There is something sinister about putting a leprechaun in the workhouse. The only solid comfort is that he certainly will not work—CHESTERTON

I have put the Longaevi or longlivers into a separate chapter because their place of residence is ambiguous between air and Earth. Whether they are important enough to justify this arrangement is another question. In a sense, if I may risk the oxymoron, their unimportance is their importance. They are marginal, fugitive creatures. They are perhaps the only creatures to whom the Model does not assign, as it were, an official status. Herein lies their imaginative value. They soften the classic severity of the huge design. They intrude a welcome hint of wildness and uncertainty into a universe that is in danger of being a little too self-explanatory, too luminous.

I take for them the name _Longaevi_ from Martianus Capella, who mentions 'dancing companies of _Longaevi_ who haunt woods, glades, and groves, and lakes and springs and brooks; whose names are Pans, Fauns... Satyrs, Silvans, Nymphs...'[1] Bernardus Silvestris, without using the word _Longaevi_, describes similar creatures—'Silvans, Pans, and Nereis'—as having 'a longer life' (than ours), though they are not immortal. They are innocent—'of blameless conversation'—and have bodies of elemental purity.[2] [end p. 122]

The alternative would have been to call them Fairies. But that word, tarnished by pantomime and bad children's books with worse illustrations, would have been dangerous as the title of a chapter. It might encourage us to bring to the subject some ready-made, modern concept of a Fairy and to read the old texts in the light of it. Naturally, the proper method is the reverse; we must go to the texts with an open mind and learn from them what the word fairy meant to our ancestors.

A good point to begin at is provided by three passages from Milton:

(I) No evil thing that walks by night
> In fog or fire, by lake or moorish fen,
> Blue meagre Hag or stubborn unlaid ghost—
> No goblin or swart Faery of the mine.
> (Comus, 432 sq.)

(2) Like that Pigmean Race
> Beyond the Indian Mount, or Faery Elves,
> Whose midnight Revels, by a Forest side
> Or Fountain some belated Peasant sees. ..
Milton lived too late to be direct evidence for medieval beliefs. The value of the passages for us is that they show the complexity of the tradition which the Middle Ages had bequeathed to him and his public. The three extracts [pp. 123/124] were probably never connected in Milton's mind. Each serves a different poetic purpose. In each he confidently expects from his readers a different response to the word fairy. They were equally conditioned to all three responses and could be relied on to make the right one at each place. Another, earlier and perhaps more striking, witness to this complexity is that within the same island and the same century Spenser could compliment Elizabeth I by identifying her with the Faerie Queene and a woman could be burned at Edinburgh in 1576 for 'repairing with, the fairies and the 'Queen of Elfame'.[3] <#_ftn3>

The 'swart Faery' in Comus is classified among horrors. This is one strand in the tradition. Beowulf ranks the elves (ylfe, III) along with ettins and giants as the enemies of God. In the ballad of Isabel and the Elf-Knight, the elf-knight is a sort of Bluebeard. In Gower, the slanderer of Constance says that she is 'of faierie' because she has given birth to a monster (Confessio, II, 964 sq.). The Catholicon Anglicum of 1483 gives lamia and eumenis (fury) as the Latin for elf; Horman's Vulgaria (1519), strix and lamia for fairy. We are inclined to ask 'Why not nympha? But nymph would not have mended matters. It also could be a name of terror to our ancestors. ' What are these so fayre fiendes that cause my hayres to stand upright?' cries Corsites in Lyly's Endymion (IV, iii), 'Hags! Out alas! Nymphs! !'. Drayton 'in Mortimer to Queen Isabel speaks of 'the dishevelled gasly sea-Nymph' (77). Athanasius Kircher says to an apparition 'Aie ! I fear ye be one of those daemons whom the ancients called Nymphs,' and receives the reassurance, 'I am no Lilith nor lamia'.[4] <#_ftn4> Reginald Scot mentions fairies (and nymphs) among bugbears used to frighten children: ' Our mothers' maids have so terrified us with bull-beggars[5] <#_ftn5>, spirits, witches, urchins, elves, hags, fairies, satyrs, pans, faunes, sylens, tritons, centaurs, dwarfs, giants, nymphes, Incubus, Robin good fellow, the spoon, the man in the oke, the fire-drake, the puckle, Tom Thombe, Tom tumbler boneles, and such other bugs.'[6] <#_ftn6>

