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FOLKLORE IN MILTON'S POETRY:

With Special Reference
to the
Pre-Civil War Poems

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Arts
in the Department of English
University of Saskatchewan

by
Mildred Grace Brown
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

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The Faculty of Graduate Studies,
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We, the undersigned members of the Committee appointed by you to examine the Thesis submitted by Mildred Grace Brown, B.A., in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts, beg to report that we consider the thesis satisfactory both in form and content.

Subject of Thesis: "Folklore in Milton's Poetry"

We also report that she has successfully passed an oral examination on the general field of the subject of the thesis.
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Mildred Grace Brown
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INTRODUCTION

Milton is one of the most learned of poets. He draws his material from all European literature, past and present. His sources are Biblical, Classical, Medieval, Renaissance, Hebrew, and Christian. But often Milton's themes, being inherently archetypal, lend themselves to imagery which is older and more deeply established in the English mind, even in the educated mind, than images from sources like the Bible or the classics. This imagery forms the folk element in Milton's work. The use of folklore is most apparent in his pre-civil war poems, though there are examples of it in Paradise Lost as well.

In the seventeenth century science was in its infancy, and its findings had not reached down to the common people. In a day when scholars like Dryden and Browne believed in astrology, it is not surprising that vulgar minds peopled the countryside with spirits and believed in numerous superstitions and wonderful legendry. This ancient lore was the inheritance, not only of the uneducated, but of literary men like John Milton. Often when Milton's references and allusions are to religious or secular literary sources, his use of folklore tends to give them a peculiarly English quality. No one would try to make out that the Latin and Biblical elements are not paramount. But in a thesis one-sidedness is useful if it illustrates an aspect of poetry not often enough recognized. My thesis aims to show these folk and related elements and their effect in giving Milton's poetry an English color.
FAIRY LORE

1. Origins

English folklore consists of tales, legends, beliefs, superstitions, and customs which antedate Christianity and reach back into the shadowy beginnings of the island's history. The most important and most fascinating branch of this folklore is that of the fairy tradition. Alfred Nutt in dealing with the "Fairy Tradition of Shakespeare" goes so far as to claim that

Few things are more marvellous in the marvellous English poetic literature of the last three centuries than the persistence of the fairy note throughout the whole of its evolution... We could not blot out from English poetry its vision of the fairyland without a sense of irreparable loss. No other literature save that of Greece alone can vie with ours in its pictures of the land of fantasy and glamour, or has brought back from that mysterious realm of unfading beauty treasure of more exquisite and enduring charm. 1

Although fairy lore plays such an important part in English literature, it by no means finds its origins there. Fairies were primitive spirits associated with the ancient pagan religions of the people. They were peaceful deities of the soil, and fertility gods of the aboriginal population. 2 They inhabited a kind of Olympian island paradise across the sea. Malory tells how fairy ladies escorted the wounded King Arthur to the "vale of Avalion", or fairy-

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land, where he was to be healed of his "grievous wound". The Celtic invaders set up a dualism by changing these gods to evil deities. With the passage of time they degenerated into mischievous sprites. Another stratum of fairy belief is connected with Celtic ancestral worship. Rulers during their lifetime were responsible for the food supply of their people. When these chieftains died, barrows were erected as tombs for their bodies. Their spirits lived in the mounds and presided over the crops and cattle. Their good-will was ensured by propitiatory offerings. This is probably the reason why fairyland is so often associated with a hill or standing stone. Lewis Spence concludes his studies of the Fairy Tradition with this statement:

I believe that Alfred Nutt probed to the heart of the significance of the faith of Faerie when he stressed its agricultural character. But I would go further and urge my conviction that it was also of an ancestral and tribal nature: that the fairies were regarded as the spirits of the deceased ancestors who magically assisted the growth of the crops and the augmentation of the flocks and herds, receiving for their labours a tithe of the same and occasional sacrifices of animals and children. I think, too, that it is clear that these ancestral spirits were thought of as reincarnating from time to time in the new-born infants of the family or tribe.

The orgiastic dancing of the fairies and the fairs which they were supposed to hold impress me as being the spiritual doublets or reflected actions of mankind when they themselves engaged in ceremonies associated with the ritual of growth. For man receives his ritual from the supernaturals and performs it in concert and cooperation with them.

With the coming of Christianity these aboriginal gods and

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1 Le Morte Darthur XXI, 5.
2 Fairy Tradition, 89-94.
3 Ibid., 333.
ancestral spirits were categorized as fallen angels. They were not bad enough for Hell although not good enough for Heaven. Consequently they maintained a kind of middle existence in fairyland. They frequented the woods, hills, and green fields, the lakes, streams, and wells. They belonged to the English countryside as spirits of the out-of-doors.

The devil theory was never particularly popular in England where the rural population felt a certain affection for their fairy folk. Pleasure mingled with fear characterized the attitude of the country people toward the fairies. The fairies could cast harmful spells or abduct human beings. They hated lust and disorder, and punished by pinching or turning the cream sour. In John Lily's little Song By Fairies, Omnes says,

Pinch him, pinch him, black and blue,
Saucy mortals must not view
What the queen of stars is doing
Nor pry into our fairy wooing.

Nutt says that the peasants feared and reverenced the fairy world:

I have endeavoured to show them as they really appeared to men and women who believed in them,—beings of ancient and awful aspect, elemental powers, mighty, capricious, cruel, and benignant, as is Nature herself.

The fairies did not use their harmful capacities to the full-

4. Ibid., 37.
est. They were more inclined to be mischievous than malicious, and
even to exercise their supernatural powers for the good of mankind.
They added a certain joy to living by rewarding virtue or giving
benefits and gifts to their favorites. Gloucester in King Lear
invokes a blessing of the fairies: "Fairies and gods prosper it with
thee!" (IV, iv, 29-30) Fairies rewarded tidy housemaids;¹ they made
the crops grow, and increased the flocks.

