There was an impenetrability about fairy-beliefs which protected them from easy exposure.

Keith Thomas

One of the recurring problems with fairies is that hard bony thought constantly melts into a jelly of aesthetics.

Diane Purkiss

The fairy vogue . . . rested upon a kind of pleasurable half-belief.

Katharine Briggs

In 1662, the diarist, Samuel Pepys attended a performance of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and came away famously unimpressed. Declaring it ‘the most insipid ridiculous play that ever I saw in my life’, Pepys allowed that there was ‘some good dancing and some handsome women, which was all my pleasure’.¹ It is hardly surprising that Pepys, whose sexual energy is well documented in his diary, should have found pleasure in handsome women and dance. His dismissal of the play as insipid and ridiculous has usually been cited as evidence of a lack of discernment, a critical judgement so obviously wrong as to be valuable only as a provocation. Nonetheless, the terms of this rejection are significant. Pepys, after all, rehearses a position that is provided within the play by Duke Theseus, who dismisses the adventures of the lovers in the wood as so much childish nonsense. Moreover, it would be simple enough to align Pepys with an increasingly urban and urbane world in which a decisive separation between elite and common culture has occurred. According to such an account, a play like *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* can only appear to the post-Restoration world as spectacle. The moment in which fairy-lore was widely accepted has passed; within the high culture of the metropolis it has become a merely poetic and aesthetic inheritance available to animate theatrical and literary productions. Consequently, Pepys signals some appreciation for the spectacle of dance and female bodies, but dismisses as foolish and dull the fairy matter that is central to the play.

Evidently, Pepys does not take the question of fairies seriously, but this raises another problem. As the position of Theseus indicates, even in Shakespeare’s day there were plenty of people who dismissed fairy belief as childish superstition. Katharine Briggs has observed that fairy belief seems to be in perpetual decline and is invariably located elsewhere: in children, in old women, in an earlier age or an alien culture.² This disavowal, the imputation of false belief, has important implications for any attempt at historical understanding. Discussing the problem of religious unbelief, Stephen Greenblatt, following a line established by Lucien Febvre, declares ‘not that atheism was literally unthinkable but rather that it was almost always thinkable only as the thought of another’.³

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Of course, imputed unbelief is not the same thing as imputed belief, but the dynamic of disavowal is the same in both cases: misbelief is attributed to someone else. One major consequence of this dynamic is that talk about fairies invariably reflects upon the qualities and conditions of belief, and it frequently involves a historicizing of belief that posits a shift from a credulous past to a sceptical present. Given the always already dismissed status of fairy beliefs – in the words of Keith Thomas ‘it seems that commentators have always attributed them to the past’ – it is not surprising that scholars have sought to explain them in functional terms.

The functionalism that Thomas offers regarding fairy belief is rudimentary: fairy-beliefs ‘enforce a certain code of conduct’. For example, the threat of fairy abductions increased the vigilance of care providers in the critical early days of an infant’s life. Fairy hostility towards slovenly housekeeping provided a supernatural sanction for hygienic practices that reduced the spread of disease and the likelihood of food contamination. Somewhat more complexly, the changeling serves to absolve parents of the shame and guilt associated with a difficult or defective child. More recently Mary Ellen Lamb has criticized Thomas’s functionalism for its effacement of agency. As an alternative, she draws on the work of James C. Scott in order to position fairy-lore as a ‘weapon of the weak’, a means by which dominated groups resist social control. A victim of rape, for instance, could describe herself as having been ‘taken by the fairies’, a euphemism that might preserve her honour and avoid accusing a member of the community of perpetrating an act of sexual violence. In addition to sexual acts, found money was referred to using ‘fairy euphemisms’. This interpretation posits a double consciousness: fairy explanations are alibis – white lies – that allow for smooth social functioning. Agency is part of the picture, but the agent’s deployment of the alibi depends on unbelief – and not just on the part of the speaker but also on the part of the audience. The euphemism functions as an open secret: nobody actually believes that the child is a changeling, that the money is fairy gold.

Parsing the historical record in these terms involves a depth hermeneutic. Confronted by a documented claim about fairy practice, the cultural historian operates on the assumption that the proposition is not in fact about fairies, but is instead a code for something else. Lamb takes a surprisingly positive position on the use of fairy-lore as a subversive strategy, though her description of ‘fairy euphemism’ suggests that such speech acts preserved social harmony by denying the fact of violence. In particular, she associates Robin Goodfellow with an insurgent plebeian culture that transforms him into ‘a hero who rights the wrongs suffered by the powerless and the poor’. Moreover, Robin is not only a representation, an imagined solution for real social inequities; Robin can also be deployed as a weapon of the weak when men disguise themselves as ‘fairies’ to poach deer. Indeed, Lamb understands accounts of fairy gold to be about theft – such tales are a ruse to explain the sudden, and potentially awkward, acquisition of money. Lamb helpfully insists that fairy-lore was not simply identified with women (nurses and old wives); in her account, the disenfranchised of both genders resorted to the language of fairies as a way ‘to forward their own interests’. This argument seems attentive to agency: members of subordinated groups pursue clear-eyed and sophisticated representational strategies.

The model does not, however, consistently allow for a recovery of agency. At one point, Lamb observes that John and Alice West, a pair of swindlers who exploited fairy beliefs found...
JESSE M. LANDER

‘their most gullible victims among the educated bourgeois or middle-class townspeople rather than among the illiterate farmers of the agrarian community, most of whom may have known better’.11 But according to her model, they must have known better.12 Townspeople are presumably vulnerable because they have lost contact with the practices associated with fairy-lore and consequently mistake an assemblage of alibis for an actually description of the world. It might be pertinent to point out that illiterate farmers tend to view strangers with suspicion and often lack the ready cash that would make then attractive targets for scam artists like the Wests. But the bigger problem is that the success of the Wests points to the existence of fairy belief, something that Lamb’s account is only able to recognize as gullibility.13

Taking Peter Burke’s claim about the withdrawal of ‘great’ culture from common culture as given, Lamb sees Dream effecting a ‘conceptual separation that prepares for the eventual withdrawal of the dominant culture from popular roots’.14 ‘By engaging in the conceptualisation of a popular culture, defined within a mutually constitutive relationship with a more elite culture, A Midsummer Night’s Dream represents’, according to Lamb, ‘a precondition for the denigration and eventual rejection of popular culture as vulgar by the eighteenth century.’15 A crucial part of this argument concerns the way in which the play miniaturizes and aestheticizes its fairies – the weapons of the weak are neutered, denatured and domesticated – in order to construct ‘a popular culture in the image desired by a dominant group’. However, the conservative aspects of the play are mitigated by its inability to enforce the cleavage that it initiates, and, in a familiar move, Lamb argues that the play also ‘opens a space for rethinking the privileging of the “great” culture over the common culture’.16