This dark view of the Fairies gained ground, I think, in the sixteenth and the earlier seventeenth century—an unusually hag-ridden period. Holinshed did not find in Boece but added to him the suggestion that Macbeth’s three temptresses might be 'some nymphs or fairies'. Nor has this dread ever since quite disappeared except where belief in the Fairies has also done so. I have myself stayed at a lonely place in Ireland which was said to be haunted both by a ghost and by the (euphemistically so called) 'good people'. But I was given to understand it was the fairies rather than the ghost that induced my neighbours to give it such a wide berth at night.
Reginald Scot's list of bugbears raises a point which is worth a short digression. Some studies of folklore are almost entirely concerned with the genealogy of beliefs, with the degeneration of gods into Fairies. It is a very legitimate and most interesting inquiry. But Scot's list [pp. 125/126] shows that when we are asking what furniture our ancestors' minds contained and how they felt about it--always with a view to the better understanding of what they wrote--the question of origins is not very relevant. They might or might not know the sources of the shapes that haunted their imagination: Sometimes they certainly did. Giraldus Cambrensis knew that Morgan had once been a Celtic goddess, dea quaedam phantastica as he says in the Speculum Ecclesiae (II, ix); and so, perhaps from him, did the poet of Gawain (2452). And any well-read contemporary of Scot's would have known that his satyrs, Pans, and fauns were classical while his 'Tom thombe' and 'puckle' were not.

But obviously it makes no difference:.. they all affected the mind in the same way. And if all really came through' our mothers' maids' it is natural they should. The real question, then, would be why they affect us so differently.-- For I take it that most of us even today can understand how a man could dread witches or' spirits ' while most of us imagine that a meeting with a nymph or a Triton, if it were possible,

would be delightful. The native figures are not, even now. quite so innocuous as the classical. I think the reason is that the classical figures stand further'-certainly in time and perhaps in other ways too--even from our half-beliefs and therefore from even our imagined fears. If Wordsworth found the idea of seeing Proteus' risen from the sea attractive, this was partly because he. felt perfectly certain he never would. He would have felt less certain of never seeing a ghost; in proportion less willing to see one. [end p. 126]

The second Miltonic passage introduces us to a different conception of the Fairies. It is more familiar to us because Shakespeare, Drayton, and William Browne made a literary use of it; from their use descend the minute and almost insectal fairies of the debased modern convention with their antennae and gauzy wings. Milton's 'Faery Elves' are compared to the 'Pigmean Race'. So in the ballad of The Wee Man,

When we came to the stair foot

Ladies were dancing jimp and sma.

Richard Bovet in his Pandaemonium (1684) speaks of the fairies ' appearing like men and women of a stature generally near the smaller size of man'. Burton mentions 'places in Germany where they do usually walk in little coats, some two feet long'.[7] <#_ftn7> A housemaid we had when I was a boy, who had seen them near Dundrum in County Down, described them as' the size of children (age unspecified).