Shakespeare emphasized the altruistic side of the fairies.
In A Midsummer Night's Dream he brings together the rustic fairy
tradition and the fairy lore of Arthurian romance with its character­
istic emphasis on human love affairs. Most of his fairies are dim­
inutive, airy, fun-loving, and harmless. They are capable of shift­
ing shape and size. Only occasionally does he allude to the less
amicable side of their nature. In the Merry Wives Falstaff crouches
in fear and says,

They are fairies; he that speaks to them shall die:
I'll wink and couch; no man their works must eye.
(V, v, 51-52)

Chaucer's Wife of Bath believes in fairies, and she regrets
that the priests have exorcised them away. At the beginning of her
tale she says,

In th'olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour,
Of which that Britons spoken greet honour.
Al was this land fulfild of sayrye.
The elf-queene, with hir joly compaignye,

¹ Spence quotes from A. Butt's Presidential Address to the
Folk-lore Society, "Folk Lore", Vol. XXXI, L. Hull, Folk-lore of the
British Isles, 90-92:
"...the love of neatness and orderly method so characteristic
of the fairy world is easily referable to a time when all operations
of rural life formed part of a definite religious ritual, every jot
and tittle of which must be carried out with minute precision."
Daunced ful ofte in many a grene mede.
This was the olde opinion, as I rede;
I spoke of manye hundred yeres ago.
But now kan no man se none elves mo,
For now the grete charitee and prayers
Of lymytours and other hooly freres,
That serchen every lond and every streem,
As thikke as motes in the sonne-beem,
Blessynge halles, chambres, kichenes, boures,
Citees, burghes, castels, hye toures,
Thorpes, bernes, shipnes, dayeryes—
This maketh that ther ben no fayeryes.

In his book on Norse mythology Munch makes this comment:

Numerous myths eventually sprang up having to do with Sprites that had suffered expulsion by means of chants, the prayers, or the holy water of the priests, and so perforce had abandoned their dwelling places in stones or mounds. Each spring during Ascension Week in the North, as everywhere else throughout Catholic Christendom, the priests walked in procession around meadows and fields, holy water and crucifix in hand, intoning prayers and benedictions, and thus compelling the Sprites to flee the cultivated acres....Ceremonies of just this sort lent themselves directly to the maintenance of belief in the Sprites.¹

Whether Chaucer actually believed that the fairies had been driven from England is difficult to say. There is ample evidence, however, in ballads,² folk tales,³ and literary works⁴ that the land was still "fulfild of fayerye", and that people from all classes believed in them from Chaucer's day to Milton's.

In Spenser's Faerie Queene an "elfin knight" goes on a quest for the Faerie Queen. He encounters a dragon foe and is deceived by Archimago, a shape-shifting evil fairy. Spenser's fairy folk are

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¹ Norse Mythology, The American-Scandinavian Foundation, New York, 1926, 43-44.
³ Briggs, Puck, 18, 197-235.
similar to those of Arthurian legend, but they are allegorized with a moral purpose and are not important for their own sakes.

Milton makes use of the fairies of the folk rather than of the literary tradition. His are rustic spirits, both fearsome and attractive, amusing and homely but not identified with fallen angels. He sometimes speaks of the spirits of fire, air, flood, the earth and under the earth as Satan's subject demons, but does not equate them with fairies. In *Paradise Regained* Satan addresses the assemblage in hell as:

Princes, heaven's ancient sons, ethereal thrones,
Demonic spirits now, from the element
Each of his reign allotted rightlier called,
Powers of fire, air, water, and earth beneath.

(Paradise Regained, 11, 121-125)

Then later before the Son of God he claims as his own

What both from men and angels I receive,
Tetrarch of fire, air, flood, and on the earth.

(IV, 200-201)

The same description is found in *Il Penseroso*:

And of those demons that are found
In fire, air, flood, or underground,
Whose power hath a true consent
With planet or with element.

Milton, however, does not call them fairies. The youths, nymphs, naiads, "ladies of the Hesperides", who attend Satan's table in the wilderness are compared with fairies:

Fairer than feigned of old, or fabled since
Of fairy damsels met in forest wild.

(Paradise Regained, 11, 358-359)

Milton is prepared to accept the demonic powers, perhaps because he has Biblical sanction, but the fairies are "feigned of old,
or fabled since". A "woody scene" is "to a superstitious eye the haunt of wood gods and wood nymphs." (Paradise Regained 11, 294-296) It is a "drowsy nurse" who sees fairies on the hearth. (Nativity Ode, 61) The "peasant sees Or dreams he sees" faery elves (Paradise Lost. 1, 783-4). This very skepticism of the folk fairies gives Milton a certain freedom in his handling of fairy lore. Only in the Nativity Ode does he identify them with the gods who were deposed by the Advent of Christ. Otherwise he presents the fairies as they were believed in by the ordinary folk—a separate and distinct order of beings, independent of Christian tradition and thoroughly English in their character.

2. On the Morning of Christ's Nativity

The Nativity Ode is a joyous hymn of praise celebrating the incarnation of Christ. All nature and mankind are affected by his coming. The heathen oracles become silent as their deities flee before the one true God who brings peace and light. The false gods are not fought with, not even unmasked and routed before the eyes of their worshippers; they simply are, in this new true light, what they always really have been—non-deities.1

There is a weaving together in this ode of Celtic, classical, and Christian imagery. Medieval Christianity had long since allegorized classical mythology, and claimed to have discovered in it a foreshadowing of Christianity.2 Heathen gods were angels who had fallen

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2 Ibid., 41
with Satan:

Then were they known to men by various names,
And various idols through the heathen world.
(Paradise Lost, 1, 374-375)

Burton in his Anatomy of Melancholy links the fairies with the gods:

Terrestrial devils are these Lares, Genii, Fauns, Satyrs, Woodnymphs, Foliots, Fairies, Robin Goodfellow, Trolls, etc. which as they are most conversant with men, so they do them most harm. Some think it was they alone that kept the heathen people in awe of old, and had so many idols and temples erected to them.¹

The silencing of the oracles and the flight of the heathen gods had long been an accepted theory belonging to Christian mythology. Sir Thomas Browne says that the oracles ceased (or became rare) with the coming of Christ. They had, he claimed, prophesied their own death. Their power was now reduced to that of witches and magicians who had contact with the devil and were therefore dangerous.² Reginald Scot states the same idea about the oracles in his Discovery of Witchcraft.³

In the Nativity Ode the nymphs, the gods, and the fairies all take flight. Some are lovely and leave weeping. Moloch is the "sullen", "grisly king"; the Nile gods are "brutish"; they depart with "lowings loud".