A similar argument has recently been made by Wendy Wall, who is particularly interested in the connections between fairy-lore, domestic labour and Englishness.17 According to Wall, Fairytale becomes a channel through which Shakespearean drama grapples with the class-specific practices that subtend debates about English community in the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries.’ Wall’s larger project explores the ‘role that the household played in the project of conceptualising England’s social order’,18 and as a consequence, she is especially attentive to the play’s domestication of its fairies. Observing that many of the named fairies are associated with household remedies, Wall concludes, ‘From this perspective the supernatural creatures of the exotic fairy queen devolve into mere Mustardseed, Peasblossom, Cobweb, and Moth – the stuff of kitchen gardens, condiments, and homey physic.’19 The play affords a vision of the social world predicated on a newly expanded domesticity that integrates rural tradition with courtly rule and middling-class concerns for work with aristocratic concerns for lineage. But this integration is not seamlessly accomplished. By revealing the palace’s faulty housework and the dust it secret[s], Robin uncovers the fact that the tidy domestic closure rests on a reproduction as magical and contingent as fairylore (unacknowledged by the rational Theseus). Locating holy practices beneath the notice of aristocrats, Shakespeare makes daily labor the unacknowledged metaphorical basis for social order.20

The subtle suggestion here is that the play undermines its own conclusion by revealing the social reproduction that it seems to celebrate to be

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11 Lamb, ‘Taken by Fairies’, p. 291. Thomas, Religion and the Decline of Magic, pp. 613–14, provides details on the Wests. Their exploits are described in The Severall Notorious and lewd Cousnages of Iohn West, and Alice West, falsely called the King and Queene of Fayries (London, 1613).
12 In fairness, Lamb does say, in another context, ‘I would theorize a range of levels of belief among his informants, from simple “faith” to outrageous yarn-spinning’ (Lamb, ‘Taken by Fairies’, p. 283, n. 20).
13 For an extraordinary example of credulity of a later date, see J. Kent Clark, Goodwits Wharton (Oxford, 1984).
14 Lamb, ‘Taken by Fairies’, p. 280.
15 Lamb, ‘Taken by Fairies’, p. 303.
16 Lamb, ‘Taken by Fairies’, p. 311.
18 Wall, ‘Why Does Puck Sweep?’, p. 70.
THINKING WITH FAIRIES

another version of magical thinking; moreover, Shakespeare appears as a staunch, if discreet, materialist who recognizes that labour is the basis for social order.

Given the role of folk-lore studies in the recovery of fairy material, the prominence of the popular in recent critical accounts of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is not a surprise, but it is puzzling to find so little attention paid to the question of the supernatural. Our sense of the deep connection between fairy-lore and the popular is fundamentally shaped by the polemical denigration of fairies in post-Reformation England; this association of fairy belief with the people was, of course, perpetuated by nineteenth-century folklorists who discovered authenticity where the reformers had found ignorance. Despite this long-running association, it is important to recognize that early modern fairies were not solely the property of the unlearned. Fairies were, indeed, one element in an elaborate constellation of superstitious beliefs that were attacked by reformers both Catholic and Protestant. But this assault on superstition was part of a general contest over the place of the sacred and the proper line of division between the natural and the supernatural. A crucial element in the definitional ferment over the supernatural was the emergence of early modern demonology, the cultural centrality of which has been established by the recent work of Stuart Clark. However, despite the massive scope of his inquiry, Clark does not consider fairies. Since demonologists were primarily concerned with the problem of witchcraft, fairies were not, indeed, a central preoccupation. Nonetheless, demonological tracts regularly mention them, and the standard position adopted is that fairies are demons. Following Clark, I will consider the ways in which early modern people habitually thought about fairies and the degree to which such thinking was neither deficient nor compromised but normal. Such an approach avoids the sort of functionalism that would explain beliefs in terms inexplicable to the historical actors involved. When Elizabethans spoke about fairies they were doing a great many different things, but it is possible to generalize. Fairy talk is concerned with ontological questions about the extent and quality of the spirit world and epistemological questions about the possibility of knowledge of that world.

While such generalizations are valuable, the important point is to avoid positing a singular, collective ‘fairy-lore’ that is then understood to express popular belief or fulfil some specific social function. Like witches, ghosts and demons, fairies were a source of controversy. The most pressing issue was not, in fact, their existence or non-existence, but rather their true identity. The consensus among the learned was that fairies were, in fact, demons. This is a limited form of scepticism – fairies are not what many have thought them to be. Edmund Topsell for example, argues that fairies ‘arise from the praestigious apparitions of Deuils, whose delight is to deceiue and beguile the minds of men with error, contrary to the truth of holye Scripture, which doeth nowhere make mention of such inchaunting creatures; and therefore if any such be, we will holde them the workes of the Deuill, and not of God’. According to Topsell, fairy-like entities may exist, but it is an error to call them ‘fairies’. This often strenuous demonisation of fairies is a response to an alternative position, associated with popular belief, holding that

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21 Regina Buccola, *Faires, Fracious Women, and the Old Faith: Fairy Lore in Early Modern British Drama and Culture* (Selinsgrove, 2006) places fairies in a post-Reformation context and gives some consideration to questions of religion. However, Buccola’s equation of fairies, women and Catholicism reproduces (in inverted form) an early modern English polemical taxonomy without sufficient attention to its limitations.


23 For a critique of past approaches to fairy material that argues for a greater sensitivity to context, see Matthew Woodcock, *Fairy in the Faerie Queene: Renaissance Elf-Fashioning and Elizabethan Mythmaking* (Aldershot, 2004), pp. 9–16.

24 The *historie of foure-footed beasts* (1607), p. 454.
fairies were neither divine nor diabolical. Precisely because they lacked a scriptural warrant and the imprimatur of orthodox theology, fairies offered an alternative to the cosmology of traditional Christianity and a challenge to the sort of binary categorization that was increasingly ubiquitous in the early modern period. The tension between the notion that fairies are a third kind of spirit, neither angelic nor demonic, and the demands of Christian orthodoxy explain its relative rarity, especially in printed sources, but there are some interesting examples. Richard Greenham, a noted Protestant preacher and pastor with puritan inclinations, asked ‘what he thought of fairies’, answered ‘he thought they were spirits: but he distinguished betweene them and other spirits, as commonly men distin- guish between good witches and bad witches’. Thinking of fairies as spiritual creatures of another sort encouraged the view that there were spirits in the world that were neither angels nor demons. At the very end of the seventeenth century, Richard Baxter, another Protestant divine, raises this possibility: ‘Yea, we are not fully certain whether these Aerial Regions have not a third sort of Wights, that are neither Angels, (Good or Fallen,) nor Souls of Men, but such as have been there placed as Fishes in the Sea, and Men on Earth: And whether those called Fairies and Goblins are not such.’ Such alternative views are an important reminder that the far more common claim, that fairies are demons, has a decidedly polemical edge.

