

The History and Practice of English Magic



Folklore and fairies, magic and madness, as seen through
the mirror of Susanna Clarke's acclaimed fantasy novel,
Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell

by *John Reppion*

In March 2006 my wife, Leah, and I flew over to Dublin, Ireland for the first time in either of our lives as guests at the third annual Phoenix Convention (or P-Con, as most people knew it). The guest of honour that year was Susanna Clarke – author of *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* which had, at that point, already been out for eighteen months and won a Hugo Award. I, a chronically slow reader at the best of times, had not yet started reading the 800ish page novel, and I think that Leah was only part of the way through it. Nevertheless, we found that we got on well with Susanna and her partner, sci-fi writer Colin Greenland – who were both lovely, charming and funny – and the brief time we spent together over the course of the con was very enjoyable. It was perhaps two years later that I finally finished reading *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*. I have on

only a couple of occasions in my life finished a book and at once turned to the front to begin reading it again. I thought about doing that with *Strange & Norrell* but I am, as I have said, a very slow reader. Instead I immediately downloaded the thirty-two-hour-long audio-book version, which to date I have listened to perhaps three or four times.

In a piece entitled “Why I Love Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell” published on the Guardian website in May 2015, Neil Gaiman recalled writing to the book’s editor to say that it was, in his opinion, “the finest work of English fantasy written in the past seventy years”.¹ I am not so widely read as Mr. Gaiman and I don’t pretend to be an expert in such matters, but what I can say with certainty is that I, like Neil, love *Strange & Norrell*. The blend of alt. history and fantasy, the handling of Englishness and of English Magic, of otherness and madness, the subtlety, the comedy, the eeriness, the epicness – in every sense; all these factors combine to make *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* a work which does not so much stand apart as it does occupy a space that seems no other work could ever fill. It is as though a *Strange & Norrell*-sized gap waited hungrily on some shelf in the realm of forms up until a decade or so ago.

In November 2012, the BBC announced that an adaptation of *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* had been commissioned for BBC One. The production was officially greenlit as a seven hour miniseries in April 2013, with a projected 2014 premiere date.² As it was, the series (adapted by British playwright and screenwriter Peter Harness) actually premiered in May 2015. Clarke’s wonderful world of magicians – theoretical, practical, and street – beamed into living-rooms across this scepter’d isle, and soon after, thanks to BBC America, beyond. The series introduced a whole new audience to Messrs. Strange and Norrell, and rekindled the interest of many who had enjoyed the book previously. This renewed interest in *Strange & Norrell* provided me with an opportunity to pluck out some of the more easily disentangled fragments of folklore, magic, and the like from Clarke’s incredibly rich text and inspect them more closely in a series of articles originally

published on The Daily Grail (www.dailygrail.com), now collected, polished, and presented here for your consideration.

THE LANGUAGE OF BIRDS

We are, at the opening of *Strange & Norrell*, introduced to the Learned Society of York Magicians, all of whom are theoretical magicians. As their president Dr. Foxcastle explains it:

[Theoretical] magicians study magic. The history of magic. We do not perform it. We don’t expect an astronomer to create stars, or a Botanist to invent new flowers.

The York Magicians are gentlemen historians, antiquarians who would never dream of casting a spell of their own, yet they have studied, discussed, and written upon the subject. The precious few texts the York Society have to examine are chiefly those deemed unworthy to reside within the prodigious library at Hurlfrew Abbey belonging to Mr. Gilbert Norrell.

Susanna Clarke provides extensive footnotes (near two-hundred in total) throughout her book, outlining an entire fictional history and corpus of magical scholarship. She divides what we may think of as Magic Books into two broad categories: Books of Magic and Books on Magic. The former were largely written pre-17th century during the era of the potent Golden Age magicians. The latter mostly date post-17th century, written by the less accomplished (sometimes wholly powerless) Silver Age magicians and those who followed them. Books of Magic are of the greatest interest to the practical magician, leaving only Books on Magic (and precious few even of them) for theoretical magicians to study.

More than thirty Magic Books (and papers) are mentioned in *Strange & Norrell*. Several, such as *How to putte Questiones to the*

Dark and understand its Answeres, and *Gatekeeper of Apollo*, are mere titles but we do get considerably more detail about a handful of others. One of the most intriguing of these is *Treatise concerning the Language of Birds* by Thomas Lanchester, upon whose possible contents and origins it might be fun to speculate a little here.

There is nothing else in magic but the wild thought of the bird as it casts itself into the void. There is no creature upon the earth with such potential for magic. Even the least of them may fly straight out of this world and come by chance to the Other Lands. Where does the wind come from that blows upon your face, that fans the pages of your book? Where the harum-scarum magic of small wild creatures meets the magic of Man, where the language of the wind and the rain and the trees can be understood, there we will find the Raven King.

– from *Treatise concerning the Language of Birds* by
Thomas Lanchester

In Kabbalah, Renaissance Magic, and Alchemy, the language of the birds was considered a secret divine language and the key to perfect knowledge. In this context the language of birds was also sometimes also referred to as the *langue verte*, or Green Language.

In Norse mythology a taste of dragon's blood could grant the consumer the gift of understanding the birds as, according to the *Poetic Edda* and the *Völsunga Saga*, it did for the hero Sigurd. Sigurd's story is also depicted in the eleventh century Ramsund carving in Sweden.

In the old folk tales of Wales, Germany, Greece, and beyond there is a long tradition of protagonists being granted the gift of understanding the birds by some magical means. The birds then invariably go on to inform or warn the hero about some danger or hidden treasure following the same pattern as the stories of Sigurd (the Russian folk tale "The Language of the Birds" is another example).



The Sigurd Stone located at Gök in Sweden (Sö 327)

In writings by and upon the ancient Greeks the ability to understand birds is often attributed (though perhaps metaphorically) to real people such as the philosophers Democritus, Anaximander, and Apollonius of Tyana, as well as to mythical figures like the soothsayer Melampus.

Most wonderful is that kind of Auguring of theirs, who hear, & understand the speeches of Animals, in which as amongst the Ancients, Melampus, and Tiresias, and Thales, and Apollonius the Tyanean [Apollonius of Tyana], who as we read, excelled, and whom they report had excellent skill in the language of birds: of whom Philostratus, and Porphyrius [Porphyry] speak, saying, that of old when Apollonius sate in company amongst his friends, seeing Sparrows sitting upon a tree, and one Sparrow coming from elsewhere unto them, making a great chattering and noise, and then flying away, all the rest following him, he said to his companions, that that Sparrow told the rest that an Asse being burdened with wheat fell down in a hole neer the City, and that the wheat was scattered upon the ground: many being much moved with these

words, went to see, and so it was, as Apollonius said, at which they much wondered.

– from *De Occulta Philosophia Libri III* by Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim, 1533³

Tiresias was one of the most celebrated soothsayers of the early ages of Greece. He lived in the times of Oedipus, and the war of the seven chiefs against Thebes. He was afflicted by the Gods with blindness, in consequence of some displeasure they conceived against him; but in compensation they endowed him beyond all other mortals with the gift of prophecy. He is said to have understood the language of birds. He possessed the art of divining future events from the various indications that manifest themselves in fire, in smoke, and in other ways but to have set the highest value upon the communications of the dead, whom by spells and incantations he constrained to appear and answer his inquiries and he is represented as pouring out tremendous menaces against them, when they showed themselves tardy to attend upon his commands.

– from *Lives of the Necromancers: or, An account of the most eminent persons in successive ages, who have claimed for themselves, or to whom has been imputed by others, the exercise of magical power* by William Godwin, 1834⁴

The belief that the vocalisations and behaviours of birds are indicators of things yet to come runs deep. In England we have the tradition that if the Tower of London ravens (once-wild birds attracted by ready supply of carrion supplied by executions, now tame corvids with clipped wings) leave, the Crown will fall and Britain with it. The 18th century *One for Sorrow* rhyme is another example, still recited by many upon sighting a gathering of magpies (which is, after all, called a tiding). Birds do speak, of course, and there are still those who understand them.