Milton here has classed the fairies with the gods. But his description of them is that of the native English spirits which "haunted spring and dale edged with poplar pale". He is impressed with their beauty:

¹ Anatomy, 168.
The lonely mountains o'er
And the resounding shore,
A voice of weeping heard, and loud lament;
From haunted spring, and dale
Edged with poplar pale,
The parting genius is with sighing sent,
With flower-inwoven tresses torn
The nymphs in twilight shade of tangled thickets mourn. (XX, 181-189)

The flocking shadows pale,
Troop to the infernal jail,
Each fettered ghost slips to his several grave,
And the yellow-skirted fays,
Fly after the night steeds, leaving their moon-loved maze. (XXVI, 232-236)

They are not evil. They simply are not gods, and they vanish into nothingness. They have the same insubstantial quality as the fairies of a Midsummer Night's Dream, and are but shadows and dreams (V, i, 430-435). Like Prospero's nymphs they are "all spirits, and are melted into air, into thin air" (The Tempest, IV, i, 149-150).
With their going something beautiful is lost. Perhaps Shelley was influenced by Milton to write these lines from Helle:

Swift as the radiant shapes of sleep
From one whose dreams are Paradise,
Fly, when the fond wretch wakes to weep,
And day peers forth with her blank eyes;
So fleet, so faint, so fair,
The Powers of earth and air
Fled from the folding-star of Bethlehem:
Apollo, Pan, and Love,
And even Olympian Jove
Grew weak, for killing Truth had glared on them;
Our hills and seas and streams,
Dispeopled of their dreams,
Their waters turned to blood, their dew to tears,
Wailed for the golden years.

Shelley also is aware of the beauty of the fleeing gods. He is impressed with a sense of sadness that the world is "dispeopled
of its dreams. Truth has a "killing" quality, and often destroys what is lovely when it deposes the ancient beliefs.

Milton's fays "fly after the night-steeds". This is folklore of the English fireside. Spence tells us that "horsemanship and riding in procession were among the chief amusements of the 'Seelie Court' of the fairies of Scotland.... The steeds of elf-folk are usually splendidly accoutred, and are of exceeding swiftness." They are night-steeds because midnight was the favorite fairy hour, though they could appear by day. Night was also the time when "fettered ghosts" could break their magic chains and escape until the cock-crowing. Shakespeare's fairies also frequent "quaint mazes in the wanton green", and keep their "moonlight revels" (A Midsummer Night's Dream, 11, i, 99, 141).

The lightness of touch with which Milton handles the fairies in the Nativity Ode is in keeping with his main images of Peace and Light. There is no anger against these deities, but rather joy that the Christ-Child has come. Instead of "yellow-skirted fays" dancing in their "moon-loved maze", "bright-harnessed angels sit in order serviceable". The silver light of the moon is exchanged for the golden radiance of the day. And with the rising sun the shadows disappear.

1 Fairy Tradition, 139.
2 Latham, The Elizabethan Fairies, 102.
3 Cf. Julius Caesar 11, ii, 24; A Midsummer Night's Dream, 111, ii, 381-384; Hamlet, 1, v, 89-91.
The Nativity Ode is the work of the young Milton. It contains elements which were to become characteristic of his later works. He is serious minded and deeply religious. His mind is already steeped in Biblical learning, and his poetry colored with ideas and imagery from the Bible. He is an ardent classical scholar with a love for the beautiful myths of Greece. But he also shows influences which are unmistakably English and which affect both the form and content of the poem. The folk tradition of the court masque, so popular in Milton's day, has its effect upon the descriptive passages in stanzas III, XI, and Xv. In stanza XX the scene is English, and the goddess with "flower-inwoven tresses" is very much like Sabrina, goddess of the Severn who will appear in Comus. Stanza XXVI describes a local fairy vision in which Milton treats with affection the gods of his own ancestors. This poem is written by an English poet whose mind has been nurtured, not only in the classics and the Bible, but also in his native folklore, which does place a definitely English impression upon his poetry.

3. At a Vacation Exercise in the College

Milton was master of ceremonies at a college entertainment, and this poem is part of the "exercise" that he was expected to perform. Fletcher says in his introduction to the poem, the two parts, Latin and English, if read together, provide us with a picture of Milton at play in college, and show us his sharp, slightly ironical, but very real wit, together with an early capacity for broad, even coarse humor.1

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The first English stanza also illustrates Milton's early interest in Medieval Romance and the classics. In the second stanza he personifies the Aristotelian categories in a brief fantasy:

Good luck befriended thee son; for at thy birth
The faery ladies danced upon the hearth;
Thy drowsy nurse hath sworn she did them spy
Come tripping to the room where thou didst lie;
And sweetly singing round about thy bed
Strew all their blessings on thy sleeping head.

A sibyl old, bow-bent with crooked age,
That far events full wisely could presage,
And in time's long and dark prospective glass
Foresaw what future days should bring to pass,

These fairies are part of the picture but are not themselves allegorized as are Spenser's fairies in the *Fairie Queene.*

The credulity of the "drowsy nurse" intensifies the folk-tale element in the scene, and brings a touch of humor as light and gay as the tripping ladies. It reminds one of Burton's half-skeptical statement: "They are sometimes seen by old women and children."¹ Inside the house the hearth was the traditional place where the fairies danced. They often presided over births and conferred talents on children.² The "sibyl old", or witch, was believed to have obtained her gift of second sight from the fairies.³ The "dark prospective glass" was part of the usual equipment of those

¹ *Anatomy,* 168.
² *Spence, Fairy Tradition,* 145-146.
³ *Latham, The Elizabethan Fairies,* 163.
who dealt in augury.

There is nothing Greek about this passage. Milton presents a happy picture of English folk spirits and a British witch who could conjure fairies in order to tell the future.

4. L'Allegro

Some of the fairies were known by name. Of these Queen Mab and Robin Goodfellow appear in L'Allegro:

Till the livelong daylight fail,
Then to the spicy nut-brown ale,
With stories told of many a feat,
How Faery Mab the junkets eat,
She was pinched, and pulled she said,
And by the friar's lantern led
Tells how the drudging goblin sweat,
To earn his cream bowl duly set,
When in one night, ere glimpse of morn,
His shadowy flail hath threshed the corn,
That ten day-labourers could not end,
Then lies him down the lubber fiend.
And stretched out all the chimney's length,
Basks at the fire his hairy strength;
And crop-full out of doors he flings,
Ere the first cock his matin rings.
Thus done the tales, to bed they creep,
By whispering winds soon lulled asleep.