Just as the demonization of fairies has a long history, the positioning of fairy belief as past belief does not begin with the Reformation. Indeed, one of the most famous literary passages concerning fairies is found in Chaucer’s ‘Wife of Bath’s Tale’. ‘In th’olde dayes of Kyng Arthour’, according to the Wife, ‘was this land fulfild of fayerye . . . But now kan no man se no elves mo.’ Their disappearance is blamed on the now ubiquitous friars whose incessant blessings ‘maketh that ther ben no fayeryes’. The Wife concludes with the sly suggestion that the friars are themselves sexual predators akin to the incubus, a standard piece of anti-fraternal satire that yokes ecclesiastical controversy to the language of disenchantment. While its cultural politics are complex, the passage indicates that the idea that the fairies had disappeared was already current in the later fourteenth century. Despite such early evidence that fairy belief was in retreat and the historical hostility of the Church towards fairy belief, Protestant polemicists claimed that fairies were the invention of the Catholic Middle Ages. However, the historical claim for invention is less frequent than the sort of associative elision which identifies both fairy belief and Catholicism as twinned forms of superstition. A puritan wife in George Chapman’s An Humerous Dayes Myrth (1599) puts it succinctly: ‘Fairies were but in times of ignorance, not since the true pure light hath been reuealed.’ King James also held fairies to be ‘one of the sortes of illusions that was rifest in the time of Papistrie’. A more complicated example is provided by Edmond Bicknoll’s A Sword against Swearyng (1579), a moral tract that inveighs against the laxity of the present time, which is the unhappiest hindrance that now remayneth against the fulnesse and plentifulnesse of Gods kingdome: Whose kingdome, yf we buylyde not vnto the ende, whose spirit yf we resist, and refuse, as heretofore (a fruite of infideli-tie) we were geuen ouer to beleue Hobgoblin, Robin goodfool, Fayries, and suche other fancies, so hereafter we may be sure, hauyneng cast of[f] the spirite of grace, the Deuyll shal euerly where in the terror of our conscience, appeare and shewe hym selfe vnto vs.

31 King James, Daemonologie (Edinburgh, 1597), p. 73.
32 Edmond Bicknoll, A Sword against Swearyng (London, 1579), sig. A8r.
THINKING WITH FAIRIES

In a common dynamic, fairy belief is described as ‘a fruite of infidelitie’ – a failure of properly Christian belief makes a person susceptible to strange ‘fancies’. The language of supersession identifies fairy belief, like Catholicism, as a thing of the past, but the consequences of refusing further reform are horrifyingly clear: the devil will ‘appeare and shew hym selfe vnto vs’. Lest the phrase ‘in the terror of our conscience’ create the impression that this diabolical visitation will be entirely psychological, Bicknoll elaborates: ‘So as hereafter it shalbe (I feare) as great a wonder to see many houses free from one or moe visibly possessed of the Deuyl, as heretofore it hath been strange to see one in a parish.’ Bicknoll expresses a standard Protestant position that simultaneously restricts manifestations of the supernatural while amplifying the diabolical: hobgoblins, Robin Goodfellow, fairies, ‘and such other fancies’ are no longer credible, but an outbreak of demonic possession is a distinct possibility. Also typical is his vision of a world torn between ‘the spirite of grace’ and the devil.33

In addition to the common claim that fairy belief and Catholicism are varieties of superstition, occasionally Catholicism is identified as the cause of fairy belief, an argument offered in two different forms. In one version Catholicism is responsible for an increase in credulity which inevitably leads to the emergence of robust fairy belief; in another version, fairy belief is the direct creation of clerical imposture, part of the panoply of techniques that will come under the heading of priestcraft in the late seventeenth century. Thomas Cooper, for example, separates sexual intercourse between Satan and the witch (which is real) from fairies (which are not): ‘This conversing of Satan with the Witch, hath been the ground of all these Conceits which are not’: ‘This conversing of Satan with the witch (which is real) from fairies for example, separates sexual intercourse between the ‘spirit of grace’ and the devil.33

Another possibility is the facetious claim that the fairies are themselves practising Catholics. In Hesperides, Robert Herrick, for instance, suggests that the fairies are of ‘a mixt Religion’: ‘Part pagan, part Papistical’.34 His elaborately detailed description of fairy ceremony is clearly satirical, but Richard Corbett’s ‘The Fairy’s Farewell’, which also identifies the fairies as having been of ‘the old profession’, directs its animus against the puritans and voices nostalgia for an earlier, simpler time.36

Several of these elements appear in Reginald Scot’s The Discovery of Witchcraft (1584), a deeply sceptical account of witchcraft that provoked a number of responses, including Daemonologie by King James VI. Though Scot was, in the words of one scholar, England’s first demonologist, he was not an obvious candidate for the role. A member of Kent’s minor gentry, Scot was initially known for his manual on hop farming, A Perfite Platforme of a Hoppe Garden, first published in 1574, a second and third edition appeared in 1576 and 1578. In addition to such practical agricultural pursuits, Scot was interested in engineering and was involved in the construction of a dam in Dover Harbour in 1583, a major project the details of which were deemed worthy of inclusion in the 1587 edition of Holinshed’s Chronicles.37 Scot is remarkable for the extent of his scepticism about spirit action in the physical world and for his use of sociological explanations for witchcraft belief. Indeed, Scot appears to have been the first to describe what has been termed the denial narrative, a scenario in which an impoverished woman, having been refused charity, cursed her neighbours, who then blamed subsequent misfortune on the diabolical interference of the ‘witch’.38 An updated version of this sociological explanation features largely in the work of Keith Thomas and Alan Macfarlane.39 Scot is important,

36 Richard Corbet, ‘The Fairies’ Farewell’ (1648): ‘By which we note the Fairies / Were of the old Profession, / Theyre Songs were Ave Maryes, / Theyre daunces were Procession’, Poetica Stromata or a Collection of Sundry Peices in Poetry ([Holland], 1648), p. 93.
for my purposes, not merely because he has a great
deal to say about fairies but also because there is
reason to think that Shakespeare was familiar with
The Discovery of Witchcraft.40

In a famous passage, Scot identifies fairies as
one among an extensive catalog of ‘bugs’ or ‘vaine
apparitions’ that are used to frighten children:

But in our childhood our mothers maids have so terrified
us with an ouglie diuell hauing horns on his head, fier
in his mouth, and a taile in his breech, eies like a bason,
fanges like a dog, claws like a beare, a skin like a Niger,
and a voice roring like a lion, whereby we start and are
afraid when we heare one crie Bough: and they haue
supposed shadowes.'