But when we have said 'smaller than men' we can define the size of these Fairies no further. Solemn discussions as to whether they are merely dwarfish, or Lilliputian, or even insectal, are quite out of place; and that for a reason which crossed our path before.[8] <#_ftn8> As I then said, the visual imagination of medieval and earlier writers...
never for long worked to scale. Indeed I cannot think of any book before
Gulliver that makes any serious attempt to do so. What are the relative
sizes of Thor and the Giants in the Prose Edda? There is no answer. In
cap. XLV a giant's [pp. 127/128] glove seems to the three gods a great
hall, and the thumb of it a side-chamber which two of them use as a
bedroom. This would make a god to a giant as a small fly to a man. But
in the very next chapter Thor is dining with the giants and can lift
up—though for a special reason he cannot drain—the drinking horn they
hand him when it was possible to write like that we can expect no
coherent account of the elves' stature—. And it remained possible for
centuries. Even in passages whose main point, such as it is, consists of
scaling things down, the wildest confusion prevails. Drayton in
Nymphidia makes Oberon big enough to catch a wasp in his arms at line
201 and small enough to ride on an ant at line 242; he might as well
have made him able both to lift an elephant and to ride a fox-terrier. I
do not suggest that such an artificial work could in any case be
expected to give reliable evidence about popular belief. The point is
rather that no work written in a period when such inconsistencies were
acceptable will provide such evidence; and that popular belief was
probably itself as incurably vague and incoherent as the literature.

> In this kind of Fairy the (unspecified) small size is less
important than some other features. Milton's 'Faery Elves' are 'on thir
mirth and dance Intent' (I, 786). The peasant has blundered upon them by
chance. They have nothing to do with him nor he with them. The previous
kind, the 'swart Faery of the Mine', might meet you intentionally, and,
if so, his intentions would certainly be sinister; this kind not. They
appear—often with no suggestion that they are smaller than men—in
(pp. 128/129) places where they might have expected no mortal to see them:

> And ofte in forme of womman in moni deorne [9] weie

> In the Wife of Bath's Tale we have the dance again, and it
vanishes at the approach of a human spectator (D 991 sq). Spenser takes
over the; motif and—makes—his dancing graces vanish when Calidore
intrudes upon their revels (F.Q. VI, x). Thomson in The Castle of
Indolence (I, xxx) knows about the vanishing.

> It is needless to stress the difference between such Fairies
and those mentioned in Comus or Reginald Scot's Discoverie. It is true
that even the second sort may be slightly alarming;—the heart of
Milton's peasant beats 'at once with joy and fear'. The vision startles
by its otherness. There is no horror or aversion on the human
side:—These creatures flee from man, not man from them; and the mortal
who observes them (Only so long as he remains unobserved himself)
feels that he has committed a sort of trespass. His delight is that of
seeing fortuitously—in a momentary glimpse—a gaiety and daintiness—to
which our own—laborious life is simply irrelevant.

> This kind was taken over, very dully by Drayton, brilliantly
by Shakespeare, and worked up into a comic device which, from the first,
has lost nearly all the flavour of popular belief From Shakespeare,
modified (I think) by Pope's sylphs, they descend with increasing
pretification [pp. 129/130] and triviality, till we reach the fairies
whom children are supposed to enjoy; so far as my experience goes,
erroneously.

> With the 'Fairy Damsels.' of our third Miltonic passage we
reach a kind of :Fairy who is more important for the reader—of medieval
literature and less familiar to modern imagination.." .And it demands
The Fairy Damsels are 'met in forest wide.' Met is the important word. The encounter is not accidental. They have come to find us, and their intentions are usually (not always) amorous. They are the fées of French romance—the fays of our own, the fate of the Italians. Launfal's mistress, the lady who carried off Thomas the Rymer, the fairies in Orfeo, Bercilak in Gawain (who is called 'an alvish man' at line 681), are of this kind. Morgan le Fay in Malory has been humanised; her Italian equivalent Fata Morgana is a full Fairy. Merlin—only half human by blood and never shown practising magic as an art—almost belongs to this order. They are usually of at least fully human stature. The exception is Oberon in Huon of Bordeaux who is dwarfish, but in virtue of his beauty, gravity, and almost numinous character, must be classified among (let us call them) the High Fairies.

These High Fairies display combination of characteristics which we do not easily digest.