A study conducted in Yellowstone National Park in 2002 recorded ravens socializing with wolves even when there was no potential prey or carrion present. The ravens were seen swooping down to pull wolves' tails, interacting with wolf pups at den sites and engaging in playful chasing. Bernd Heinrich, author of *Mind of the Raven, Investigations and Adventures with Wolf-Birds*, and advisor on the study, also frequently observed ravens hunting with wolves. This relationship between the two species was deemed especially interesting considering that wolves were absent from Yellowstone National Park for nearly seventy years, until their reintroduction in the mid-1990s.⁵ Our own bond with the ancestors of today's domestic dogs began during the Stone Age, when humans were hunter gatherers working with the canines to secure food for the two species, just as the ravens and wolves still do. Tales of hunting interaction involving wolves, ravens, and humans figure in the storytelling of Tlingit and Inuit Native American tribes of the Pacific Northwest and Alaska. Some of these stories describe the birds tipping in flight, effectively pointing with their wings, to direct hunters to caribou.

Today there are fifteen species of honeybird in Africa and, as you might deduce from their name, they're quite interested in bees and their nests. In truth it is not so much the honey the birds are after as the larvae and wax contained within the hive. Breaking into a nest to get at the honey comb is a nigh on impossible task for these relatively small birds, which is why they talk to humans. First formally studied in the 1980s, the nomadic Boran people of Kenya have a long-standing agreement with the honeybirds of that region.

Each partner knows how to get the other's attention. To attract the birds, the Borans call them with a penetrating whistle (known in the Boran language as Fuulido) that can be heard over distances greater than a kilometer and that is made by blowing air into clasped fists, modified snail shells, or hollowed-out palm nuts. Comparably, hungry honeyguides flag down humans by flying

up close, moving restlessly from perch to perch, and emitting a double-noted, persistent “tirr-tirr-tirr-tirr” call.⁶

The bird flies along before perching on a branch, waiting for the human to catch up, then flies on again, leading the would be honey gatherer on toward the nearest hive. The behaviour and calls of the honeybird (or honeyguide as they are also known) also indicate other factors like the distance of the hive from the current location. Arriving at the nest (which is still often unseen by the person following) the honeyguide gives a new call and once again modifies its behaviour.

This call differs from the previous guiding call in that it has a softer tone, with longer intervals between successive notes. There is also a diminished response, if any at all, to whistling and shouting by humans. After a few indication calls, the bird remains silent. When approached by the searching gatherer, it flies to another perch close by, sometimes after circling around the nest. The resulting flight path finally reveals the location of the colony to the gatherer. [...] After using smoky fires to reduce the bees’ aggression, the Boran honey gatherers use tools or their hands to remove the honey comb, and then break off pieces to be shared with their honeyguide partners.⁷

In so many of the old stories the idea is that, through the power of flight (in itself seemingly magical and unobtainable), birds could travel vast distances, see things no human eye could, and report back to one who spoke their language. One could argue that, in the 21st century, drones are beginning to practically fill the role of Odin’s legendary Hugin and Munin. Yet drones are mindless, soulless things, alien invaders in any natural landscape, whereas birds have been here far, far longer than we humans. No longer, as in my youth, do we describe the dinosaurs as having died out – not completely, at least – because birds are now classified as modern theropod dinosaurs. In a paper published in August 2015, scientists reported a new fossilised specimen

of a previously undiscovered feathered bird species, *Archaeornithura meemannae*, which lived roughly 130.7 million years ago in north-eastern China.⁸ That is 128 million years older than the oldest human remains which were discovered in Ethiopia recently.⁹ Their ancestors were the closest things to dragons that ever lived, soaring high above everything while our shrew-like furry forebears squeaked and scurried for cover. They must have looked up into the sky in fear at first but over time, generation after generation after generation after generation, that fear turned to awe. How did they move through the air? Forces and powers they could not comprehend, things outside of their own nature and experience. Magic. What did they see? What did they know? If only, thought the hominid, we could speak the language of the birds.

ON FAIRIES AND WITCHCRAFT

The word fairy derives from Middle English *faierie* (also *fayerye*, *feirie*, *fairie*), a direct borrowing from Old French *faerie* (Modern French *féerie*) meaning the land, realm, or characteristic activity (i.e. enchantment) of the legendary people of folklore and romance called (in Old French) *faie* or *fee* (Modern French *fee*). In *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* Faerie (or the Other Lands as some magicians call them), the home of the fairies, is an Otherworld realm connected to England by magical means. Clarke’s Faerie is a large land with many kingdoms and territories. There is Lost-Hope, the home (or *brugh*) of the fairy known only as ‘The Gentleman With The Thistle-Down Hair’, which at times borders or intersects with real world locations such as Sir Walter Pole’s Harley-street home. The Gentleman’s other kingdoms include The City of Iron Angels, and a place called Blue Castles. There is Pity-Me (“a miserable little place” according to The Gentleman) which, oddly enough, has the name of a real village in Durham, England; “a whimsical name bestowed in the 19th century on a place considered desolate, exposed or difficult to cultivate” according to the Oxford

Dictionary of British Place Names. There is also Untold Blessings (“a fine place, with dark, impenetrable forests, lonely mountains and uncrossable seas”). John Uskglass – the almighty 12th century magician known as the Raven King – is held to have possessed three kingdoms: one in England, one in Faerie (the name of which is not given) and “a strange country on the far side of Hell” sometimes called the Bitter Lands. Indeed, relations between Faerie and Hell are well established, not least in Scottish folk tradition where “the *teind*” (tithe) must be paid by the former to the latter every seven years. Mortals who have strayed into the Other Lands are sometimes taken as payment, as hinted at in the 16th century ballad of Tam Lin and the 15th century romance of Thomas the Rhymer (itself later condensed into a ballad). Though the *teind* itself is not mentioned in Susanna Clarke’s book, it is briefly referred to in the third episode of the television series.

It may surprise you to learn that, in Britain, consorting with fairies was once a capital offence. Midwife Bessie Dunlop, a resident of Dalry, Scotland was burned at the stake in 1576 after admitting to receiving magical tuition from a fae Queen of the “Court of Elphyne” (elfland or fairyland).¹⁰ Allison Peirson (or Pearson) of Fife, Scotland was likewise punished for the same offence seven years later. In a 1583 ballad written about the then Bishop of St. Andrews, Patrick Adamson, the Scottish balladeer Robert Semphill makes reference to the scandal surrounding the trial of Allison Pearson when it was discovered that Adamson had sought advice from the magician (or witch as the court called her). In Semphill’s ballad he has Pearson taking part in the ‘Fairy Rade’ described in Thomas Keighley’s 1870 work *The Fairy Mythology* thusly:

The Fairy Rade, or procession, was a matter of great importance. It took place on the coming in of summer, awh the peasantry, by using the precaution of placing a branch of rowan over their door, might safely gaze on the cavalcade, as with music sounding, bridles ringing, and voices mingling, it pursued its way from place to place.¹¹

Semphill’s version of the trooping of the fae seems to have been mixed up with the witches Sabbath, the event even taking place on Halloween rather than the eve of the Summer. The 16th and 17th centuries – while at the tail end of the Golden Age of Magic in *Strange & Norrell* – were not a good period to be a practitioner of magic in Britain. In England, Scotland and Ireland, a series of Witchcraft Acts enshrined into law the punishment (usually death, sometimes incarceration) of individuals practising, or claiming to practise magic. Many books were written upon the subject of magic and the detection of those who practised it at the time and among them was King James VI of Scotland (later also James I of England)’s *Daemonologie, In Forme of a Dialogie* (written as a conversation between two characters named Philomathes and Epistemon). Published in 1599 the work was divided into three parts, the last of which is entitled *The Description Of All These Kindes Of Spirites That Troubles Men Or Women*. In the fifth chapter of this book, *The Description Of The Fourth Kinde Of Spirites Called The Phairie: What Is Possible Therein, And What Is But Illusionnes*, Epistemon makes it clear that he (and therefore King James) believes that fairies and the



From *The History of Witches and Wizards*, 1720

Other Lands are mere illusions created by the Devil to trick humans. The old beliefs, stories, and practices are dismissed in one fell swoop: anything non-Christian is automatically anti-Christian and therefore the work of the Arch Fiend itself. Faerie and Hell no longer near neighbours but, in the eyes of the King and his loyal subjects, the self-same place. So it was that for centuries there was no magic in Britain, only Witchcraft. No magicians, only witches.