Scot here uses the figure of congeries (or accu-
mulatio) – a device common in anti-Catholic
polemic – to insist on the irrational proliferation of
such imagined creatures; his catalogue promiscu-
ously mixes classical and native figures in order to
suggest that all are illusory and insubstantial. Scot’s
emphasis on fearfulness is typical of early mod-
ern treatments of superstition, but he also implies
that female domestics have promoted such anxii-
ety: ‘Robin goodfellowe ceaseth now to be much
feared, and poperie is sufficientlie discouered.
Neuertheless, witches charms, and coniurors
cousenages are yet thought efectuall.’

Since the preaching of the gospell, is in part forgot-
ten: and doubtless, the rest of those illusions will in
day time (by Gods grace) be detected and vanish
awaie.43

Fairy belief also features prominently in Scot’s
Epistle to the Reader. Partial readers are dismissed
as beyond reclamation, they will never be con-
vinced to read with ‘indifferent eies’: ‘For I should
no more preuaile herein, than if a hundred years
since I should have intreated your predecessors to
beleeue, that Robin goodfellowe, that great and
ancient bulbegger, had been but a cousening mer-
chant, and no diuell indeed.’44 Having written
off a portion of his audience as incorrigible, Scot
shifts his attention to those he considers persuad-
able: ‘Robin goodfellowe ceaseth now to be much
feared, and poperie is sufficientlie discouered.
Neuertheless, witches charms, and coniurors
cousenages are yet thought efectuall.’45 The ortho-
dox Protestant reader is asked to entertain the possi-
bility that, like other now discarded belief systems,
witchcraft will also prove to be mere superstition.

Scot’s identification of history as a progressive
process of enlightenment combined with his dis-
missal of spirit action in the material world has
led some recent scholars to argue that he does not
believe in spirits at all. Sydney Anglo, for instance,
claims that Scot did not believe in the reality of spir-
its, that he understood them as metaphors for good
and evil.46 James Sharpe adopts a similar position:

40 Geoffrey Bullough, Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shake-
peare (London, 1957), vol. i, p. 394, includes Scot as a ‘probable source’.
41 On the affective aspect of early modern understandings of
superstition, see Susan James, ‘Shakespeare and the Politics
of Superstition’, in Shakespeare and Early Modern Political
Thought, ed. David Armitage, Conal Condren and Andrew
Fitzmaurice (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 80–98.
42 John Deacon and John Walker, A summarie ansvvere to al the
material points in any of Master Darel his books (London, 1601),
p. 222.
43 Scot, Discovery, sig. M3r.
44 Scot, Discovery, sig. B2r.
45 Scot, Discovery, sig. B2v.
46 Sydney Anglo, ‘Reginald Scot’s Discoverie of Witchcraft: Scep-
ticism and Sadduceeism’, in The Damned Art: Essays in the
`In effect (and despite his disavowals), the logic of Scot’s arguments led to a denial of the reality of the spirit world as surely as it led to a denial of the reality of witchcraft.’ Such arguments confirm King James’s claim that Scot was a Sadducee, but they exaggerate Scot’s secularism and fail to recognize the seriousness of his commitment to non-corporeal spirit.48

Nonetheless, it is no surprise that contemporaries interpreted Scot’s unorthodox theology as a denial of the spirit realm. The difficulties are apparent in a third passage where Scot comments on fairy belief during a discussion of the incubus. Scot here expresses general incredulity at the notion that a spirit entity, the incubus, could be capable of generation: ‘But to use few words herein, I hope you understand that they affirm and saie, that Incubus is a spirit; and I trust you know that a spirit hath no flesh nor bones, &c: and that he neither dooth eate nor drinke.’ This carnal image of the demonic spirit, a recurring preoccupation among demonologists recently examined by Walter Stephens, leads Scot to a remark on fairy belief: ‘In deed your grandams maides were wont to set a boll of milke before him and his cousin Robin good-fellow, for grinding of malt or mustard, and sweeping the house at midnight: and you have also heard that he would chafe exceedingly, if the maid or good-wife of the house, having compassion of his nakednes, laid any clothes for him, besides his messe of white bread and milke, which was his standing fee. For in that case he saith, what hau we here? Hemton hamten, here will I never more tread nor stampen.’49 Like the lusty incubus who desires the pleasures of human flesh, Robin Goodfellow is credited with carnal appetites despite his being a spirit. He enjoys a good bowl of milk, and yet the suggestion that he might clothe his body is deeply insulting. For Scot, the incoherence of a tradition that features a hungry body that is impervious to the cold is an aggravation, but the basic problem is that spirits are not corporeal. If it is ‘granted that Robin could both eate and drinke’, then the only conclusion is that he was ‘a cousening idle frier, or some such rogue’.50

Scot clearly wants to effect a strict segregation between the physical world and the spirit world: if an entity operates in the physical world seeking sexual intercourse or food and drink, then the only possible conclusion is that it is a fully material ‘rogue’.51 Not only does the analogy serve to connect the incubus to the now discredited Robin Goodfellow, but the contradiction that Scot sees in the practices of housemaids of his grandmother’s generation is firmly lodged in the learned philosophical discourse of demonology. In pursuit of a strict segregation of the natural and the supernatural, Scot seeks to discredit accounts of spirit intercourse whether scholastic or popular.

A contrary view is provided by a manuscript copy of four spells to bind fairies produced around 1600 and now in the Folger Shakespeare Library. Written on a large piece of vellum, approximately 19 by 28 inches (48 × 71 cm), that has been folded, the spells provide access to a line of thinking about fairies that has received scant attention. Dirty and difficult to read in places, the document is a utilitarian object – there is nothing ornamental about it. The spell focuses on binding the fairies in order to have ‘carnall copulacion’ with them. After describing the necessary formula, the text continues:

This sayd goo to thy naked beed with her . . . & do with her what soo euer you please or canste doo for with owt dowt shee is a woman + & you needeste not to feare her for she shall haue no power to hurte the, beinge so bownde as is afores to the prescribed, nor the nether in the lyf hadiste soo pleasaunte a creature or lyvelye a /woman/

49 Walter Stephens, Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief (Chicago, 2002). Stephens argues that the fascination with demonic sex was a symptom of scepticism. Demon-human intercourse was not merely salacious or misogynistic, it promised to vindicate the existence of an otherwise intangible spirit world.
50 Scot, Discovery, pp. 85–6.
51 According to Clark, Thinking With Demons, ‘Scot’s most telling argument was his reduction . . . of all demonic agents to a non-corporeal condition, thus removing them from physical nature altogether’ (p. 212).
in bed with the for bewyte & bountye nether / quene / nor / empres / in all the worlde is able to countervaille her.\textsuperscript{52}

Written in a neat secretary hand, the spell refers to the practitioner's book (or grimoire), indicating that this particular document emerges from a cultural zone somewhere between what Keith Thomas identifies as the separate and distinct activities of popular and intellectual magic.\textsuperscript{53}

The spells reveal a serious concern with the threat posed by the fairies; the binding charms, as usual, are extensive and legalistic. However, there is no indication that the fairy sisters are considered demonic. Indeed, the writer confirms that 'with owt dowt shee is a woman', a reassurance that uses gender to defuse the frightening possibility that the apparently companionable visitor is, in truth, a demon. Moreover, the fairy's female gender indicates that she is an embodied creature capable of sexual intercourse. Though the goal is 'carnall copulacion', one of the additional benefits of binding a fairy is that once 'thou haste accomplishe it & fulfilled thie will & desier with her then maiste Reason with her of any manner of things that thou desyreto & in all Kynd of question you lyste to demannde of her'. However, the practitioner is warned not to ask her 'what shee is'. Both these elements are traditional: the notion that fairies provide secret knowledge is common as is the figure of the fairy lover who must not be questioned about her identity.\textsuperscript{54} In the context of this document, however, the prohibited question of identity means that the fairy's status and the precise qualities of her body remain mysterious.