Queen Mab is celebrated in one of the ballads collected by Percy. The ballad gives the reason for Mab's habit of pinching and pulling. She is checking on the housekeeping habits of the maids:

And if the house be foul
With platter dish or bowl,
Up stairs we nimbly creep,
And find the slut asleep;
Then we pinch their arms and thighs; 
None escapes, nor none espies.1

Robin Goodfellow is the most notable of the solitary fairy 
figures. Latham says this of him:

In his own person and with the title of Robin Goodfellow, 
this "great and ancient bull-beggar" was the most famous and the 
most esteemed of all the spirits and supernatural beings who 
haunted England... He was by nature a British spirit, as far as 
can be ascertained, bound up with the traditions of the country 
and the customs and beliefs of the people. Of all the spirits and 
terrors of the night, he was never known to possess or to make use 
of any supernatural powers fatal to mankind.2

He was a practical joker with a lively sense of humor who 
maoed "good sport with ho, ho, ho!" Such spirits, says Burton, 
"draw men out of the way, and lead them all night a by-way, or 
quite bar them on their way".3 Percy's ballad of Robin Goodfellow 
rings with merriment as Robin describes his own antics:

From Oberon, in fairye land, 
The king of ghosts and shadowes there, 
Mad Robin I, at his command, 
Am sent to viewe the night-sports here 
What revell rout, 
Is kept about, 
In every corner where I go, 
I will o'ersee, 
And merry bee, 
And make good sport with ho, ho, ho!4

1 Percy, Reliques 
The same idea is expressed in The Works of Dr. Thomas Campion, ed. A. H. 
Bullen, Chiswick Press, London, 1889, 22. 
Here the fairy queen is called Proserpina. Ben Jonson in The Satyr 
gives a concise and detailed account of Mab's activities. See also 
Romeo and Juliet 1, iv, 54-95.
2 The Elizabethan Fairies, 219, 220, 222. 
3 Anatomy, 170. 
4 Reliques, Vol. 11, 314.
Robin's tricks were generally considered harmless although they were very annoying to the victim. He is often identified with Will-o'-the-Wisp. In *Paradise Lost* Milton refers to the Will-o'-the-Wisp, not as a merry prankster, but as something evil and dangerous:

'Lead then', said Eve. He leading swiftly rolled
In tangles, and made intricate seem straight,
To mischief swift. Hope elevates, and joy
Brightens his crest, as when a wandering fire,
Compact of unctuous vapor, which the night
Condenses, and the cold environs round,
Kindled through agitation to a flame,
Which oft, they say, some evil spirit attends
Hovering and blazing with delusive light,
Misleads the amazed night-wanderer from his way
To bogs and mires, and oft through pond or pool,
There swallowed up and lost, from succor far.
So glistened the dire snake, and into fraud
Led Eve our credulous mother, to the tree
Of prohibition, root of all our woe;

(IX, 631-645)

The light has a witching quality; it is dangerous and attractive. In like manner the wily serpent leads "credulous Eve" to the fatal tree. Her plight arouses our pity. Again in *Comus* Milton speaks of the Will-o'-the-Wisp as "an evil thing that walks by night, in fog, or fire, by lake or moorish fen."

But in *L'Allegro* there is nothing sinister about the yarns that are told over the cups of ale. Robin Goodfellow is a rough, hairy, domestic goblin who does household chores, drinks his offering of cream and stretches his bulk on the hearth to sleep till dawn. He is generally described in folklore as carrying a broom or flail. The output of his work is prodigious—greater than that of "ten-day-labourers".¹ After reading the ballad in

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the Reliques it is easy to imagine the other tales that went round about
Queen Mab and Robin Goodfellow. The stories are "characteristically
English, with no hint of pastoral prettinesses."\(^1\)

Milton, by a series of pictures in L'Allegro, makes it possible for his readers to share the experiences of mirth. These are "unreproved pleasures free", joys that are innocent and entirely free from responsibility. There is no need to preface these stories with "they say" or "to the superstitious eye". Like the other pleasures in the poem they are free from censure. They are not simply tales; they are experiences. The maid is rather pleased that she has been pinched and pulled by Queen Mab and led astray by the "friar's lantern". Everyone knew it was dangerous to watch the brownie at his work. The story-teller is justly proud that he has dared to see such things. The failing light, the "spicy nut-brown ale", and the confident faith of the narrators put all the listeners into a mood of believing in and enjoying the half-fearful pleasures of the credulous country folk.

The gods and goddesses of this poem are Greek, but they are the companions of a joyful man as he indulges in the pleasures of the English countryside, listens to ancient folk tales that have been relived by countless generations of English peasants, and enjoys the drama of English playwrights.

5. Il Penseroso

The experiences of meditation are no less pleasurable than

\(^1\) Briggs, The Anatomy of Puck, 88.
those of mirth; they are simply those of a different mood. The thoughtful man enjoys tales of romance which are so bound up with folklore as to have lost most of their historical character. Milton alludes to Spenser's *Faery Queene* with its skilful blending of medieval romance and Celtic tradition:

> And if aught else, great bards beside,  
> In sage and solemn tunes have sung,  
> Of tourneys and of trophies hung;  
> Of forests, and enchantments drear,  
> Where more is meant than meets the ear.

These stories, as told by Spenser, have a more serious cast than the yarns about Mab and Puck. It is folklore that has been given an allegorical meaning but still with "enchantedms drear" and a sense of mystery typical of the rustic tales.

The nymphs that people the "hallowed haunts" of the "twilight groves" are native spirits whom no "rude Axe" has frightened away. The "sweet music" that the thoughtful man enjoys is "sent by some spirit to mortals good, or the unseen genius of the wood".

In *Lycidas* Milton portrays the same gay woodland deities, though here the referents are classical:

> Rough satyrs danced, and fauns with cloven heel,  
> From the glad sound would not be absent long, ...

