



Henderson, L. (2016) The (super)natural worlds of Robert Kirk: fairies, beasts, landscapes and lychnobious liminalities. *Bottle Imp*(20).

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Deposited on: 9 January 2017

'The (super)natural worlds of Robert Kirk: Fairies, Beasts, Landscapes and Lychnobious Liminalities'

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On 14 May 1692 Rev. Robert Kirk (1644-1692), an accomplished Gaelic scholar and Episcopalian minister of Aberfoyle, set off for an evening stroll on the Doon Hill behind the manse. When he did not return searchers discovered his collapsed body atop the hill; aged only 48 he had been the victim of a sudden death, or had he? He was duly buried at Kirkton graveyard, a stone now marking his final resting place, though it is not the original gravestone. Legend has it that the deceased appeared to a relative with a message for his cousin, Graham of Duchray, that he was not dead but was being held captive in Fairyland and left instructions for his release. At the appointed hour, Kirk would appear once again and Graham was to throw a dagger above the apparition, thus breaking the spell and releasing Kirk from captivity. Allegedly, Kirk did indeed appear but Graham was so shocked that he failed to throw the dagger and the spectre vanished, trapped for evermore in the land of the fairies.¹

The rationale behind this legend, and Kirk's abduction, was that the learned minister had transgressed a widely known taboo, to stay clear of known abodes of the fairies, and Doon Hill was understood to be one such location. Furthermore, it was supposed, that he had earned the annoyance of the fairy folk by revealing their secrets within the pages of a manuscript he had just completed before his untimely death (or abduction), which he entitled *The Secret Common-Wealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies*, most likely completed sometime in 1691. A small number of handwritten copies of Kirk's planned publication were in circulation but the treatise did not appear in print until 1815.²

Kirk was well aware that particular places on the landscape were identified as fairy territory; "There be manie places called Fayrie hills, which the mountain-people [Highlanders] think impious and dangerous to peel or discover, by taking earth or wood from them". He must surely, then, have understood the risks involved in walking on fairy terrain. Indeed, he had interviewed a woman who had fallen asleep on another fairy hill and was, according to those who knew her, never the same since:

I saw a woman of fourtie years age . . . her name is McIntyr. It was told by them of the house as well as herselfe, that she took verie little, or no food for several years past, that she tarry'd in the fields over night, saw and convers'd with a people she

knew not, having wandred in seeking of her sheep, and slept upon a hillock, and finding hirselfe transported to another place before day. The woman had a child sinc that time, and is still prettie melanchollious and silent, hardly ever seen to laugh.³

Modern readers might conclude that Kirk, as an educated man, would not have observed the same customs and taboos of his parishioners and therefore did not regard the crossing of a fairy threshold in the same manner. This may well be the case. However, Kirk's writings suggest a more complex picture, of a man searching for evidence of the spiritual realms within the folk traditions of his countrymen and women while simultaneously navigating theological doctrine and, as will be seen, contemporary ideas about science and natural philosophy.

The underlying premise of *The Secret Common-Wealth* was to refute and fight against the growing tide of sadducism or atheism that was threatening to undermine Christianity in the late seventeenth century. In the manner of a folklorist and proto-scientist Kirk set about gathering evidence for the existence of fairies to uphold the belief in the existence of angels, the Devil, the Holy Spirit and, ultimately, of God. If he could convince his readership of the reality of fairies he would, he envisaged, “suppress the impudent and growing atheisme of this age”. For Kirk, belief in fairies was not incompatible with his Episcopalian faith.⁴

There are many aspects of this remarkable text worth exploring, but for the purposes of this discussion focus is directed towards his engagement with the natural world and his treatment of the fairies as simply another species inhabiting this planet. Throughout Kirk's dialogue the natural and supernatural worlds intermesh and are, at times, indistinguishable from one another. The concept of liminal space, of visible and invisible boundaries that demarcate the junctures between the natural and supernatural worlds, is also a notion that surreptitiously permeates Kirk's treatise. Furthermore, Kirk draws on his understanding of the lives and habits of a variety of animals and the workings of the natural world to inform his interpretations and explanations about the operations of the supernatural realms.