On the one hand, when they are described we are struck by their hard, bright, and vividly material splendour. We may begin, not with a real Fairy, but with one who merely looked as though he came 'of faerie', from [pp. 130/131] the fairy realm. This is the young lady-killer in Gower (V, 7073). He is curled and combed and crowned with a garland of green leaves; in a word, 'very well turned out'. But the High Fairies themselves are very much more so. Where a modern might expect the mysterious and the shadowy he meets a blaze of wealth and luxury. The Fairy King in Sir Orfeo comes with over a hundred knights and a hundred ladies, on white horses. His crown consists of a single huge gem as bright as the sun (142–52). When we follow him to his own country we find there nothing shadowy or insubstantial; we find a castle that shines like crystal, a hundred towers, a good moat, buttresses of gold, rich carvings (355 sq.). In Thomas the Rymer the Fairy wears green silk and a velvet mantle, and her horse's mane jingles with fifty-nine silver bells. Bercilak's costly clothes and equipment are described with almost fulsome detail in Gawain (151–220). The Fairy in Sir Launfal has dressed her waiting women in 'Inde sandel', green velvet embroidered with gold, and coronets each containing more than sixty precious stones (232–9). Her pavilion is of Saracenic work, the knobs on the tent-poles are of crystal, and the whole is surmounted by a golden eagle so enriched with enamel and carbuncles that neither Alexander nor Arthur had anything so precious (266–76).

In all this one may suspect a certain vulgarity of imagination—as if to be a High Fairy were much the same as being a millionaire. Nor does it obviously mend matters to remind ourselves that Heaven and the saints were often pictured in very similar terms.

Undoubtedly it is naïf; but [pp. 131/132] the charge of vulgarity perhaps involves a misapprehension: Luxury and material splendour in the modern world need be connected with nothing but money and are also, more often than not, very ugly. But what a medieval man saw in royal or feudal courts and imagined as being outstripped in 'faerie' and far outstripped in Heaven, was not so. The architecture, arms, crowns, horses, and music were nearly all beautiful. They were all symbolical or significant—of sanctity, authority, valour, noble lineage or, at the very worst, of power. They were associated as modern luxury is not... with graciousness and courtesy. They could therefore be ingenuously admired without degradation for the admirer.

Such, then, is one characteristic or the High Fairies. But despite this material splendour—shown to us in full light and almost photographically detailed, they can at any moment be as elusive as those
>'Faerie Elves' who are glimpsed dancing 'by a forest side or fountain.'
Orfeo awaits the Fairy King with a guard of a thousand knights, but it
is all no use. His wife is carried off, no one sees how-' with fairi
forth ynome' and 'men wist never wher she was become' (193-4). Before we
see the Fairies again, in their own realm, they have faded to a 'dim cri
and blowing' heard far off in the woods. Launfal's mistress can be met
only in secret, in 'deme stede'; there she will come to him, but no one
will see her coming (353 sq.).

But she is very palpable flesh and blood when she is there.
The High Fairies are vital, energetic, wilful, passionate beings.
Launfal's Fairy lies in her rich pavilion naked down to the waist, white
as a lily, red as a rose. Her [pp. 132/133] first words demand his
love. An excellent lunch follows, and then to bed (289-348). Thomas the
Rymer's Fairy shows herself, so far as ballad brevity allows, a stirring
and sportive creature, 'a lady gay come out to hunt in her follee'.
Bercilak is the best of all in his mingled ferocity and geniality, his
complete mastery of every situation, his madcap mirth. Two descriptions
of fairies, one from a later and one from an earlier period, come far
nearer to the High Fairies of the Middle Ages than anything our modern
imagination would be likely to produce. A rowdy High Fairy would seem
to us a kind of oxymoron. But Robert Kirk in his Secret Commonwealth
(1691) calls some of these 'wights like furious hardie men'. And an old
Irish poet describes them as routing battalions of enemies, devastating
every land they attack, great killers, noisy in the beer-house, makers
of songs. One can imagine the Fairy King in Sir Orfeo, or
Bercilak, feeling at home with these.