Witches (as opposed to magicians) are mentioned as such only two or three times in *Strange & Norrell*, the practical magician Mr. Gilbert Norrell describing them as “those half-fairy, half-human women to whom malicious people were used to apply when they wished to harm their neighbours”. Clearly they are, or were, not respectable in Norrell’s estimation – but then he is a man who disapproves of almost all magic that is not done by himself. Are, or were, there then any female magicians? The story of “*The Master of Nottingham’s daughter*”, an adventure concerning a magical ring and a wicked sorceress named Margaret Ford, appears in one of Susanna Clarke’s ample footnotes for Chapter Twenty-five. It is quite a long story, very much in the Fairy Tale tradition but, at its conclusion, we are given the following information:

There is another version of this story which contains no magic ring, no eternally-burning wood, no phoenix – no miracles at all, in fact. According to this version Margaret Ford and the Master of Nottingham’s daughter (whose name was Donata Torel) were not enemies at all, but the leaders of a fellowship of female magicians that flourished in Nottinghamshire in the twelfth century. Hugh Torel, the Master of Nottingham, opposed the fellowship and took great pains to destroy it (though his own daughter was a member). He very nearly succeeded, until the women left their homes and fathers and husbands and went to live in the woods under the protection of Thomas Godbless, a much greater magician than Hugh Torel. This less colourful version of the story has never been

as popular as the other but it is this version which Jonathan Strange said was the true and which he included in *The History and Practice of English Magic*.

The world of gentlemen magicians is an undeniably patriarchal one then, yet so too was the historical era in which *Strange & Norrell* is set. Even so, it is perhaps interesting to note that the enchanting Fairy Queen, ruler of Faerie of our own traditions, seems to have been replaced by Clarke with a host of male fairy Kings, Dukes, and so on. In *Strange & Norrell’s* alternative history the witch-trials never happened; magic instead being, if not celebrated, then feared and respected during the Raven King’s reign over Northern England (the area between the rivers Tweed and Trent) which lasted from 1111 up until his disappearance in 1434. Even so, with magic in decline – both in employment generally and in potency when employed – in the centuries after the Raven King’s departure, it seems people did find cause to speak and write against it. Published in 1698, skeptical magio-historian Valentine Munday’s *The Blue Book: being an attempt to expose the most prevalent lies and common deceptions practised by English magicians upon the King’s subjects and upon each other* denied the existence of the Other Lands entirely and stated that anyone who claimed to have visited them was, not in league with Satan as King James would have had them, but merely a liar. In the mannerly world of *Strange & Norrell* the ruining of his or her reputation seems to be very worst punishment that could be levelled against any magician then.

AWAY WITH THE FAIRIES

In *Strange & Norrell* the practical magician Mr. Gilbert Norrell is very much anti-fairy and warns strongly against consulting with, or employing, them:

A more poisonous race or one more inimical to England has never existed. There have been far too many magicians too idle or ignorant to pursue a proper course of study, who instead bent all their energies upon acquiring a fairy-servant and when they had got such a servant they depended upon him to complete all their business for them. English history is full of such men and some, I am glad to say, were punished for it as they deserved. Look at Bloodworth.

Simon Bloodworth's tale is given in one of Clarke's many wonderful footnotes (in chapter five of the book) and mentioned briefly in episode five of Harness' television adaptation. According to Clarke, Bloodworth was a none-too-impressive 14th century magician from Bradford on Avon who was one day unexpectedly offered the services of a fairy calling himself Buckler.

As every English schoolchild nowadays can tell you, Bloodworth would have done better to have inquired further and to have probed a little deeper into who, precisely, Buckler was, and why, exactly, he had come out of Faerie with no other aim than to become the servant of a third-rate English magician.

Buckler did ever more and ever better magic upon Bloodworth's behalf, and as he did so he grew stronger. Soon the fairy took on a larger, more human, appearance ("his thin, piebald fox-face became a pale and handsome human one") which he claimed to be his true form, the former being merely an enchantment.

On a fine May morning in 1310 when Bloodworth was away from home Mrs Bloodworth discovered a tall cupboard standing in the corner of her kitchen where no cupboard had ever been before. When she asked Buckler about it, he said immediately that it was a magical cupboard and that he had brought it there.

Buckler told Mrs. Bloodworth that it pained him to see her and her daughters slaving away washing and cleaning all day long. If she would but step into the cupboard, he said, she would be transported to a place where she might learn spells which "would make any work finished in an instant, make her appear beautiful in the eyes of all who beheld her, make large piles of gold appear whenever she wished it, make her husband obey her in all things" and so on and so on.

Seventeen people entered Buckler's cupboard that morning and were never seen again in England; among them were Mrs Bloodworth, her two youngest daughters, her two maids and two manservants, Mrs Bloodworth's uncle and six neighbours.

Two hundred years later, author of *De Tractatu Magicarum Linguarum (On the Subject of Magical Languages)*, the magician Dr. Martin Pale, entered Faerie and visited the brughs of fairies Cold Henry and John Hollyshoes. In the latter the doctor found an eight-year-old girl washing a great pile of dirty dishes. She said she had been told that when the things were clean she could go home to England. The girl thought she had been washing-up for two weeks or so and would be done in a day or two more. Pale recorded that the girl told him her name was Anne Bloodworth.

The danger of humans being lost, trapped, or even imprisoned in Faerie is a recurring theme throughout the old folk-tales of England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and beyond. In the 15th century romance of Thomas the Rhymer¹² the titular character meets and falls in love with the beautiful Queen of Elfland, travelling willingly with her upon a milk-white horse whose mane hung with bells. In his collection *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, William Butler Yeats wrote the following, more detailed and much less pleasant sounding, description of what may be considered the same arrangement:

The Leanhaun Shee (fairy mistress), seeks the love of mortals. If they refuse, she must be their slave; if they consent, they are hers, and can only escape by finding another to take their place. The fairy lives on their life, and they waste away. Death is no escape from her. She is the Gaelic muse, for she gives inspiration to those she persecutes. The Gaelic poets die young, for she is restless, and will not let them remain long on earth – this malignant phantom.¹³

Others like Burd Ellen, sister of Rowland in the old English Fairy Tale *Childe Rowland*, stray into the Other Lands entirely by accident. Burd Ellen unintentionally ran around a church widdershins (anti-clockwise) and disappeared – taken to the Dark Tower by the King of Elfland. After seeking advice from the great magician Merlin, Rowland set out on a rather bloody quest to rescue his sister. One must never eat or drink in Faerie, as Merlin warns:

Bite no bit, and drink no drop, however hungry or thirsty you are; drink a drop, or bite a bit, while in Elfland you be, and never will you see Middle Earth again.¹⁴

If fairy food is eaten then the devourer will be bound to remain in the Other Lands for an allotted time, just as Persephone daughter of Zeus and Demeter was doomed to remain half a year in Hades (the Greek Underworld which it may be noted shares characteristics with both Faerie and its near neighbour Hell) by the consumption of food there. This seems to have become a steadfast “fact” of fairy lore but, for my part, I cannot find reference earlier than *Childe Rowland* relating specifically to the fae.