Kirk adopts a Neo-Platonic conceptualization of the (super)natural world in which no corner of the earth remained empty, “the earth being full of cavities and cells, and their being no place or creature but is supposed to have other animals (greater or lesser) living in, or upon it, as inhabitants”. There is, he firmly states, “no such thing as a pure wilderness in the whol universe”. He calls upon notions of a great, interconnected circle of life that is “renewed and refreshed in its revolutiones, as ‘tis

another, that every body in the creatione, moves, (which is a sort of life:) and that nothing moves but what has another animall moving on it, and so on, to the utmost minutest corpuscle that's capable to be a receptacle of lyfe".⁵ Kirk was, of course, referring to the astonishing discoveries of the microscope that were coming to light in the late seventeenth century in the researches of men such as the Dutch scientist Antonie van Leeuwenhoek on microorganisms.⁶

All of existence, in its entirety, Kirk described as consisting of seven major spheres: Heaven was situated along the circumference of the earth. Living in the highest region of the air was the "Manucodiata", and old name for a Bird of Paradise; followed by common birds; then flies and insects at the lowest region. On the earth's surface there were humans and beasts; under the surface of the earth and water were worms, otters, badgers, and fishes. At the centre of the earth was Hell.⁷ Under such a system it was inconceivable to Kirk that the "midle caveties" of the Earth could be empty.

Kirk referred to the fairies by many names, such as the Gaelic *sith*, the *sluagh maith* (good people), and most evocatively as the "lychnobious people", those living by lamplight, or "instead of day, useth the night, and liveth as it were by candle night", an appellation that reinforced their liminality. Though he is unable to use the taxonomic terminologies that would later become popularized by Carl Linnaeus in the mid-eighteenth century, Kirk surmised that there was not only one species or family under the genus *Fairy* but that there may have been several sub-species surviving within different environments; "their bodies of congealed air, are sometimes carried aloft, other whiles grovel in different shapes, and enter in anie cranie or cleft of the earth (where air enters) to their ordinary dwellings".⁸

His concept of what exactly the fairies were and what they were composed of was, I have argued elsewhere, a synthesis of folkloric tradition and learned angelology. While he was doubtlessly influenced by theological and philosophical theories on the nature of angels, Kirk certainly does not posit that fairies and angels are one and the same but rather angelology provided an acceptable framework from which he could explore and extrapolate on the nature of fairies. For example, Kirk described one order of angels as having "bodies of air condensd and curiously shapt" while the fairies had "light changable bodies" like a "condens'd cloud". Within such a hierarchical schemata he deduced that fairies were of "a middle nature betwixt man and angell", though it is unclear where he thought the fairies stood in relation to human and non-human animal life. On this latter point there is a decided lack of clarity and occasional contradiction.

Though the fairies, he said, had “nothing of the Bible” they would use parcels of biblical text for charms, not to protect themselves from harm as humans did, but “to operate on *other animals*; for they are a *people* invulnerable by our weapons” [my italics]. His wording here to “other animals” might imply that fairies are also “animals”, though he immediately goes on to refer to them as “people”. Similar obfuscation occurs when he refers to them as “aerial people or species of creatures not vulgarly [commonly] known”.⁹

Elsewhere the animalistic qualities of the fairies are less vague when, for instance, he explains their superior senses are more akin to that of non-human animals than of humans; “As birds and beasts whose bodies are much used to the change of the free and open air, forsee stormes, so those invisible people are more sagacious to understand by the Book of Nature things to come, then wee, who are pester’d with the grosser dregs of all elementary mixtures, and have our purer spirits choaked by them”. Exceptions to the rule are humans, and men in particular, in possession of the second sight. Such individuals, of whom Kirk opined, were better able to see the fairies because they had, like certain animals, keener senses, like the deer that “scents out a man at a great distance” or the raven, “their brains being long clarified by the high and subtil air, will observe a verie small change”. Once again drawing upon his knowledge of the natural world to explain the supernatural, Kirk referred to the “gradations of nature, ordered by wise providence” to account for the superior senses of the second-sighted for “as the sight of bats & owles transcend that of shrews and moles, so the visive faculties of men are clearer than those of owles, as eagles, lynxes and cats, are brighter than mens: And that men of the second sight . . . surpass the ordinary vision of other men”.¹⁰

Quite how the fairies were able to remain so elusive was also explainable through comparisons with the natural world, notably with the chameleon, which he described as “a little beast that doth easily change it selfe into all colours, and is nourished only with the air”. And so, in reptilian fashion, the fairies could similarly adopt such camouflage, “their chamaeleon-like bodies” able to “swim in the air, near the earth”.¹¹ As consummate shapeshifters, a fairy could replicate the form of a specific person, “a superterranean [human] and a subterranean [fairy] inhabitant perfectly resembling one another in all points”. This ability for replication was also a phenomenon found in nature; “that every element and different state of being, have animals resembling those of another element, as there be fishes sometimes caught in the sea, resembling monks [monkfish]”. The illusory capabilities of fairies was not only

restricted to their bodily appearances but might also apply to various material productions and activities they undertook. For instance, female fairies were said to be able to “spin, verie fine, to dy, to tissue and embroyder”, though Kirk questioned if the tools employed were actually “solid instruments” and if the end products were indeed material or “only curious cob-webs” or “impalpable rainbows”, and the whole endeavour a “phantastic imitatione of the actiones of more terrestriall mortals”.¹²