While the document may be an imposture concocted to defraud an ardent fan of the fairies, it is evidence of a transaction between men at least one of whom was prepared to entertain the notion that sex with fairies was possible. Though the manuscript appears unprepossessing, the text is marked by a subtle persuasive rhetoric. Divided between invocations addressing the fairies that are to be repeated verbatim and commentary directed to the practitioner, the manuscript presents itself as a set of instructions offered by an accomplished master to a neophyte. These instructions include details concerning the furnishing of the room as well as provisions for failure (a common feature in early modern spells): 'This worde don & ended, yf she come note Reapete the coutioracion agayne and bynde her by this bande as followeth.' Such provisos insist on the exacting nature of the conjuration; at the same time, they reassuringly suggest that failure is not final, that a careful repetition or an alternative formulation may finally do the trick. At the same time as it presents magical technique as arduous, the manuscript advertises the joys that await the studious artisan. Immediately after the passage extolling the sexual 'bewyte & bountye' of the fairy, the writer adds a personal testimonial: 'For I haue dyveres tymes provede her & haue had her with me.' This direct avowal of fairy experience echoes the often repeated scriptural injunctions to 'Try the spirits' (1 John 4:1) and 'Prove all things' (1 Thessalonians 5:21), but to an extraordinarily heterodox end.\textsuperscript{55} Though the spell's anonymous writer is beyond recovery, his testimony remains significant. Unlike accounts of fairy sex produced through the legal machinery of prosecution, such as that of Andro Man who claimed to have had an ongoing sexual relationship with the fairy queen for some thirty years, Folger ms x.d.234 remains anonymous. It is also not the result of inquisitorial interrogatories, the responses to which have been recorded by a hostile scribe.\textsuperscript{56} This is not to say that the Folger manuscript provides access to 'real' fairy belief; but it is evidence that fairy belief, and in particular an interest in fairy bodies and their sexual possibilities, existed amongst

\textsuperscript{52} Folger ms x.d.234. I would like to express my gratitude to Heather Wolfe, Curator of Manuscripts at the Folger Library, for her generous assistance with this document.

\textsuperscript{53} Thomas, Religion, p. 228.

\textsuperscript{54} Katharine Briggs, 'Human-Fairy Marriages', Folklore, 67 (1956), 53–4.

\textsuperscript{55} For the use of these texts in religious polemic, see Jesse M. Lander, Inventing Polemic: Religion, Print, and Literary Culture in Early Modern England (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 39–40.

THINKING WITH FAIRIES

Elizabethans whose social status and education put them at some distance from the often illiterate and impoverished cunning men and women who claim in their confessions to have had physical contact with the fairies.

Shakespeare’s *Dream* is further evidence of a late sixteenth-century interest in fairy bodies. The romance tradition that had been so recently renovated by Spenser presents fairies that are of human stature, and though there were precedents for tiny fairies, Shakespeare seems to have initiated the fashion for miniaturization – a tendency visible in the Queen Mab speech from *Romeo and Juliet* that gets a full articulation in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Usually this development is understood as a form of aestheticization – akin to the Elizabethan vogue for portrait miniatures. The classic account of Shakespeare’s fairies, Minor White Latham’s *The Elizabethan Fairies: The Fairies of Folklore and the Fairies of Shakespeare* argues that Shakespeare achieved a major innovation when he miniaturized the fairies of folk tradition. However, Latham does not celebrate this aesthetic development; instead, he laments the way in which the vogue for precious, miniature fairies extinguished traditional beliefs. Katharine Briggs absolves Shakespeare by pointing to antecedents for his tiny fairies, but her interest is in ‘fundamental beliefs’ – and Shakespeare is capable of rehabilitation only to the degree that his fairies genuinely participate in a robust common culture: ‘The whole conception of the fairies is true of its kind. They are creatures of another order, but definite, clear-cut and natural, with none of the flimsy quality that strikes one in later fairy stories.’ The purveyors of flimsiness are presumably Herrick and Drayton, whose ‘fairies became miracles of littleness and often very little else’.

An alternative account of this ‘preoccupation with tiny things’ has recently been offered by Marjorie Swann who argues that the fairy vogue was in part an attempt ‘to indigenize a new form of material display rooted in the unsettled socioeconomic conditions of nascent capitalism’. According to Swann, Shakespeare’s depiction of the fairy queen as a ‘tiny aristocrat engaged in conspicuous consumption’ exposed both folklore and courtly myth as mired in the pre-capitalist past. At the same time, Shakespeare’s tiny fairies are not simply a new ideology for a nascent market society: ‘Shakespeare underlines his own artifice and implicitly represents fairy lore as a cultural object available for manipulation.’ But what initially appears to be the commodification of fairy lore – Shakespeare was after all a huge success in what we now call the entertainment industry – is from a slightly different angle understood ‘to satirize elite material display as grotesquely parasitic activity’. The subsequent work of the Jacobean poets reveals a similar ambivalence; for Browne, Drayton and Herrick, fairy poetry expresses a deep alienation from Stuart culture: depictions of fairy courts reveal that the ‘social rituals of the Caroline court have become ludicrously attenuated’, while tiny ‘ceremonialist fairies’ are a parodic version of the Laudian pursuit of beauty in holiness.