Robert Kirk’s 1691 book *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies* is regarded by many as one of the most important works on fairy lore ever committed to paper, yet it contains no reference to the perils of dining upon fairy foods. Kirk, it is said, paid a



heavy price for his involvement with the fairy folk, however. In his introduction to the 1893 edition the renowned folklorist Andrew Lang gave the following biographical account of the author and his strange demise.

The Rev. Robert Kirk, the author of *The Secret Commonwealth*, was a student of theology at St. Andrews: his Master's degree, however, he took at Edinburgh. He was (and this is notable) the youngest and seventh son of Mr. James Kirk, minister of Aberfoyle, the place familiar to all readers of Rob Roy. As a seventh son, he was, no doubt, specially gifted, and in *The Secret Commonwealth* he lays some stress on [...] By his first wife he had a son, Colin Kirk, W.S.; by his second wife, a son who was minister of Dornoch. He died (if he did die, which is disputed) in 1692, aged about fifty-one; his tomb was inscribed --

ROBERTUS KIRK, A.M.
Linguae Hiberniae Lumen.

The tomb, in Scott's time, was to be seen in the east end of the churchyard of Aberfoyle; but the ashes of Mr. Kirk are not there. His successor, the Rev. Dr. Grahame, in his *Sketches of Picturesque Scenery*, informs us that, as Mr. Kirk was walking on a *dun-shi*, or fairy-hill, in his neighbourhood, he sunk down in a swoon, which was taken for death. "After the ceremony of a seeming funeral," writes Scott, "the form of the Rev. Robert Kirk appeared to a relation, and commanded him to go to Grahame of Duchray. 'Say to Duchray, who is my cousin as well as your own, that I am not dead, but a captive in Fairyland; and only one chance remains for my liberation. When the posthumous child, of which my wife has been delivered since my disappearance, shall be brought to baptism, I will appear in the room, when, if Duchray shall throw over my head the knife or dirk which he holds in his hand, I may

be restored to society; but if this is neglected, I am lost for ever.'" True to his trust, Mr. Kirk did appear at the christening and "was visibly seen;" but Duchray was so astonished that he did not throw his dirk over the head of the appearance, and to society Mr. Kirk has not yet been restored. This is extremely to be regretted, as he could now add matter of much importance to his treatise. Neither history nor tradition has more to tell about Mr. Robert Kirk, who seems to have been a man of good family, a student, and, as his book shows, an innocent and learned person.¹⁵

The form that fell down as if in death upon Aberfoyle's Fairy Knowe was thought then to have been a "stock" or "fetch" or "waff": a mere magical facsimile of Kirk, created by the fairies to trick mortals into believing he had died while he was in fact in the Other Lands.¹⁶

Besides washing-up, what do these humans do while they're in Faerie? Well, many seem to spend an awful lot of time dancing.

It is, of course, to be noted that the modern Greek superstition of the Nereids, who carry off mortal girls to dance with them till they pine away, answers to some of our Fairy legends.¹⁷

Again, these are the words of Andrew Lang in his introductory notes to *The Secret Commonwealth. The Twelve Dancing Princesses* (or *The Worn-Out Dancing Shoes*, or *The Shoes that were Danced to Pieces*) is a German fairy tale originally published by the Brothers Grimm in 1812. In the story the princesses all sleep every night in the same locked room. Every morning, much to the confusion of the staff and their father the king, their dancing shoes are found to be worn through. This, it transpires is because every night the princesses sneak through a trapdoor in their bedroom floor down into the Fairy Realm where they travel to a fairy castle and dance with twelve fairy princes. Once discovered and proved this leads to the fae princes each being cursed for the same length of time they kept the young women dancing.



According to Mrs. Ella Mary Leather's 1913 collection *The Folklore and Witchcraft of Herefordshire*, girls were still dancing themselves (almost) to death in Faerie in the late 19th century. A seventy-five-year-old woman told Mrs. Leather that she remembered her mother telling of a first cousin of hers who was so passionately fond of dancing she would visit any dance she heard of and could get to. One evening the young woman was walking home from such an occasion when she heard beautiful music coming from within a fairy ring (*elferingewort*, or "elf-ring" in Middle English; *ronds de sorciers*, or "sorcerers' rings" in French; and *Hexenringe* or "witches' rings" in German). Dancing into the ring, she immediately disappeared. Guessing what must have happened to her dance-crazed daughter, the mother knew that the only way to get her back was to wait outside the ring exactly one year after the vanishing. This she did and when her child reappeared suddenly within the ring the mother seized her in silence (so as not to bring herself to the attention of the fairies) and dragged her back into England. The young woman thought less than a day had elapsed – time in Faerie passing much slower than it does in our own realm. Mrs. Leather was told that the young woman went to work as a

shop assistant in the market town of Kington, but was for the rest of her life prone to seeing fairies who would, apparently, steal from the shop. Though she warned the fairies they would be found out, the woman was careful not to say that she could see them in case, as in the tale of the *Fairy Ointment*, she was subsequently blinded by them.¹⁸

In *Strange & Norrell*, just as in tragic "true" tales such as those of Robertus Kirk and the dancing girl of Kington, fairy tale endings cannot be counted on it seems. In a letter to Mr. John Murray, on December 31st, 1816 (possibly unsent), the practical magician Jonathan Strange wrote:

Stories of magicians freeing captives from Faerie are few and far between. I cannot now recall a single one. Somewhere in one of his books Martin Pale describes how fairies can grow tired of their human guests and expel them without warning from the brugh; the poor captives find themselves back home, but hundreds of years after they left it.

Whether little Anne Bloodworth ever made it back to England remains unrecorded.

MAGIC AND MADNESS

"I am not at all surprised that you could not help His Majesty," said Mr Norrell. "I do not believe that even the Aureate magicians could cure madness. In fact I am not sure that they tried. They seem to have considered madness in quite a different light. They held madmen in a sort of reverence and thought they knew things sane men did not – things which might be useful to a magician. There are stories of both Ralph Stokesy and Catherine of Winchester consulting with madmen."

“But it was not only magicians, surely?” said Strange. “Fairies too had a strong interest in madmen. I am sure I remember reading that somewhere.”

“Yes, indeed! Some of our most important writers have remarked upon the strong resemblance between madmen and fairies. Both are well known for talking without sense or connexion.”

Talking without (seeming) sense or connection, in the world of *Strange & Norrell*, is one effect of what is referred to only as a “muffling spell”: an enchantment signified by a phantom rose at the mouth of the subject (to those magically inclined enough to see it). The apparent nonsense spoken by those thus enchanted proves, in fact, to be old fairy and folk tales which, though unrelated to what the person is trying to say, are nevertheless coherently told. So it is that those who have had a muffling spell cast upon them may appear insane but not (necessarily) be so. Clearly, this can be read as a metaphor for depression, and any number of mental health conditions in which the sufferer feels unable to articulate their problems, or is unable to imagine them being understood (or taken seriously) if they do so.

Madness and otherness are themes that run throughout *Strange & Norrell*. In one footnote we are given a note on the thoughts of Richard Chaston (1620-95), an author who the practical magician Mr. Gilbert Norrell agrees with (on this matter, at least):

Chaston wrote that men and Fairies both contain within them a faculty of reason and a faculty of magic. In men reason is strong and magic is weak. With fairies is the other way round: magic comes very naturally to them, but by human standards they are barely sane.

Here then, magic seems to be the very opposite of reason, but does that make it madness?