In *Il Penseroso* the nymphs fill the air with gentle music for the mortal. In *Lycidas* the mortals play while the fairies dance. Both arrangements are in keeping with fairy lore. The music associated with fairy revels is usually provided by their own minstrels. Sometimes, however, if the fairies discovered a talented human piper, they
would induce him to play the accompaniment for their dance. 1

6. Paradise Lost

There are only a few references to fairy lore in Paradise Lost. The beautiful epic simile at the end of Book 1 is the most notable example:

So thick the airy crowd
Swarmed and were straitened; till the signal given,
Behold a wonder! they but now who seemed
In bigness to surpass earth's giant sons
Now less than smallest dwarfs, in narrow room
Throng numberless, like that pygmaean race
Beyond the Indian mount, or faery elves,
Whose midnight revels, by a forest side
Or fountain some belated peasant sees,
Or dreams he sees, while overhead the moon
Sits arbitress, and nearer to the earth
Wheels her pale course, they on their mirth and dance
Intent, with jocund music charm his ear;
At once with joy and fear his heart rebounds.

Giants and dwarfs are familiar figures in the folklore of all nations. Pliny describes the Pygmies which, he said, lived "near the source of the Ganges":

"Beyond these in the most outlying mountain region we are told of Three-span men and Pygmies, who do not exceed three spans, i.e. Twenty-seven inches in height, 2

Marvelous tales have become associated with giants and dwarfs, but the matter of their size originates in fact. There are persons living today who, because of glandular disorder, have become excessively tall or have failed to gain normal height. Milton is

1 Munch, Norse Mythology, 45.
here concerned with the contrast of the former size of the fallen angels now reduced to a "pygmaean race". The faery elves by implication are dwarfish in size.

Latham says that Milton "celebrated the traditional fairies of the folk save in the matter of their size".¹ In his book The Elizabethan Fairies Mr. Latham advances the theory that the folk fairies were the same size as human beings, and that Shakespeare, by presenting them as diminutive beings in A Midsummer Night's Dream introduced this conception of fairies which prevails in nearly all subsequent fairy literature. Certainly the fairies of Arthurian legend were often mistaken for people. However, Spence shows that the fairies of folklore had always varied in size from taller-than-human fairy ladies to the half-inch portunes. The tiny fairies, he maintains, were not invented by Shakespeare:

Summing up, we find in British tradition at least three various levels of fairy stature—diminutive fairies, who appear like the courils or gorics of Brittany, to be associated chiefly with standing stones and megalithic monuments generally; somewhat larger elves, about four feet in height who appear to be connected with mounds and hillocks, and the fairies of mortal height, or even greater in size, of whom we read chiefly in Irish saga and in British ballad, romance and accounts of the witch trials. I am compelled to the conclusion that this variation in height is to be accounted for by a periodic creation of the folk in ages distantly removed from one another, and that it represents specific strata of folk-imagination, developed in accordance with the beliefs of people who existed in the several periods in which these various types first made their appearance. These ideas, I believe, survived separately side by side in the popular imagination until a few generations ago.²

¹ The Elizabethan Fairies, 18.
² Fairy Tradition, 135, 136.
Milton is following a valid folk tradition in making his elves small. The rustic fairies commonly kept their midnight revels by dancing in the moonlight. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the fairies speak about the loss of their former pleasures:

> And now they never meet in grove or green,  
> By fountain clear, or spangled starlight sheen,

(1l, i, 28, 29)

Later they extend an invitation, "And see our moonlight revels; go with us" (1l, i, 141). Dancing was not merely for pleasure; it seems to have been their natural means of locomotion.¹

But the fairy dance could be dangerous to the onlooker. The fairies often became angry when a mortal dared to gaze on their activities. They sometimes cast the viewer into a death-like trance.²

In this way one could be lured into fairyland never to be seen again on earth. In spite of the danger, the magic and fascination of the scene charm Milton's peasant so that "at once with joy and fear his heart rebounds". Alfred Nutt says that the peasants feared and revered the fairy world, not only because the fairies must be placated by the performance of certain ancient rituals, but because they hated still more any "prying interference".³

This simile of the faery elves must be considered in relation to the whole of Book 1. The poem begins with Milton's magnificent

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description of the lake of fire. Then follows the bombastic oratory and the garish splendor, the profusion and the drama of the Satanic forces drawn up in martial array. The mob responds to its great leader with "A shout that tore hell's concave and beyond Frighted the reign of chaos and old night". Pandemonium with its fabulously ornate beauty and excessive wealth rises by "wondrous art" and "subtle magic". The whole picture is baroque, teeming with beings and activity, throbbing with sound. Then suddenly Milton breaks the spell to describe the fall of Mulciber. It is like a petal or thistledown falling. The poet is temporarily in a lighter mood, and the sense of relief to the reader is immense. The relief is shortlived, but we have been prepared for the final image. The trumpet sounds and the thronging mass returns. They swarm like bees in springtime, "brushed with the hiss of rustling wings". The scene is crowded--too crowded.

Then, "behold a wonder!". Again Milton enjoys his own creative art. He makes room in the "high capital" for this numberless throng. These "giant sons" are made "less than smallest dwarfs" or "faery elves". The splendor, the din, the exotic have disappeared, and we are back in England, looking with the eyes of a peasant upon a rustic scene with its mirth, dance, and jocund music so common to the imagination of the country folk. The peasant is an archetype of all those plain and simple people who live close to nature. He gazes with joy and fear upon these elemental spirits of the woods and fields. The fairies are ominous and mysterious; the pale moonlight is foreboding.
So it is that the infernal angels gather for consultation to plot their sinister program in order that Satan may "wreck on innocent frail man his loss".

This epic simile is skilfully placed and exceedingly effective. It brings the reader back from a terrifying, extravagant, unreal place of torment to the homely world of rustic earthy sprites who consort with men. The relationship between earth and hell is established. It is done by imagery which is thoroughly English.
LEGENDARY FOLKLORE

1. Lycidas

In Lycidas Milton uses another branch of folklore—that associated with the pre-Christian history of Britain. David Daiches has this to say of Lycidas:

King had been drowned off the north coast of Wales, a fact which allows Milton to exploit the old Celtic traditions of England (in which he had always been interested) and enrich the classical pastoral conception of the poet with reference to the ancient Druids (who were poet priests), associated especially with the island of Mona or Anglesey, and to the whole Celtic conception of the bard with its implications. "Deva" is the River Dee, which forms part of the boundary between England and Wales, and is rich in Celtic folk traditions (hence "wizard stream"). Milton has here deftly widened his conception of the poet to include both the classical and the Celtic.¹