The destructive behaviour of fairies was likened to that of birds and mammals, as in their penchant for stealing corn, “preying on the grain as do crows and mice”. The negative effects upon human victims of fairy assaults were also described in relation to the mysteries of animal behaviour, as in the report of the “melancholious” woman called McIntyr whose “natural heat and radical moisture seem to be equally balanced, like ane unextinguishable lamp, and going in a circle, not unlike to the faint lyf of bees, and som sort of birds that sleep all the winter over, and revive in the spring”.¹³

In the final analysis, Kirk seems to be suggesting that fairies are not particularly supernatural at all but are, in fact, part of the natural world. Not only do they plainly exist – as his “evidence” bears out – but also, fairies should be regarded as a distinct genus or species, inhabiting the known and unknown spaces of the landscape, both above and under the ground. Drawing on atomistic theory, which was fundamentally antagonistic to the idea that there were any empty spaces or voids within nature, he claimed the fairies moved among us “as thick as atoms in the air”, and unseen by most human eyes (save for those with the second sight) only because they reside in an uncharted region or separate sphere of the world. The division between humans and this “secret common-wealth” was, for him, no different to the separation between humans and the undersea world. They simply lived in another environment, “as some of us men do to fishes which are in another element”. Why they should have revealed themselves to any “superterranean” at all was, he surmised, due to “the courteous endeavours of our fellow creatures in the invisible world to convince us . . . of a Dietie, of spirits; of a possible and harmless method of correspondence betwixt men and them”. In the course of time, Kirk predicted the fairies would eventually be uncovered like any other of the world’s many mysteries for “every age hath som secret left for its discoverie, and who knows, but this entercourse betwixt the two kinds of rational inhabitants of the same Earth may be not only beleived shortly, but as freely intertain’d, and as well known, as . . . the discoveries of the microscopes, which were sometimes as great a wonder, and as hard to be believ’d”.¹⁴

Robert Kirk thrived at the dawn of the Scottish Enlightenment and arguably his ways of seeing and interpreting the natural and supernatural world demonstrate that the empirical impetus of the age did not merely supplant or replace spiritual or Neo-Platonist beliefs but entered into a process of mutual negotiation and exchange.¹⁵ Utilizing knowledge drawn from oral tradition and using the combined skills of folklore, theology, and natural history, Kirk's text stands as a fascinating insight into seventeenth-century folk and learned ideas about both real and imagined liminal worlds.

¹ Patrick Graham, *Sketches of Perthshire* (1806; London, 1812) 253-5; Lizanne Henderson and Edward J. Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief: A History* (2001; Edinburgh: John Donald, 2007) chapter 6.

² It underwent subsequent reprinting and fresh transcriptions in 1893, 1933, 1964, 1976 and 2001. Michael Hunter, *The Occult Laboratory: Magic, Science and Second Sight in Late Seventeenth-Century Scotland* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2001) 20-1.

³ Hunter, *Occult Laboratory*, 81, 85, 89.

⁴ Hunter, *Occult Laboratory*, 77; Stewart Sanderson, ed. *The Secret Common-Wealth* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1976) 38-9.

⁵ Hunter, *Occult Laboratory*, 79, 82.

⁶ See, for example, Lesley Robertson, et.al., *Antoni van Leeuwenhoek: Master of the Minuscule* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

⁷ Hunter, *Occult Laboratory*, 99.

⁸ Hunter, *Occult Laboratory*, 114, 79.

⁹ Lizanne Henderson, "Tündérek, angyalok és a holtak földje: Robert Kirk *Lychnobious People* című műve", in *Test, Lélek, Szellemek és Természetfeletti Kommunikáció*, Szerkesztette Éva Pócs (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2015) 368-85; Hunter, *Occult Laboratory*, 96, 79, 88.

¹⁰ Hunter, *Occult Laboratory*, 87.

¹¹ Hunter, *Occult Laboratory*, 79, 112; The much celebrated colour changing abilities of the chameleon are, in fact, greatly affected by climate and the general health of the animal, while the alternation of shades is mostly restricted to green or bluish grey to pale yellow tones, with some patches of dull red. The chameleon eats insects but can abstain from feeding for a considerable time, hence the once popular notion that it was nourished by air alone.

¹² Hunter, *Occult Laboratory*, 80, 82.

¹³ Hunter, *Occult Laboratory*, 79, 89.

¹⁴ Hunter, *Occult Laboratory*, 96, 102, 100.

¹⁵ On the interface between Enlightenment ideals and folk belief see also Lizanne Henderson, *Witchcraft and Folk Belief in the Age of Enlightenment: Scotland, 1670-1740* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).