In Clarke’s world fairies and Faerie may seem at first to be the opposite of Englishmen and England but, in fact, (as Chanston hints) they prove to be more like mirror images of the same; their characteristics merely inverted.

Strange & Norrell draws on various Romantic literary traditions and is set during the Romantic Era – an era when England was itself ruled over by “mad” King George III. The self-elected poster-boy of Romanticism Lord Byron was infamously described as “mad, bad, and dangerous to know” by Lady Caroline Lamb; a phrase which has become synonymous with hell-raising, raucous, rebellious behaviour ever since. Madness then, was and is an important part of the Romantic aesthetic.

Poets cultivated the association among insanity, eccentricity, and genius in their life-styles and their work to distinguish themselves from the philistine public and from writers of lesser talent. [...] Two general reasons for the prevalence of genuine and feigned madness in this period were the increased acceptability of public displays of emotion and the cult of the genius poet.¹⁹

Yet while Byron’s madness may have been something of an affectation, other poets such as William Blake, and Friedrich Hölderlin did unquestionably struggle with their mental health (the latter almost certainly being schizophrenic). Another was John Clare, the “Peasant Poet” from Northampton, who was in and out of asylums for much of his adult life.

In 1837 he was admitted to Dr Allen’s High Beech asylum near Epping and was reported as being “full of many strange delusions”. He thought he was a prize fighter and that he had two wives, Patty and Mary [a girl Clare fell in love with as a boy but who, in reality, he seems to have never had any actual relationship with]. He started to claim he was Lord Byron. There

is an interesting letter that Dr Allen wrote about Clare to *The Times* in 1840:

‘It is most singular that ever since he came... the moment he gets pen or pencil in hand he begins to write most poetical effusions. Yet he has never been able to obtain in conversation, nor even in writing prose, the appearance of sanity for two minutes or two lines together, and yet there is no indication of insanity in any of his poetry.’

An interesting picture of Clare during [his time at Northampton Asylum circa 1860] comes from the asylum superintendent, Dr Nesbitt, who wrote of his condition:

‘It was characterised by visionary ideas and hallucinations. For instance he may be said to have lost his own personal identity as with the gravity of truth he would maintain that he had written the works of Byron, and Sir Walter Scott, that he was Nelson and Wellington, that he had fought and won the battle of Waterloo, that he had had his head shot off at this battle, whilst he was totally unable to explain the process by which it had been again affixed to his body.’²⁰

Clare’s own affliction apparently worked as the mirror opposite of the muffling spell of Clarke’s world – him being able to speak with absolute clarity and mastery through one medium alone. The madman as genius in his single field of specialisation.

In a paper published in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* in 2001, Allan Beveridge wrote the following:

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, two major factors contributed to the awakening interest in the art of the insane—the Romantic movement, which identified madness as an exalted

state allowing access to hidden realms; and the emergence of the asylum, which provided a location for the production of patient-art. Romanticism saw madness as a privileged condition: the madman, unrestrained by reason or by social convention, was perceived as having access to profound truths. The Romantics emphasized subjectivity and individualism, and hailed the madman as a hero, voyaging to new planes of reality. Although the equation of madness and genius originated with Plato, it was only in the nineteenth century that it became an important feature of cultural discourse. From the proposition that the genius was a kind of madman it was logical to ask whether the mad themselves create works of genius.²¹

The art of the insane, along with the art of children, and the “primitive” art of other cultures, were studied and admired by the likes of the Expressionists and the Surrealists. To them such art represented an absolute break from the conventions of western formalism – from the established etiquette and symbolism of art as it stood (just as the wild magic of fairies contrasts with Mr. Norrell’s controlled, formalised English Magic). In the first *Surrealist Manifesto*, André Breton, the leading theorist of the movement, wrote:

The confidences of madmen: I would spend my life in provoking them. They are people of a scrupulous honesty, and whose innocence is equalled only by mine.

A quotation worthy of Lord Byron himself in terms of its apparent pomposity.

One cannot write of magic, madness, fairies, and art and not include the tragic, talented Richard Dadd.

Richard Dadd was born August 1, 1817 in Chatham, Kent, England. At age 13 the family moved to London, and in 1837, Dadd, age 20, was admitted to the Royal Academy of Art. Dadd showed talent at

the Academy and gathered a number of painterly friends, known collectively as ‘The Clique’. He won several awards while at the Academy, and began exhibiting his work during his first year.

In 1841, he received a commission to do the woodblock illustrations for a book called the *Book of British Ballads*, as well as an oil painting called *Titania Sleeping*, which is perhaps the best example of his early work. Overall, his style was not particularly remarkable, no more so than any other moderately gifted painter in Victorian England during the stylistic phase now referred to as “The Fairy School”.²²

In 1842 Richard Dadd set out on the not-yet-quite-out-of-fashion Grand Tour (of Europe and the Middle East) with Sir Thomas Phillips, who had employed the artist to document his travels. All went well until the duo reached Egypt where Phillips and others believed that Dadd must have caught sunstroke. Dadd himself was under a rather different impression however, namely that he had been possessed by the ancient Egyptian God Osiris. Osiris is the God of the afterlife, of the dead, and, perhaps crucially, of the underworld (the connections between Hades, Hell, the classical underworld, and Faerie having already been discussed in part).

Upon his return to England Richard was clearly changed and troubled. He was taken by his family to rural Kent for a bit of rest, relaxation, and recuperation. There, in August 1843, Dadd took a knife and murdered his father, who he now believed was not his father at all but a supernatural double (a “fetch”, or a “waff”, as some might say). Richard fled the country but was arrested just outside Paris when he attempted a second murder, this time with a straight razor. Dadd confessed to killing his father and was returned to England, where he was committed to the criminal department of Bethlem psychiatric hospital, better known to many as Bedlam.

In Bedlam (and later in the equally infamous Broadmoor Hospital where he died in 1886) Richard Dadd was encouraged to continue