Milton was deeply concerned that a young and promising life such as King's should be cut off before there was any sense of fulfilment. He asks in great seriousness,

Where were ye nymphs when the remorseless deep
Closed o'er the head of your loved Lycidas?
For neither were ye playing on the steep,
Where your old bards, the famous druids, lie,
Nor on the shaggy top of Mona high,
Nor yet where Deva spreads her wizard stream:

If the nymphs had been playing where the "old bards, the famous druids lie", on the isle of Anglesey or by the river Dee, they would have guarded the ship at sea. The ancient druids were priests, poets and seers; they would have foreseen the tragedy. Perhaps Milton had in mind this passage from Drayton's Polyolbion:

The fearelesse British Priests, under an aged Oake,  
Taking a milk-white Bull, unstrained with the yoke,  
And with an axe or gold, from that Jove-sacred tree  
The Missleto cut downe; then with bended knee  
On th' unhew'd Altar layd, put to the hallowed fires:  
As their strong furie mov'd (when all the rest adore)  
Pronouncing their desires the sacrifice before,  
Up to th' eternall heaven their bloodied hands did reare:  
And, whilst the murmuring woods ever shuddred as with feare,  
Preached to the beardless youth, the soules immortal state;  
To other bodies still how it should transmigrate,  
That to contempt of death them strongly might excite.  

(IX, 415-429)

The river Dee "was supposed to foretell, by changing its course,  
good or ill events for England and Wales, of which it forms the  
boundary".1

Toward the end of the poem Milton's thoughts turn to the cold  
expanse of sea that stretches from the Hebrides to Land's End. Is the  
body of King being washed somewhere along the west coast, or does it  
sleep "by the fable of Bellerus old"?

This passage is rich in Celtic legend and filled with Milton's  
sense of English history and patriotism. The legend is this: Brutus,  
the great-grandson of Aeneas, came from Italy to found a settlement  
in Britain, then supposedly called Albion. The region was guarded by  
giants, one of whom was named Bellerus. Corineus, a warrior with  
Brutus, was particularly successful in slaying the giants. He received  
Cornwall as his reward. Drayton writes of these Roman invaders,

Who drave the Giants hence that of the Earth were bred,  
And of the spacious Ile became the soveraigne head.  

(Polyolbion, VIII, 23-24)

1 Verity, A. W., Milton's Ode on the Morning of Christ's  
Nativity, L'Allegro, Il Penseroso and Lycidas, University Press  
With the coming of Christianity to the island, the Cornish mount became known as St. Michael's mount. "Tradition said that apparitions of the archangel had been witnessed."¹ Consequently Michael was believed to be the guardian angel of Cornwall.²

The angel looks from the southern tip of Cornwall to Namancos and Bayona in Spain. Thoughts of the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 cannot have been far from Milton's mind. Spain symbolized ecclesiastical tyranny which once again threatened England, this time in the form of the corrupt clergy in the Church of England: "Look homeward angel now, and melt with ruth." Pity England who has lost this youth, the symbol of the old integrity.

The picture is huge and sweeping both in terms of time and place. The idea is conveyed "of the littleness of man in a world of forces that God does not seem to control".³ It gives a universality to Milton's problem.

The poem ends in peace. Faith in true fame and in the purposes of life is restored through the Christian conception of immortality.

The use of Celtic legend and native superstition in this poem tend to Anglicize the classical pastoral image. The Greek mythology does not distract the reader from the English setting.

¹ Verity, Lycidas, 156.
² Munch, Norse Mythology, 40.
It is a British youth, drowned in the Irish sea, who is being elegized. The nymphs inhabit local waters; old Camus is a native god; the flowers are those that grow in English gardens. The myths of Greece, long since universalized, are in this poem the property of the English poet, and he blends them harmoniously with the legends of his country.

In spite of the fact that Milton is writing in the classical tradition, there is an Englishness about his poem that is not felt in the poetry of the later Romantic poets when they use classical sources. Shelley writes his poem Adonais in the style of the Greek Pastoral, but his work remains aloof from English legend or atmosphere. Milton, though living in the Renaissance, is close enough to Medieval thought to be able to write with a certain naturalness in regard to British folklore, and to relate it to the classics. Shelley and his contemporaries are too far removed from Medieval times to make that part of their poetry which is modelled on the classics anything but classical. Milton, like his audience, was steeped in both classical myth and English folklore, and in his mind they form a unified whole.

2. At a Vacation Exercise in College

This same kind of legendary folklore is found in the last few lines of the Vacation Exercise:

Rivers arise; whether thou be the son,
Of utmost Tweed, or Ouse, or gulfy Dun,
Or Trent, who like some earth-born giant spreads
His thirty arms along the indented meads,
Or sullen Mole that runneth underneath,
Or Severn swift, guilty of maiden's death,
Or rocky Avon, or of sedgy Lea,
Or Coaly Tyne, or ancient hallowed Dee,
Or Humber loud that keeps the Scythian's name,
Or Medway smooth, or royal towered Thame.

The above passage illustrates Milton's early capacity to make apt use of place names in his poetry. It is a game. Rivers, the young man addressed, was taking part in the masque. As Milton lists the rivers, he alludes to legends connected with certain streams. Trent, with its many tributaries, is like the many armed earth-born giants of Cornwall. Severn is named for Sabrina, daughter of Locrine, son of Brutus, the founder of Britain. Sabrina was drowned in the river, and was afterwards changed into a water nymph to be the genius of the stream. The Dee is "hallowed" because it is associated with Druid sacrificial rites. Drayton tells how the Humber got its Scythian name:

Heere landing with intent the Ile to over-run:
And following them in flight, their Generall Humber drownd
In that great arme of Sea, by his great name renowned;
(Polyolbion, VIII, 43-44)

Spenser relates the same story of the defeat of Humber by the Britons and his subsequent drowning.¹ Tillyard explains that the Thames is "royal-towered" because of Windsor and Hampton and "probably to connect the royal houses of Tudor and Stuart with the early British Kings". He goes on to say that "the references to early British mythology suggest that Milton, like Browne's seniors, Spenser and Drayton connected a geographical scene with a complete framework of Tudor patriotism."² Milton probably had in mind Drayton's epic Polyolbion

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¹ Faerie Queene, Book 11, X, 13-16, 119.
This short catalogue of rivers is written in epic style, but its author is not in a serious mood. It does illustrate his early ability to use place names with musical effects, and with apt and descriptive adjectives and allusions to local history and legend. Milton's audience would get the full flavour of his patriotism, knowing the myths connected with these persons and places.¹

¹ Milton gives some credit to the story of Brutus, the Trojan, in his "History of Britain", The Works of John Milton, Columbia University Press, New York, Vol. X, 6:

But now of Brutus and his line, with the whole Progeny of Kings, to the entrance of Julius Caesar, we cannot be so easily discharged; Descents of Ancestry, long continu'd laws and exploits not plainly seeming to be borrow'd, or devis'd, which on the common belief have wrought no small impression: defended by many, deny'd utterly by few.