If we are to call the High Fairies in any sense 'spirits',
we must take along with us Blake's warning that 'a Spirit and a Vision
are not, as the modern philosophy supposes, a cloudy vapour or a
nothing; they are organised and minutely articulated beyond all that the
mortal and perishing nature can produce'. And if we call
them "supernatural" we must be clear what we mean. Their life is, in one
sense more 'natural' - stronger, more reckless, less inhibited, more
triumphantly and impenitently passionate than ours. They are liberated
both from the [pp. 133/134] beast's perpetual slavery to nutrition,
self-protection and procreation, And also from the responsibilities,
shames, scruples, and melancholy of Man: Perhaps also from death; but
of that later.

Such, very briefly, are the three kinds of Fairies or
Longaevi we meet in our older literature. How far, by how many, and how
consistently, they were believed in, I do not know. But there was
sufficient belief to produce rival theories of their nature; attempts,
which never reached finality, to fit even these lawless vagrants into
the Model.

I will mention four.

(1) That they are a third rational species distinct from
angels and men. This third species can be variously conceived. The
'Silvans, Pans and Nerei' of Bernardus, who live longer than we but-not
forever, are clearly a rational (and terrestrial) species distinct from
our own, and such figures, for all their classical names, could be
equated with Fairies. Hence Douglas in his Eneados glosses Virgil's
Fauni nymphaeque (VIII, 314) with the line 'Quhilk fair folkis or than
evils cleping we'. The fata in Boiardo who explains that she, like all
her kind, cannot die till Doomsday comes, [14] implies the same
conception. An alternative view could find the required third species
among those spirits which, according to the principle of plenitude,
existed in every element [15] - the 'spirits of every element,
in Faustus (151), the 'Tetrarchs of Fire, Air, Flood, and on the Earth'
Paradise Regained (IV, 201). Shakespeare's Ariel, a figure incomparably more serious than any in the [pp. 134/135] Dream, would be a tetrarch of air. The most precise account of the elementals would, however, leave only one of their kinds to be strictly identified with the Fairies.

Paracelsus enumerates: (a) Nymphae or Undinae, of water, who are human in stature, and talk. (b) Sylphi or Silvestres, of air. They are larger than men and don't speak. (c) Gnomi or Pygmaei, of earth: about two spans high and extremely taciturn. (d) Salamandrae or Vulcani, of fire. The Nymphs or Undines are clearly Fairies. The Gnomes are closer to the Dwarfs of Märchen. Paracelsus would be rather too late an author for my purpose if there were not reason to suppose that he is, in part anyway, using much earlier folklore. In the fourteenth century the family of Lusignan boasted a water-spirit among their ancestresses. Later still we get the theory of a third rational species with no attempt to identify it. The Discourse concerning Devils and Spirits, added in 1665 to Scot's Discouerie, says: 'their nature is middle between Heaven and Hell...they reign in a third kingdom, having no other judgement or doom to expect forever'. Finally, Kirk in his Secret Commonwealth identifies them with those aerial people whom I have had to mention so often already: 'of a middle nature between Man and Angel, as were Daemons thought to be of old'.

(2) That they are angels. But a special class of angels who have been, in our jargon, 'demoted'. This view is developed at some length in the South English Legendary. When Lucifer rebelled, he and his followers were cast into Hell. But there also angels who 'somdel with him hulde': fellow-travellers who did not actually join the rebellion. These were banished into the lower and more turbulent levels of the airy region. They remain there till Doomsday after which they go to Hell. And thirdly there was what I suppose we might call a party of the centre; angels who were only 'somdel in misthought'; almost, but not quite, guilty of sedition. These were banished, some to the higher and calmer levels of air, some to various places on earth, including the Earthly Paradise. Both the second and the third group sometimes communicate with men in dreams. Of those who mortals have seen dancing and called eluene many will return to Heaven at Doomsday.