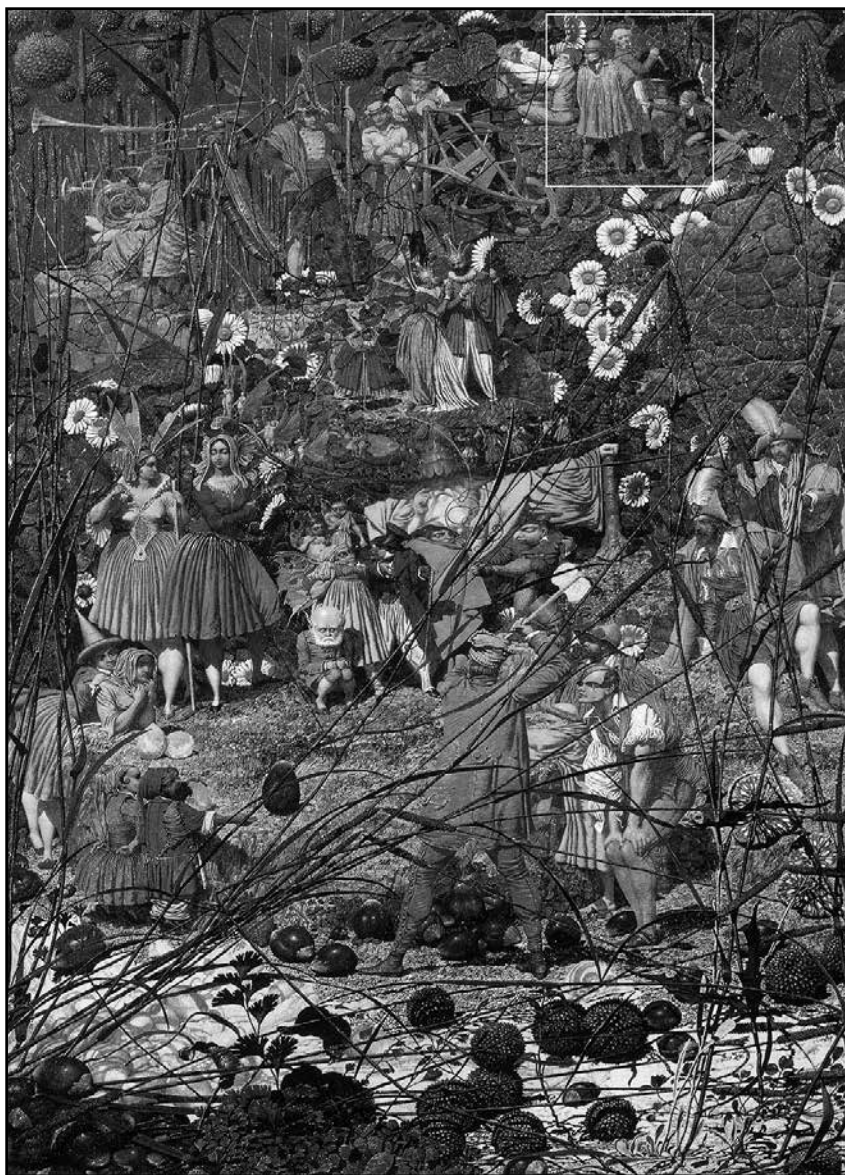
with his painting. His artwork was, as is perhaps to be expected, somewhat changed (“possess[ing] a strange compelling quality absent from the work he completed when sane”, according to Beveridge²³) but it was no less wonderful. So wonderful in fact that in 1855 the then Head Steward at Bedlam, George Henry Haydon, asked Dadd if he would paint a picture for him. Dadd spent nine years on the painting – a canvas measuring a mere 54 x 39.5 cm (21 x 15.5 inches) – which, though it remained unfinished in his eyes, now hangs in London’s world famous Tate Gallery. The painting is entitled *The Fairy Feller’s Master Stroke* and is described on the Tate website thusly:

With the exception of Shakespeare’s Oberon and Titania, who appear in the top half of the picture, the figures are drawn entirely from the artist’s imagination. The main focus of the painting is the Fairy Feller himself, who raises his axe in readiness to split a large chestnut which will be used to construct Queen Mab’s new fairy carriage. In the centre of the picture the white-bearded patriarch raises his right hand, commanding the woodsman not to strike a blow until the signal is given. Meanwhile the rest of the fairy band looks on in anticipation, anxious to see whether the woodsman will succeed in splitting the nut with one stroke.

The magician-like figure of the patriarch wears a triple crown, which seems to be a reference to the Pope. Dadd saw the Pope during a visit to Rome in 1843 and was apparently overcome by an urge to attack him. Although the patriarch may be interpreted as a father figure, the tiny apothecary, brandishing a mortar and pestle in the top right of the picture, is in fact a portrait of the artist’s father, Robert Dadd.²⁴

Yes, Dadd’s father was depicted by the artist among the fairies.

In the very first issue of the Tate magazine, *Tate Etc*, published in May 2004 (four months before *Strange & Norrell*), the German Capitalist Realist painter and photographer Sigmar Polke (1941–2010)



Richard Dadd's *The Fairy Feller's Master Stroke* (1855-1864), with highlighted section showing his father Robert Dadd, who he murdered in 1843 after becoming convinced he was a supernatural double of his true father.

wrote a piece on Dadd's *Fairy Feller's Master Stroke* entitled "Private View". While I do not pretend to be familiar with Polke, either as a painter or a writer, there are nevertheless perhaps some insights to be gained from an artist's perspective on Dadd and his master-work. Here are a couple of choice quotations from the piece:

I've known Richard Dadd's *The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke* 1855–64 since the 1970s. When I look at it again today, it's as if I were looking into a tapestry and losing my way. Its composition is quite unlike any other Victorian fairy painting. The point of view is not clearly defined. Instead, the individual elements appear to be linked by almost invisible forces.

At that time, the fantasy life of fairies – from Grimm to Shakespeare – enjoyed widespread popularity as an imaginary world fully integrated into reality. Dadd's appropriation of this world is, however, neither kitsch, nor facile, nor garrulous, because it does not obey the then current pictorial conventions. Nor does his vision echo the spirited confections of popular draughtsman J.J. Grandville's fantastic book *Un Autre Monde* 1844. Instead, one senses the extraordinary intensity of an enduring dialogue between the artist and the universe of figures that he created. Isolated from the outside world, he painted the picture for the director of the hospital. Did he perhaps want to present it as proof of his sanity?

A strange idea; attempting to prove one's sanity by creating a hyper-realistic representation of Faerie.

In the final paragraph Polke talks briefly about Dadd's madness but in place of a conclusion to the piece there is, instead, a rather curious quotation.

One more curlicue, a whorl, my coda follows in the form of an ancient Celtic saying:

A city lasts three years,
 A dog outlives three cities,
 A horse outlasts three dogs,
 A person outlives three horses,
 A donkey outlives three people,
 A wild goose outlives three donkeys,
 A crow outlives three wild geese,
 A hart outlives three crows,
 A raven outlives three harts,
 And the Phoenix outlives three ravens.²⁵

I have not been able to find the source of the quotation and I'm left wondering exactly what Polke was trying to communicate, and whether he was freely able to do so...

In *Strange & Norrell* madness and magic may not be the same thing but they are bedfellows nonetheless; each having some bearing and effect upon the other. Even so...

There were remarkably few spells for curing madness. Indeed he had found only one, and even then he was not sure that was what it was meant for. It was a prescription in Ormskirk's *Revelations of Thirty-Six Other Worlds*. Ormskirk said that it would dispel illusions and correct wrong ideas. Strange took out the book and read through the spell again. It was a peculiarly obscure piece of magic, consisting only of the following words:

“Place the moon at his eyes and her whiteness shall devour the false sights the deceiver has placed there.

Place a swarm of bees at his ears. Bees love truth and will destroy the deceiver's lies.

Place salt in his mouth lest the deceiver attempt to delight him with the taste of honey or disgust him with the taste of ashes.

Nail his hand with an iron nail so that he shall not raise it to do the deceiver's bidding.

Place his heart in a secret place so that all his desires shall be his own and the deceiver shall find no hold there.

Memorandum. The colour red may be found beneficial.”

However, as Strange read it through, he was forced to admit that he had not the least idea what it meant.

THE RAVEN KING

Strange & Norrell (the novel) is divided into three volumes: the first is *Mr. Norrell*, the second *Jonathan Strange*, and the third is entitled *John Uskglass*. In the novel, *The History and Practice of English Magic* is a book written by Jonathan Strange and published in 1816 by John Murray. The third volume of *Strange & Norrell* opens with Strange's prologue to his book which is a summation of what is known of John Uskglass – the magician they called the Raven King.

In the last months of 1110 a strange army appeared in Northern England. It was first heard of near a place called Penlaw some twenty or thirty miles north-west of Newcastle. No one could say where it had come from – it was generally supposed to be an invasion of Scots or Danes or perhaps even of French.

By early December the army had taken Newcastle and Durham and was riding west. It came to Allendale, a small stone settlement that stands high among the hills of Northumbria, and camped one night on the edge of a moor outside the town.

The farming people of Allendale (a real and extant village in Northumberland, settled since prehistoric times – known today for its flaming tar barrel hurling New Year's celebrations), anxious to befriend the army, sent a party of young beautiful women (“a company of brave Judiths”) to make contact, and peace, with the

force. There on the moor the women found a host of curious looking soldiers, wrapped in black cloaks, lying on the ground looking like corpses, with ravens roosting on and around them. One soldier stood up and one brave Allendale woman stepped forward to kiss him. They kissed, and kissed, and then they danced, and danced.