Bulfinch's Age of Chivalry of King Arthur and His Knights (ed. J. L. Scott, David McKay Publishers, Philadelphia, 1900) calls this early history of England "traditional" and then says, "All history must be written with broad margins, while that which confesses to be traditional is but little better than ordinary fiction."
1. **Masque: A folk tradition**

The masque has its roots in folklore. Primitive peoples of all nations have celebrated the coming of spring, harvest, and the winter solstice with religious ritual. These rituals were marked by orgiastic dancing (often in costume), processions, ceremonies around sacred trees, the strewing of flowers and branches, and sacrifices to tribal spirits. Sometimes the shouting and jumping were intended to drive away the spirits of witches, ghosts, or fairies. More often the antics were imitative of the processes of nature. They were joyful fertility rites with traditional games like those of the May Day. Frequently the revellers wore masks or darkened their faces. In this way they hoped to identify themselves with the ancestral spirits. These seasons were marked by lawlessness such as characterized the later carnivals and the modern Mardi gras. The medieval mummers and the Christian morality plays belong to this tradition. Christianity simply incorporated into Whitsun and Christmas festivities customs which were too deeply rooted to be stamped out.

As the rituals gradually lost their original meanings, they came more and more to be performed by the educated section of the population as entertainment for the nobility and royalty. Out of this came the court masque with its emphasis on spectacle, dancing,
music and costume. The court masque became to the upper classes what the mummers' play and the May Day celebrations were to the rustics. The moral themes and the frequent use of personification in the masque are carry-overs from the morality plays.¹

Briggs discusses the masque as an example of folk tradition:

The court no less than the country was the repository of a good deal of folk custom; for the court ceremonial embalmed many usages which would otherwise have died, though the bookishness of the courtiers might re-dress them in almost unrecognizable disguises. Whenever there is an institution which passes with unbroken continuity from one generation to another, whether it is the cultivation of a farm, the conduct of a university or the ceremonial of a court, it is sure to preserve usages of which the original meaning has been almost forgotten; and these are the very stuff of folk-lore.²

2. Comus

Milton's Comus contains the elements of the traditional masque: magic, fairies, costume, disguise, dancing, song, personification, and moral theme. But so great is Milton's power as a poet that he cannot subordinate his poetry to spectacle. It is possible for one to read the poem and scarcely be aware that it includes dancing, costume, and elaborate stage setting.³ The masque, as courtly entertainment, reached its culmination in Ben Jonson. Nevertheless Milton's Comus, while it is a true masque, is also a

² The Anatomy of Puck, 82.
³ Welsford, The Court Masque, p. 316, "It is hardly necessary to say once more that the central moment of the masque was the moment of the discovery of the masquers and the revels; that the poetry was a mere explanation or adornment of the dancing, a method of providing a motive for the appearance of the masquers."
great poem and surpasses the masques of Jonson as poetic achievement.

Milton develops his theme of chastity around the story of Circe as found in Homer's *Odyssey*. The outline of the tale is classical, but Milton has so infused it with British fairy lore, legend, and superstitions as to make it as much a part of native folklore as the masque framework.

The Christian allegorizing of classical myth had long been an accepted principle of interpretation. Milton owes a debt to Spenser who had done much to establish the allegory as a way of thinking. Not only does Milton accept this custom, but he regards all folklore as one. Certain elements of folk tales are universal: the use of magic and mystery, a wicked witch and an innocent victim, enchanted forests, disguise, and the omnipresence of the divine world.

In *Comus* the attendant spirit, who has his mansion near Jove's court, inhabits the region "above the smoke and stir of this dim spot". "Smoke" and "stir" are reminiscent of London not of ancient Greece. Neptune makes his "blue-haired deities" guardians of "this isle", England. The ethereal spirit travels with the speed of Hermes:

> Swift as the sparkle of a glancing star,  
> I shoot from heaven to give him safe convoy.  
> (81-82)

He has the same delicacy of spirit as Ariel. He flies to the "broad

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1 The close resemblance of the Sacrapant episode in Peele's Old Wives Tale would indicate that Milton may also have used this as source material. The theme of chastity may have been suggested by Fletcher's *Faithful Shepherdess*.
fields of the sky" to "suck the liquid air". Like Ariel he delights in being free again:

But now my task is smoothly done,
I can fly, or I can run
Quickly to the green earth's end,
Where the bowed walkin slow doth bend,
And from thence can soar as soon
To the corners of the moon.

(1011-1016)

As with Hermes he can provide a magic herb to use "against all enchantments", but he calls upon Sabrina, the spirit of the river Severn, to break the charm.

The enchanted forest with its "nodding horror" and "threats forlorn" is as much the habitat of Celtic witches, sorcerers, and fairies as of the Greek enchantress. When the elder brother describes the perils and "horrid shades" of the woods, he pictures the folk spirits of England:

Some way no evil thing that walks by night
In fog, or fire, by lake, or moorish fen,
Blue meager hag, or stubborn unlayd ghost,
That breaks his magic chains at curfew time,
No goblin, or swart faery of the mine,
Hath hurtful power o'er true virginity.

(431-436) (italics mine)

It is interesting to note the English (i.e. Germanic) diction and allusions in this passage as contrasted with Milton's usual Latin style. Even "goblin" and "faery" have been so long accepted as part of the English language as to have been Englished from the French "gobelin" and "faerie".

In Paradise Lost the comparison of Satan with the Will-o' the-Wisp gives an impression of darkness, even though Eve is being
seduced in broad daylight. Here it is night, and the "evil thing" is likewise sinister. It is not identified with good-natured, mocking Puck.