Miniaturization also develops an already established discourse on the precise quality of fairy bodies; their ability to change size and go invisible is directly related to their status as spirits, and the play deliberately presents fairies that resist precise measurement and strict classification. This indistinction is not the accidental, if predictable, consequence of a syncretic imagination combining popular lore and literary tradition with the philosophical and theological preoccupations of the moment; instead, it is a deliberate strategy, a response to the polemical positioning of fairies that was typical in the literate culture of late sixteenth-century England. Put crudely, the play can be read as a rejoinder both to Scot’s *Discoverie of Witchcraft* and to the orthodoxy demonization of fairies. This does not mean that Shakespeare believed in fairies or that the play is an attempt to persuade its audience to believe

57 Minor White Latham’s *The Elizabethan Fairies: The Fairies of Folklore and the Fairies of Shakespeare* (New York, 1930).
in fairies; it is enough to say that the play presents belief in benign fairies as a plausible position within the world of the play. If fairy belief in the period is frequently imputed belief, the belief of some other person or people, the play can be seen to reproduce this dynamic in its representation of the young lovers, Bottom and Hippolyta. At the same time as the play makes an issue of belief, staging the controversy over fairies, it also provides tangible evidence for their existence, ensuring that the believers appear sympathetic.

The most sympathetic, if also the most inarticulate, of these believers is Bottom. In a play insensibly concerned with change, Bottom’s transformation into human-ass hybrid becomes an emblem for what Kristen Poole has recently described as the period’s ‘Ovidian physics’, an understanding of the material world as ‘eminently plastic’. At the same time, there is an alternative tradition that denies the possibility of regular metamorphosis. Scholastic theologians had identified transmutation as the theoretical core of the miracle, an idea that undergirds the doctrine of transubstantiation, and were consequently committed to the position that non-miraculous changes were not true, substantial transformations. Scot inherits the scholastic antipathy towards transmutation and combines it with a Protestant rejection of transubstantiation. In pursuing his case, Scot takes issue with a number of claims about diabolical transformation that appear in the demonological literature. In particular, Scot recounts, only in order to reject, a story told by Bodin of a young man transformed into an ass by a witch. The story appears in Book 5, which attacks the claim that humans can be bodily transformed into other creatures. Having reviewed Bodin’s tale, Scot affirms: ‘Whosoever beleueth, that anie creature can be made or changed into better of worse, or transformed into anie other shape, or into anie other similitude, by anie other than by God himself the creator of all things, without all doubt is an infidel, and worse than a pagan.’

The position is affirmed by the Calvinist theologian William Perkins: ‘The transmutation of the substance of one creature into an other, as of a man into a beast of what kind soever, is a worke simply aboue the power of nature, & therefore cannot be done by the deuill, or any creature. For it is the proper worke of God alone, as I haue said, to create, to change, or abolish nature.’ Scot explicitly connects such tales of transformation to the discredited doctrine of the Eucharist: ‘I wonder at the miracle of transubstantiation.’ According to Scot, such narratives are bad physics and worse theology.

While Scot denies the possibility of a real, substantial transformation, he acknowledges that appearances can be manipulated in order to create the illusion of metamorphosis. In Book 13, treating the wonders of natural magic, Scot remarks: ‘If I affirme, that with certeine charmes and popish prayers I can set an horse or an asses head upon a man’s shoulders, I shall not be believed; or, if I do it, I shall be thought a witch. And yet if I. Bap. Neap. Experiments be true, it is no difficult matter to make it seeme so.’ The following detailed instructions, taken from Giambattista della Porta’s 

\[ \text{Magia naturalis} \]

describe the preparation of an ointment that will make men ‘seeme to haue horrses or asses heads’. Scot’s apparently credulous reading of della Porta is produced by his theoretical commitment to the strict separation of the natural and the supernatural. The category of natural magic enables a strictly natural explanation for bizarre and  

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65 Scot, *Discovery*, sig. Itr.
67 In an argument against the use of literary evidence, Scot writes, ‘I doubt not but the most part of the readers hereof will admit them to be fabulous; although the most learned of my aduersaries (for lacke of scripture) are faigne to produce these poetries for proofs, and for lacke of judgement I am sure doe thinke, that Actæons transformation was true. And why not? As well as the metamorphosis or transubstantiation of Ἀρτακος his companions into swine: which S. Augustine, and so manie great clarkes credit and report’ (sig. K3r).
68 Scot, *Discovery*, sig. Bb6r.
astonishing phenomena and precludes ‘The incon-
venience of holding opinion, that whatsoever pas-
seth our capacitie, is diuine, supernaturall, &c.’ 99

Bottom’s transformation is not illusory, yet it
remains incomplete: he retains the powers of
speech and reason, despite having the head of an
ass. Bottom is a monster in the technical sense: a
creature that combines animal and human parts.
However, unlike the monsters of classical mythol-
gy, he is unfailingly gentle and, unlike the pro-
tagonist in The Golden Ass, he remains unaware of
his transformation. When Quince responds to Bot-
tom’s new form – ‘O monstrous! O strange! We are
haunted. Pray, masters; fly, masters: help!’ (3.1.99–
100) – Bottom is merely convinced that his fellows
are trying to trick him. Indeed, during his time
with the fairies, Bottom never, despite developing
an appetite for hay and dried peas, appears aware of
his transformation. Despite this, the play embraces
the possibilities afforded by Ovidian physics, most
conspicuously in the characters of Bottom and
Puck, who is capable of appearing as a roast crab
apple, a joint stool, ‘a hound, / a hog, a headless
bear, sometime a fire’ (3.1.103–4). Puck may be the
play’s most adept shape-shifter, but all the fairies
exemplify a peculiar plasticity. Oberon’s descrip-
tion of the sloughed off skin of a snake as ‘Weed
wide enough to wrap a fairy in’ (2.1.256) serves,
as do all the other indications of minuteness, to
remind the audience that the fairies can vary their
size.

Bottom’s transformation, however, does not
appear to be a liberation but rather a confinement
that emphasizes the grossness of his bodily nature.
Indeed, Bottom’s demotion and his subsequent
tryst with Titania has led one recent commen-
tator to conclude that the play is ‘patently about
bestiality’. 70 There are many reasons to be sceptical
about a hyper-sexualized Bottom; as Peter Holland
has pointed out, such a characterization is difficult
to square with the play’s presentation of Bottom.
Moreover, the emphasis on bestiality obscures the
fact that the union in question is not between an
ass and a human but between a human and a fairy.71
The scenario plays out as a classic fairy abduction,
but instead of terror, Bottom experiences lyrical
eroticism. The note of compulsion – ‘Thou shalt
remain here, whether thou wilt or no’ (3.1.145) –
is offset by the list of benefits Titania will con-
fer: fairy attendants, jewels, a bed made of pressed
flowers. But perhaps most important is her promise
of another transformation: ‘And I will purge thy
mortal grossness so / That thou shalt like an airy
spirit go’ (3.1.152–3). Like Folger MS x.d.234, this
episode concerns the prospect and the possibility of
fairy sex but, unlike the ardent practitioners made
visible by the manuscript, Bottom seems entirely
innocent of sexual desire or understanding. Indeed,
the episode is handled with a degree of decorous-
ness that makes it impossible for the audience to
know what exactly has happened.