This went on for some time until she became heated with the dance and paused for a moment to take off her cloak. Then her companions saw that drops of blood, like beads of sweat, were forming on her arms, face and legs, and falling on to the snow. This sight terrified them and so they ran away. The strange army never entered Allendale. It rode on in the night towards Carlisle. The next day the townspeople went cautiously up to the fields where the army had camped. There they found the girl, her body entirely white and drained of blood while the snow around her was stained bright red.

By these signs they recognized the Daoine Sidhe – the Fairy Host.

The fairy army fought many battles and won them all. By late December they held Newcastle, Durham, Carlisle, Lancaster (which was burnt to the ground), and were at York. In January the fae army met that of King Henry I at Newark on the banks of the River Trent. The King lost.

The King and his counsellors waited for some chieftain or king to step forward.

The ranks of the Daoine Sidhe parted and someone appeared. He was rather less than fifteen years old. Like the Daoine Sidhe he was dressed in ragged clothes of coarse black wool. Like them his dark hair was long and straight.

He was pale and handsome and solemn-faced, yet it was clear to everyone present that he was human, not fairy.

King Henry asked the boy his name.

The boy replied that he had none.*

King Henry asked him why he made war on England.

The boy said that he was the only surviving member of an aristocratic Norman family who had been granted lands in the north of England by King Henry's father, William the Conqueror. The men of the family had been deprived of their lands and their lives by a wicked enemy named Hubert de Cotentin. The boy said that some years before his father had appealed to William II (King Henry's brother and predecessor) for justice, but had received none. Shortly afterwards his father had been murdered. The boy said that he himself had been taken by Hubert's men while still a baby and abandoned in the forest. But the Daoine Sidhe had found him and taken him to live with them in Faerie. Now he had returned.

He had settled it in his own mind that the stretch of England which lay between the Tweed and the Trent was a just recompense for the failure of the Norman kings to avenge the murders of his family. For this reason and no other King Henry was suffered to retain the southern half of his kingdom.

* When he was a child in Faerie the Sidhe had called him a word in their own language which, we are told, meant "Starling", but he had already abandoned that name by the time he entered England. Later he took to calling himself by his father's name John d'Uskglass but in the early part of his reign he was known simply by one of the many titles his friends or enemies gave him: the King; the Raven King; the Black King; the King in the North. [this is Clarke's original footnote from *Strange & Norrell*]

That day he began his unbroken reign of more than 300 years.

In a 2004 interview with BBC Nottingham Susanna Clarke was asked whether her master magician, the Raven King, was based upon any historical figure.

The Raven King had an odd genesis. Ursula Le Guin has a magician in the *Earthsea* trilogy who has no name: the Grey Mage of Plan, whose magic was so dubious, his name was forgotten. And there's a magician in *The Lord of the Rings*, right at the very end, who comes out of Mordor to do battle against our heroes, and no one knows his name because he himself has forgotten it. I thought this was rather cool, and when I was developing my magicians, I wanted one without a name. Unfortunately I hadn't quite understood what would happen if I had a major character without a name. The consequence has been that he has acquired more names than most people: the Raven King, John Uskglass, the Black King, the King of the North and a fairy name that no one can pronounce.²⁶

While the initial seeds of Clarke's John Uskglass may have been literary, the Raven King's roots stretch deep into the fertile soil of English history and folklore.

Puck is a name we are most familiar with today from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – that “shrewd and knavish sprite”, “that merry wanderer of the night”, and entertainer of Oberon, the fairy king. Puck pre-dates the Bard by a long way however.

Parallel words exist in many ancient languages – *puca* in Old English, *puki* in Old Norse, *puke* in Swedish, *puge* in Danish, *puks* in Low German, *pukis* in Latvia and Lithuania – mostly with the original meaning of a demon, devil or evil and malignant spirit.²⁷

When not being applied generally to household sprites (the kind that helped with chores in exchange for an offering of food and/or drink which was left by the hearth for them), Puck is then the name of one particular fae who also uses the alias Robin/Robyn Goodfellow. This fairy was portrayed in a 1785 painting by William Blake in which he resembles the Greek God Pan, and an 1841 painting by Richard Dadd as a human-looking child.²⁸ Post his role in Shakespeare's play, Puck/Robyn found himself the subject of many 17th century ballads in which he was often portrayed as the son of Oberon and an English woman.²⁹ A creature of several names then, and neither wholly human nor fairy.

Writing as Strange upon Uskglass, Clarke gives us:

The boy said that he was already a king in Faerie. He named the fairy king who was his overlord. No one understood.



Richard Dadd's 1841 painting of Puck

The accompanying footnote reads:

The name of this Daoine Sidhe King was particularly long and difficult. Traditionally he has always been known as Oberon.

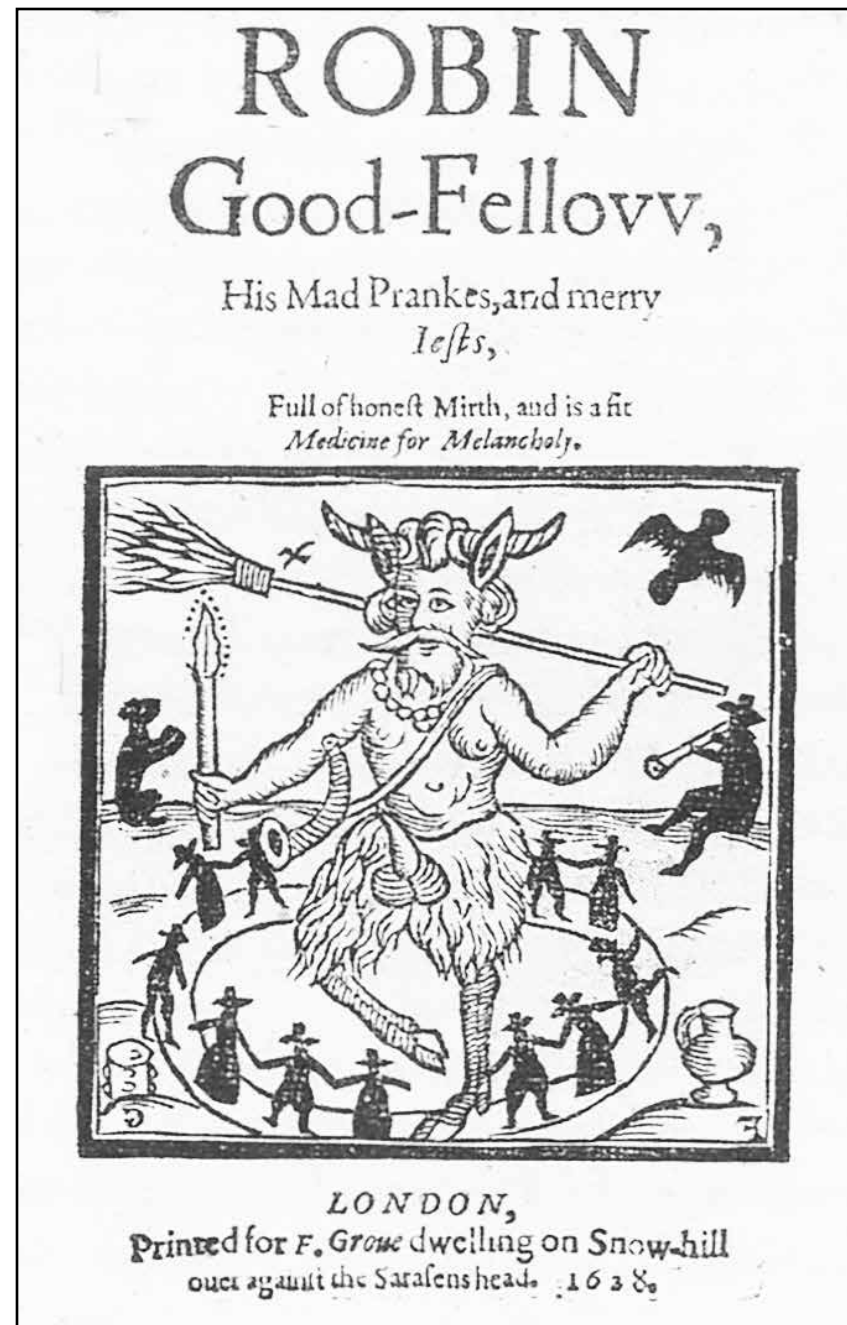
A connection to Oberon, as (foster) father hinted at, at least.