(3) That they are the dead, or some special class of the dead. At the end of the twelfth century, Walter Map in his De Nugis Curialium twice tells the following story. There was in his time a family known as The Dead Woman's Sons (filii mortuae). A Breton knight had buried his wife, who was really and truly dead—re vera mortuam. Later, by night, passing through a lonely valley, he saw her alive amidst a great company of ladies. He was frightened, and wondered what was being done by the Fairies (a fatis), but he snatched her from them and carried her off. She lived happily with him for several years and bore children. Similarly in Gower's story of Rosiphelee the company of ladies, who are in all respects exactly like High Fairies, turn out to be dead women. [end p. 136]

[top p. 137] Boccaccio tells the same story, and Dryden borrowed it from him in his Theodore and Honoria. In Thomas the Rymer, it will be remembered, the Fairy brings Thomas to a place where the road divides into three, leading respectively to Heaven, Hell, and 'fair Elfland'. Of those who reach the latter some will finally go to Hell, for the Devil has a right to 10 per cent of them every seventh year. In Orfeo the poet seems quite unable to make up his mind whether the place to which the Fairies have taken Dame Heurodis is or is not the land of the dead. At first all seems plain sailing. It is full of people who had
been supposed dead and weren't (389-90). That is imaginable; some whom
we think dead are only 'with the faerie'. But next moment it appears to
be full of people who had really died; the beheaded, the strangled, the
drowned, those who died in childbed (391-400). Then we revert to those
who in their sleep were taken thither by Fairies (401-4).

The identity .or close connection between the Fairies and
the dead was certainly believed in, for witches confessed to seeing the
dead among the Fairies.[21] <#_ftn21> Answers to leading questions under
torture naturally tell us nothing about the beliefs of the accused; but
they are good evidence for the beliefs of the accusers.

(4) .That they are fallen angels; in other words, devils.
This becomes almost the official view after the accession of James I.
'That kinde of Devils conversing in the earth', he says (Daemonologie,
[II, i], may be divided in foure different kindes. . .the fourth is
these kinde of spirites [pp. 137/138] that are called vulgarie the
Fayrie'. Burton includes among terrestrial devils 'Lares, Genii, Fauns,
Satyrs, Wood-Nymphs, Foliotis, Fairies, Robin Good-fellow, Trulli,
etc.'[22] <#_ftn22>

This view, which is closely connected with the later
Renaissance phobia about witches, goes far to explain the degradation of
the Fairies from their medieval vitality into the kickshaws of Drayton
or William Browne. A churchyard or a brimstone smell came to hang about
any treatment of them which was not obviously playful. Shakespeare, may
have had practical as well as poetical reasons for making Oberon assure
us that he and his fellows are 'spirits of another sort' than those who
have to vanish at daybreak (Dream, III, ii, 388). One might have
expected the High Fairies to have been expelled by science; I think
they were actually expelled by a darkening of superstition.

Such were the efforts to find a socket into which the
Fairies would fit. No agreement was achieved. As long as the Fairies
remained at all they remained evasive.

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[1] <#_ftnref1>De Nuptiis Mercurii et Philologiae, ed. F. Eyssenhardt
(Lipsiae, 1866), II, 167, p. 45.


[3] <#_ftnref3>1 M. W. Latham, The Elizabethan Fairies (Columbia, 1940),
p. 16. I am much indebted to this throughout.

dicitur (Romae, Typis Mascardi, MDCLVII), II, i.


>101-102, on mediaeval artists' indifference to perspective, scale, and
>foreground-background distinction
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>[16] <#_ftnref16> I De Nymphis, etc., I, 2, 3, 6.
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>Fairies (1940)], p. 46.
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>[22] <#_ftnref22> [Burton] Pt. I, s. 2; M 1, subs. 2.