Bottom’s celebrated speech extolling the won-
der of his recent experience refutes all speci-
ficity. Indeed, this speech has been celebrated as
an expression of specifically religious awe, ‘a rare
vision’, that conveys intimations of grace. 72
Such interpretations focus on Bottom’s garbled quo-
tation of St Paul – ‘The eye of man hath not heard,
the ear of many hath not seen, man’s hand is not
able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart
to report what my dream was’ (4.1.208–211) – and
present him as a visionary, ‘a mystic of sorts’.73
The text in question, 1 Corinthians 2:9, reads,
in the Geneva version: ‘But as it is written, The
things which eye hathe not sene, nether eare hath
heard, nether came into mans heart, are, which
 God hathe prepared for them that love him.’ It
is an affirmation of ‘a secret and hidden wisdom
of God’ – a wisdom that includes the promise

99 Scot, Discovery, sig. Bb4r.
70 Bruce Thomas Boehrer, ‘Bestial Buggery in A Midsummer
Night’s Dream’, in The Production of English Renaissance Cul-
ture, ed. David Lee Miller, Sharon O’Dair and Harold Weber
(Ithaca, 1994), pp. 123–50. For an earlier interest in the play’s
bestiality, see Jan Kott, Shakespeare Our Contemporary (New
71 Peter Holland, ed., A Midsummer Night’s Dream (Oxford,
72 For a representative example, see Ronald E Miller, ‘A Mid-
summer Night’s Dream: The Fairies, Bottom, and the Mystery
of redemption, a spiritual truth only available to the faithful. As Richard Davies, a preacher, puts it, the faithful ‘shall possess ioyes that cannot be explicated with mortall tongues’. In the words of Thomas Adams, ‘The cheare is beyond all sense, all science.’ Approaches that emphasize this scriptural allusion too often devolve into allegories more attentive to the niceties of Pauline theology than to the exigencies of dramatic performance. Bottom’s response to his experience is first of all extremely funny. Whereas the scripture passage is an affirmation of ‘The things which . . . are which God hath prepared for them that love him’, Bottom’s version focuses on a fine derangement of the senses. Anthony Dawson insists that the religious material here is being appropriated and deployed in pursuit of particularly theatrical effects and that such moments contribute to a general secularization of society. According to Dawson, Bottom’s garbled reference is a ‘clear example of the theatre cannibalising and carnivalising religious discourse and the authority that goes with it’. Dawson’s argument is subtle and persuasive – he readily acknowledges the many ways in which the biblical text resonates in the scene – and his claim for the theatre as ‘a secular, and secularising, institution’ merits careful consideration. However, a reading of A Midsummer Night’s Dream benefits from a distinction between secularization and disenchantment. These two processes, though often identified, are conceptually distinct and, while the play conspicuously takes its distance from institutional religion, it presents a world that is decisively enchanted, populated by the sort of spirit agents that are inadmissible in a disenchanted world.

Bottom’s enchantment presents an affirmation not of Christian doctrine but of something far stranger. After all, he is recalling time spent in the bower of the fairy queen; his is an experience that escapes the categories of established religion and resists expression. Yet the notion that he is a mystic who has been given access to the transcendent and ineffable takes the episode far too seriously. To make Bottom into a mystic is to make Titania a god, and this would be to miss the play’s serious consideration of fairies as spiritual creatures of another sort. The fundamental point made by the second chapter of 1 Corinthians is that the mystery of God is not accessible through the senses, yet Bottom’s experience is insistently sensual. Fairy sex provides access to the spirit world but it remains ‘carnall copulacion’.

Like Bottom, the lovers attest to the existence of peculiar agencies in the woods outside of Athens. Unlike Bottom, who decides to remain silent, the lovers have described their experience, provoking the scorn of Theseus, who famously declares:

More strange than true. I never may believe
These antique fables, nor these fairy toys.
Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends.
The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
Are of imagination all compact.
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold:
That is the madman. The lover, all as frantic,
Sees Helen’s beauty in a brow of Egypt.
The poet’s eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven,
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.
Such tricks hath strong imagination
That if it would but apprehend some joy
It comprehends some bringer of that joy;
Or in the night, imagining some fear,
How easy is a bush supposed a bear! (5.1.2–22)

This indictment of the excesses of the imagination has an analogue, perhaps even a direct source, in the passage from Scot’s Discovery discussed above. Especially susceptible to such ‘bugs’, according to

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75 Thomas Adams, The Devill’s Banket described in foure sermons (London, 1614), sig. a2v.
77 Dawson, ‘Shakespeare and Secular Performance’, p. 84.
Scot, are the sick, children, women and cowards, a catalogue that is replaced by Theseus's triad of the lunatic, lover, and poet. The position that Theseus articulates is startlingly similar to arguments offered by Scot: a strenuous rationalism and hostility towards the spirit world produce a strong form of disenchantment. Theseus historicizes fairy belief as 'antique' – a word that carries not only the sense of ancient but also that of 'antic' meaning grotesque, bizarre and fantastic. The sneering reference to 'more devils than vast hell can hold' brings a concrete literalism to the question of spirits and their extension, a question that had also exercised Scot.\footnote{Almond, \textit{England's First Demonologist}, pp. 183–4.}  Theseus's high-flying and dismissive account of poetic composition concurs with Scot's suggestion that the poets are at least in part responsible for a variety of false beliefs – their inventions having given 'airy nothing / A local habitation and name'. Indeed, the degree to which Theseus identifies metamorphosis as a strictly poetic operation echoes Scot's extensive engagement with Ovid.\footnote{Abraham Fleming provided the English translations of Ovid that appear in \textit{The Discovery}; Scot quotes Ovid approvingly at places (e.g. sig. I.4), but is contemptuous of those who misread him.} Theseus goes on to offer a developed description of the psychological propensity to attribute agency to inanimate matter before concluding his critique with an appeal to proverbial wisdom. 'How easy is a bush supposed a bear' is a variation on 'Think every bush a bugbear' and 'afraid of every bush', two proverbs about the way fear produces misprision.\footnote{Harold F. Brooks, ed., \textit{A Midsummer Night's Dream} (London, 1979), p. 105; Holland, ed., \textit{Dream}, p. 232. \textit{The Oxford English Dictionary of Proverbs}, 3rd edn (Oxford, 1970), p. 813, lists 'He thinks every bush a boggard.'} Indeed, Scot's dismissal of 'vaine apparitions', discussed above, includes a similar remark: 'in so much as some neuer feare the diuell, but in a darke night; and then a polled sheepe is a perilous beast, and manie times is taken for our fathers soule, especially in a churchyard, where a right hardie man heretofore scant durst passe by night, but his haire would stand vpright'.\footnote{Scot, \textit{Discovery}, sig. M3r.}