In chapter one of her 1933 work *The God of Witches*, entitled “The Horned God”, Dr. Margaret Murray wrote the following:

The most interesting of all the names for the god is Robin, which when given to Puck is Robin Goodfellow. It is so common a term for the “Devil” as to be almost a generic name for him “Some Robin the Divell, or I wot not what spirit of the Ayre”. Dame Alice Kyteler called her god, Robin Artisson, and the Somerset witches cried out “Robin” when summoning their Grandmaster to a meeting, or even when about to make a private incantation.³⁰

While Murray’s writings are viewed by many as rather fanciful these days there is, nonetheless, value in her cataloguing of these matters and, I would also argue, in her interpretation of things (even if she did get a little carried away at times). She goes on:

A fact, noted by many writers and still unexplained, is the connection between Robin Goodfellow and Robin Hood. Grimm remarks on it but gives no reason for his opinion, though the evidence shows that the connection is there. The cult of Robin Hood was widespread both geographically and in time, which suggests that he was more than a local hero in the places where his legend occurs. In Scotland as well as England Robin Hood was well known, and he belonged essentially to the people, not to the nobles.³¹



In his 1895 essay *The Devil and His Imps: An Etymological Inquisition*, Charles P. G. Scot wrote briefly upon the connections and confusions between Hood and Goodfellow:

Robin Hood seems to have been sometimes confused in kitchen tales with Robin Good-fellow, and so to have been regarded in the light of a fairy – or in the dark of a goblin. Reginald Scot, speaking of Hudgin, a German goblin, says:

There goe as manie tales upon this Hudgin, in some parts of Germanie, as there did in England of Robin Good-fellow. But this Hudgin was so called, bicaufe he alwaies ware a cap or a hood; and therefore I thinke it was Robin Hood.

– 1584 R. Scot, Discourse upon divels and spirits, ch. 21 (app. to Discoverie of witchcraft, repr. 1886, p. 438; ed. 1651, p. 374).

Keightly, no conclusive authority, mentions Robin Hood as another name for Puck or Robin Goodfellow:

Puck . . . his various appellations: these are Puck, Robin Goodfellow, Robin Hood, Hobgoblin.

– 1828 T. K[eightley], Fairy mythology, 2 : 118.³²

The oldest surviving document mentioning Robin/Robyn/Robe Hood (also Hod, Hode, Whood, Wood, and so on) is a 14th century poem entitled *The Vision Concerning Piers Plowman* which alludes fleetingly to the “rhymes of Robin Hood” – therefore suggesting that the tales were already well-told and known. The real Robin Hood (if there ever was one) is long obscured by the hundreds, if not thousands, of tellings, re-tellings, and re-imaginings of his life and deeds which continue to entertain into the present day. There

are at least three sites in England which claim to be the outlaw’s final resting place and though Sherwood, Nottingham is the location most of us automatically associate with Robin, many historians now believe that Yorkshire was his (or his tale’s) place of origin.

Robin [Hood] has been presented as a personification of the Green Man (he was always dressed in Lincoln Green), a folk character with fairy origins, a political rebel, and even a Witch-Cult figure.³³

Though a yeoman in the earliest ballads, the idea of Robin Hood being the rightful Earl of Huntingdon, robbed of his title by scheming family members who abandoned him as an infant, goes back to the late 16th century at least. Robin is supposed then to have been raised by Gilbert Whitehand (a now largely overlooked member of the Merry Men), and schooled by him in the ways of the bow and the staff. In later versions Robin is said to have quarrelled with the king (almost always King John by this point, though an unspecified Edward in the original tales) and was forced to flee north, taking refuge in Sherwood Forest.³⁴

Compare this with Strange’s account of John d’Uskglass’ origins: the entitled noble, abandoned as a child, raised and schooled so well he bettered his master, living in the north while the true king remains in the south. (I could go on, bringing in other sources, but for the constraints of time and word-count).

I am not suggesting that Susanna Clarke meant in any way to deliberately base The Raven King upon Robin Hood or Robyn Goodfellow, merely that such figures – complex, elusive, many-named, trickster-ish, champions of “otherness” who live and operate outside the normal rules and constraints of society – are now and always have been part of the English psyche.

Robin Hood is a greatly sanitised version of the archetype, the Raven King a darker, more alien, and dangerous one. Lincoln Green and Raven Black.



There is, of course, also the shared avian nomenclature: the robin and the raven. The former having recently been voted the National Bird of Britain,³⁵ the latter not even making the top ten. The robin is a cheery, plucky bird that reminds us of Christmas and all the Victorian trappings and customs we carry with the season (consciously or not). The raven is a midnight-hued carrion eater with an IQ comparable to that of a primate, long associated with omens, magic and witchcraft. The raven represents the ancient, the untamed, the occult while the robin represents whimsy, nature at its back-garden level, and the familiar. England may try to maintain its Victorian composure, try to keep up appearances, but in the fields, and on the concrete roofs of blocks of flats, along the motorways, and even in the Tower of London, the ravens watch and wait.

All of Man's works, all his cities, all his empires, all his monuments will one day crumble to dust. Even the houses of my own dear readers must – though it be for just one day, one hour be ruined and become houses where the stones are mortared with moonlight, windowed with starlight and furnished with

the dusty wind. It is said that in that day, in that hour, our houses become the possessions of the Raven King. Though we bewail the end of English magic and say it is long gone from us and inquire of each other how it was possible that we came to lose something so precious, let us not forget that it also waits for us at England's end and one day we will no more be able to escape the Raven King than, in this present Age, we can bring him back.

– *The History and Practice of English Magic* by Jonathan Strange, pub. John Murray, London, 1816.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Here I ask the reader to indulge me in a brief outro in an effort to bring my own tenuous acquaintance with Susanna Clarke up to date, and the piece to something approaching a conclusion. At the end of July 2015, following the *Strange & Norrell* television series and the publication of my articles online, I found myself composing a hasty email to someone by the name of Clark. As I typed the name into the To: field, Mozilla Thunderbird suggested "Susanna Clarke". I clicked on the name and, sure enough, there was Susanna's email address which I had completely forgotten we had. So, naturally, I sent Susanna a message wishing her and Colin all the best, saying how much Leah and I had enjoyed the television series, and even mentioning the articles I'd been writing. As I wrote at the beginning of this piece, I had not yet read *Strange & Norrell* when first we met, so I took the opportunity to thank Susanna for writing what has become one of my very favourite books of all time. And, the very next day, I received an email back. She was warm, friendly, chatty and full of praise for Peter Harness' work on the adaptation. She was also characteristically kind about my writing on *Strange & Norrell*: "I've had a read of your Daily Grail pieces – fascinating. There's masses

there I didn't know. You are very learned. Thank you very much for giving the show (and book) such a boost.”

As if the Friends of English Magic needed any help from me.

John Reppion is an English writer based in Liverpool. A lifelong fascination with folklore, fortune-telling, weird and forgotten history runs through all of his work, from comics (co-authored with his wife, Leah Moore), to *Weird Fiction*, to his essays and articles. His website is moorereppion.com and he can be found on Twitter @johnreppion.