landscape	187
	Conclusion	193
4	Furies, Elves and Giants: Godlings in Early Medieval Britain	194
	The Influence of Learned Traditions	196
	The Brittonic Linguistic and Onomastic Evidence	200
	Fauns, Woodwoses and the Origins of Male Fairies	212
	Elves	222
	Female Godlings in Early Medieval Britain	225
	Pygmy Otherworlders	238
	Work of Giants	243
	Conclusion	248
5	The Fairy Synthesis: Godlings in Later Medieval Britain	250
	Medieval Fairies	252
	The Norman Cultural Revolution	256
	From Elves to Fairies	260
	From Fauns to Fairies	263
	Parcae, Fates and Nymphs	273

Contents

Fairy Kings and Fairy Otherworlds	278
Medieval Folklore	283
Fairies and Romance	292
Fairies in Ritual Magic	298
Conclusion	302
Epilogue: The Fairy Legacy	305
The Classicising Legacy	310
Almost Human, Not Quite Divine	317
<i>Bibliography</i>	322
<i>Index</i>	349

The plate section is to be found between pages 192 and 193

PLATES

- 1 A Roman relief of dancing godlings, Peterborough Cathedral
- 2 The nymph-goddess Coventina and companions, Carrawburgh
- 3 St Anne's Well, Buxton
- 4 Three nymphs in the 'nymph room', Lullingstone
- 5 A Roman relief of the Parcae, Calne
- 6 Spoons from the Thetford treasure bearing a mixture of pagan and Christian symbolism
- 7 A satyr on a gold belt buckle from the Thetford treasure
- 8 The Bacchic *thiasos* on the Great Dish of the Mildenhall Treasure
- 9 A Mother Goddess with the Genii Cucullati, Cirencester
- 10 A figure of Minerva carved into the side of a quarry, Chester
- 11 Stone chapel, near Faversham
- 12 Medieval satyrs
- 13 A woodwose on the font, Waldringfield
- 14 The stoke-hole of a Roman hypocaust, Richborough
- 15 Anglo-Saxon-era lead amulet bearing the runic legend 'the dwarf is dead', found near Fakenham
- 16 The conception of Merlin by an incubus
- 17 A reconstructed nymphaeum, Vindolanda Roman fort

List of Plates

- 18 Robin Goodfellow as Pan or Faunus (1639)
- 19 A faun surrounded by fairies (1840)
- 20 An early modern handbill advertising ‘the
Ethiopian Satyr, or Real wild-Man of the Woods’

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PREFACE

‘It is the supreme difficulty experienced in accounting for the origins of the fairy superstition, in finding a formula which shall express its original nature, which has inspired so many brilliant men and women to ransack the records of elfin tradition’.¹ So wrote Lewis Spence in 1946 – at a time, as he himself acknowledged, when folklorists had already ‘agreed to differ’ on the question of the origins of the supernatural beings of British folklore. The discussion was already, in other words, an unfashionable one because it risked leading the scholar down an unprofitable cul-de-sac where there was only endless argument and no satisfactory answers. As a consequence, the question of the ultimate origins of Britain’s supernatural beings – for to classify them only as ‘fairies’, as we shall see, is far too restrictive – has been largely neglected since, and was touched upon only lightly and speculatively even by great folklorists such as Katharine Briggs.

It is the premise of this book that the time for such silence and reticence is over. The methodological advances made by historians, folklorists, archaeologists, linguists and others over the past eighty years have transformed the intellectual landscape, more than justifying a return to the question of the ultimate origins of Britain’s attachment to those beings named as ‘godlings’ in the title

¹ Spence, *British Fairy Origins*, pp. v–vi.

Preface

of this book. Whether *Twilight of the Godlings* successfully peers through the half-light and adequately answers the questions it poses is for the reader to judge; however, this book is not intended as a reductive polemic that offers a single simplistic explanation for the origins of those elusive supernatural beings we now generally call fairies. The book is, rather, intended to illustrate the complexity of a difficult historical and folkloristic problem, and to mark a possible path through the maze. There are no simple answers to the questions addressed by this book, but there are certain concepts and processes we may wish to adopt that could lead us closer to the truth, as well as outdated assumptions and approaches we can profitably lay aside that have hitherto hindered understanding or led researchers down blind alleys.

While fairy lore and fairy stories have fascinated me since childhood, the idea for this book emerged from the process of writing my earlier book, *Suffolk Fairylure* (2018), which first led me to ponder questions about the ultimate origins of fairy belief in Britain. Clearly, those questions could not be adequately addressed in a book focussed on the folklore of a single English county, but I found them insufficiently explored (or dealt with summarily) in much of the literature. Then, in writing my book *Pagans in the Early Modern Baltic* (2022), I again found myself considering the nature of those beliefs that hover on the unstable boundary between religion and folklore, in the context of the definition of paganism and traditional religions. The need for an up-to-date study addressing the origins of supernatural beings in Britain – a country that has produced much of the literature on the subject over the past two centuries – seemed to me acute.

Preface

I am very grateful to Alex Wright for his faith in this project, and to the rest of the team at Cambridge University Press for bringing it to fruition, as well as the anonymous reviewers commissioned by the press for their helpful and constructive criticism of the manuscript. The late Susan Curran, who supported me in the writing of *Suffolk Fairylore* (which led to this book) is also deserving of thanks. I thank Dr Simon Young – who, incidentally, is no relation – the foremost chronicler of Britain’s fairies, for pointing me in the direction of crucial sources for this book. I am grateful to Danny Bate for providing expert advice on linguistics, and to Dr Nicholas Wilkinson for many inspiring conversations on folklore over the years, as well as for reading over the book’s Epilogue from the perspective of a biologist. I thank Simon Knott for sharing his knowledge of woodwoses in church art, and Dr Margaret Hilditch for her generosity in sharing her personal library.

I am grateful to Simon Knott, the Trustees of the British Library Board, the Trustees of the British Museum, the Wellcome Collection, the Corinium Museum at Cirencester, the Portable Antiquities Scheme and the Wiltshire Museum, Devizes, for permission to reproduce images from their collections, and I acknowledge with thanks the helpful staff of Cambridge University Library, the British Library and other libraries whose digitisation of their manuscripts has greatly aided my research. As always, my greatest debt of gratitude is to my wife Rachel and daughters Abigail and Talitha for sustaining me and supporting my scholarship.

Translations from other languages are my own unless otherwise stated.

ABBREVIATIONS

BL	British Library, London
GPC	<i>Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru</i> , geiriadur.ac.uk/gpc/gpc.html
ODNB	<i>The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i> (online edition), oxforddnb.com
OED	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i> , oed.com
PL	Migne, J.-P. (ed.), <i>Patrologia Latina</i> (Paris, 1844–64), 221 vols
RIB	Roman Inscriptions of Britain, romaninscriptionsofbritain.org
RMLWL	Latham, R. E. (ed.), <i>Revised Medieval Latin Word List from British and Irish Sources</i> (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965)