Proverbial wisdom is here deployed by Theseus precisely in order to dismiss received tradition. The critique that he offers is similar to that made by Mistress Page in \textit{Merry Wives}. In order to humiliate Falstaff, she plans to exploit an old tale – regarding a dreadful spirit known as Herne the hunter – that is the product of 'superstitious idle-headed eld' (4.4.35). The disenchantment of suburban Windsor does not, however, carry over to the world of ancient Athens. As plausible as Theseus sounds to modern ears, his scepticism needs to be understood within the context of the play in which he appears and in which his bill of indictment earns a quietly devastating response from Hippolyta:

\begin{quote}
But all the story of the night told over,  
And all their minds transfigured so together,  
More witnesseth than fancy's images,  
And grows to something of great constancy;  
But howsoever, strange and admirable.  
\end{quote}

(5.1.23–7)

In response to Theseus's individualizing psychology with its emphasis on the idiosyncratic and the aberrant, Hippolyta invokes the solidity of collective experience. Though her language hints at an Aristotelian respect for received belief as well as the explicitly Christian concept of a \textit{consensus fidelium}, Hippolyta is referring specifically to a concurrence of witnesses, and her insistence on an event, a transfiguration that 'grows to something of great constancy', introduces an element of dynamism not usually found in the concept of tradition. This argument between Theseus and Hippolyta is broken off, not concluded, by the arrival of the lovers. Though the controversy over fairies is not resolved, it is they, not Theseus, who are given the final word.

First Puck appears and lists the night terrors that threaten: 'Now the hungry lion roars, / And the wolf behowls the moon...N o w i t i s t h e t i m e o f  / That graves, all gaping wide, / Every one threaten: 'Now the hungry lion roars, / And the wolf behowls the moon...N o w i t i s t h e t i m e o f  / That graves, all gaping wide, / Every one

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(18–20). Here he plays the role of Robin Goodfellow, the household spirit who rewards good housewives and maids by sweeping at midnight, but he also assumes the role of guardian, a protector of the ‘hallowed house’. He is immediately joined by Oberon, Titania and all their train. First the fairies sing and dance, then Oberon directs them to bless the beds and the chambers throughout the house ‘with field-dew consecrate’ (45). Oberon and Titania will themselves bless the ‘best bride-bed’: ‘And the issue there create / Ever shall be fortunate’ (33, 35–6). All three couples will, according to Oberon, ‘Ever true in loving be’ and their offspring will not be marred by ‘the blots of nature’s hand’ (39). This fairy ritual clearly echoes the ancient practice of blessing the bridal bed found in the Sarum Missal, a practice that was dropped from the Book of Common Prayer. But before concluding that we are dealing with Catholic fairies like those whose ritualism is lovingly described and gently mocked by Herrick, it is worth considering the episode from a slightly different angle.

Fairies, as we have seen, are frequently associated with the very night-terrors that Puck will ward off. Spenser’s ‘Epithalamion’ has a similar passage in which the speaker expresses the wish that he and his bride be protected from a series of evils: ‘Ne let the Pouke, nor other evil sprites, / Ne let mischievous witches with theyr charmes, / Ne let hob Goblins, names whose sence we see not, / Fray us with things that be not.’ Spenser, however, cannot resist a dig at folk belief even as he uses ‘names whose sence we see not’. A more straightforward version is provided by Richard Brathwait, who, commenting on Chaucer’s Miller’s Tale, offers the following example of an ‘old sylvan charm’:

Fawns and Fairies keep away,
While we in these Coverts stay;
Goblins, Elves, of Oberon’s Train,
Never in these Plains remain,
Till I and my Nymph awake,
And do hence our Journey take,
May the Night-mare never ride us,
Nor a fright by night betide us:
So shall Heav’ns praise sound as clear,
As the shrill voy’c’d Chantecleer.

Like the Chaucerian example, in which the Carpenter says a ‘nyght-spell’ in an attempt to recover the seemingly bewitched Nicholas, Brathwait’s charm is directed against the fairies. More important than ritualism, then, is the fact that Shakespeare’s fairies appear as guardians of the household and the natural order. The association between the fairies and the natural world, so conspicuous in Titania’s description of the ill-effects of her struggle with Oberon (2.1.88–117), here returns in Oberon’s claim that ‘the blots of nature’s hand / Shall not in their issue stand’ (39–40). The resort to apotropaic ritual emphatically confirms Oberon’s earlier response to Puck’s description of ‘darnèd spirits’: ‘But we are spirits of another sort’ (3.2.383, 389).

Indeed, Shakespeare is usually credited with transforming the dark and robust fairies of folk tradition into the diminutive and benign creatures familiar to us now: from Puck to Ariel to Tinkerbell, a long term development that can be understood as a process of disenchantment, commodification, domestication or aestheticization. While acknowledging the interest and the importance of such long term changes, I have been arguing for a closer look at Shakespeare’s fairies not as allegories, symptoms or social functions but as an important resource for thinking about the boundaries between the natural and the supernatural and the dimensions of the spirit world in early modern England. Despite the tactical retreat offered in Puck’s epilogue, Shakespeare’s fairies present a vital possibility: spirits of ‘another sort’. This does not mean that Shakespeare believed in fairies; if pressed, I suspect he would have answered with Horatio, ‘So have I heard, and do in part believe it’ (Hamlet, 1.1.146). What A Midsummer Night’s Dream does is entertain a belief in fairies in order to protest against

84 Richard Brathwait, A Comment upon the Two Tales of our Ancient, Renowned, and Ever-Living Poet Sir Jefray Chaucer, Knight (1665), p. 31. For Chaucer, see The Canterbury Tales, lines 3479–83.
the relentless dichotomizing and strenuous disenchantment that accompanied the Calvinism that dominated England’s universities and pulpits in the late sixteenth century. At the same time, there is no reason to read hostility towards strict Calvinism as an embrace of Catholicism. After all, the Church, even in the Middle Ages, was also hostile to fairy belief. Furthermore, even if traditional religion was able in practice to accommodate fairy belief, the Counter-reformation was militant in pursuit of popular error. Indeed, to see Shakespeare’s fairies as an expression of recognisably Catholic dissent is to accept the polemical identification so commonly made by Protestants between Catholicism and fairy belief. Instead, the fairies of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* afford a glimpse of a spiritual world beyond the confines of institutional religion and the rigidities of polemic, an intimation that received theologies, despite their claims to comprehensiveness, are something less than adequate.\(^\text{85}\)

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\(^{85}\) A suggestive analogue is found in the work of Paracelsus whose *Book on Nymphs, Sylphs, Pygmies, Salamanders and other Spirits* describes elemental spirit-creatures who are neither angelic nor human. These creatures have bodies of flesh and blood, but are capable of preternatural feats; they bear children and our able to mate with humans; see, Paracelsus, *Four Treatises*, ed. Henry E. Sigerist, trans. C. Lilian Temkin, *et al.* (Baltimore, 1941), pp. 213–53.