The "blue meager hag" of Comus is the "Cailleath Bheur" of Scottish fairy lore. She is "a giant hag who seems to typify winter, for she goes about smiting the earth with her staff so that it grows hard."¹

There are restless ghosts in Greek mythology, but their time of roving is not limited to the period between curfew and crowing. They do not "break magic chains" for a night's freedom, but they beg that their bodies be buried so that they may be at rest. The "stubborn unladen ghost" is an English type of spirit. The "swart faery" is a dark-complexioned fairy of the Cornwall mines. It is a dangerous sprite.

These spiritual forces, combined with the threat of bandits and the natural terrors of the "huge forests" and "unharbored heaths", heighten the atmosphere of danger against which the chaste maiden is "clad in complete steel".

In Paradise Lost Milton compares Sin to the "night-hag":

Nor uglier follow the night-hag, when called
In secret, riding through the air she comes
Lured with the smell of infant blood, to dance
With Lapland witches, while the labouring moon
Eclipses at their charms.

(11, 662-666)

Fletcher's footnote refers to the "night-hag" as the classical figure

of Hecate. But the picture is far more that of an English or Norse witch than of a Greek goddess. The "night-hag" is suspiciously like the vampire described by Spence:

In the folk-lore sense a vampire is a person existing in a state between life and death, who returns from the grave to absorb the blood of others, chiefly those of his own family, so that he may not suffer from hunger in his tomb. The superstition is a relic of primitive ancestor-worship and is thought to have originated in the idea of the "angry dead" who had not received a sufficiency of food offerings from his relatives and had revenged himself upon them by sucking their blood while they slept.

One of the witches in Jonson's *Masque of Queens* says,

Under a cradle I did creep
By day; and when the child was asleep,
At night I sucked his breath

In Homer it is not Persephone who drinks the blood but the dead souls of men. British witches, not Hecate the goddess of the underworld, were lured by blood and danced with Lapland witches to work their charms. Either Milton is here Anglicizing the Greek goddess, or Fletcher's footnote is wrong. Milton may intend the reference to be to the "vampire" or the "baobhan sith" of Scottish folklore.

Comus is a classical Greek figure. After he has roved "the Celtic and Iberian fields" he "betakes him to this ominous wood". It is an English forest and he is a threat to three young English

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1 Poetical Works of John Milton, ed. by Harris Francis Fletcher, 188.
2 Fairy Tradition, 268.
people. He is a wicked and slightly drunk Ariel. He is variously
called by others "the damned wizard", "damned magician", "false en­
chanter", and "sorcerer". He is as dangerous and seductive as "La
Belle Dame Sans Merci". Like his mother, he changes men into beasts
by causing them to drink of his magic cup. As Circe chose Odysseus
for her lover, so he would make the lady his queen.

In spite of this parallel with the Greek story, Comus is
more a nature spirit of the English woods than a classical divinity.
He describes the sun as setting in "the steep Atlantic stream". He
is slightly tipsy but not florid and drunk like Bacchus. He leads
his company in a "wavering morris" dance, a dance which is associated
with ancient pagan rites of rural England:1

And on the tawny sands and shelves,
Trip the pert fairies and the dapper elves;
By dimpled brook, and fountain brim,
The wood-nymphs decked with daisies trim,
Their merry wakes and pastimes keep.
(117-121)

These are the "wee-folk" and forest sprites of Shropshire.

Comus turns from revelry to witchcraft and the obscene
midnight orgies of Cotytto. The poetry slows down to a kind of
heavy tread. He becomes more like the witches in the Masque of
Queens or MacBeth than like Ariel. He is a combination of fairy
and witch—attractive and dreadful. In common with all fairies
he inspires both joy and fear.

The charming rod, the glass, the magic potion belong to

1 Chambers, E. K., Medieval Stage, Vol. 1, The Clarendon Press,
Milton's source material. But the fact that Scot and Browne feel called upon to refute the power of such things, indicates that these objects were also associated with the witchcraft and superstitions of their own country.¹

Disguise is a form of magic practised by spirits good and bad, Greek and English. The "subtill" Archimago deceives the Redcrosse Knight. Hermes comes in disguise to Odysseus; the attendant spirit dons a shepherd's garb and appears to the brothers as their father's servant Thyrsis; Comus says, "I shall appear some harmless villager".

Comus uses fairy dust to further his "dazzling spells" and "cheat the eye with bleary illusion, And give it false presentments". There are many tales in British fairy lore about mortals anointing their eyes with magic salve in order to see into the spiritual world.² Others were given false impressions by means of fairy dust or disguise. Five times the Lady addresses Comus as "shepherd" after he has begun to charm her. Evil, through assuming the form and reasons for good, can cast a spell over her.

Comus is able to bewitch the Lady so that she is held in the enchanted chair even though she does not drink of his charmed wine. Spence says that "the evil influence of the fairy glance does not kill, but it throws the object into a death-like trance".³ The Lady is in just such a trance.

¹ Discovery of Witchcraft, V, v; Vulgar Errors, 11, chapter 5.
² Spence, Fairy Tradition, 156.
³ Ibid., 176.
The brothers, like Odysseus, are protected by a magic herb from the bewitching power of Comus. The attendant spirit gives them instructions for breaking the spell that holds the lady: they are to break the glass, throw away the liquor, and seize the wand. But failing to get the wand, they cannot release the Lady as easily as Circe changes Odysseus's men back to human shapes. Further charms are necessary. These incantations and rites have a peculiarly British form:

River spirits are akin to mermaids in folk-lore; like the salmon they come far upstream... There seems a spark of genuine folk tradition about Sabrina... It is more consistent with the incurably personifying nature of the human mind, that the rivers, the sea, and the earth were first personified, and supposed to demand a human victim; and that the victim became part of the spirit it reinforced, and was transformed into him.¹

So Sabrina, a victim of the Severn, by the process of enchantment that alters tales of antiquity, became a river goddess. Though her origin was anything but chaste, she herself was guiltless of any sin, and Milton associates her with chastity. She is a "virgin pure", commended for her "fair innocence" and "maiden gentleness". She is like those fairies who are kindly disposed to humans,

...and oft at eve
Visits the herds along the twilight meadows,
Helping allurchin blasts, and ill luck signs
That the shrewd meddling elf delights to make,
Which she with precious vialed liquors heals.

(842-846)

She is also able to "unlock The clasping charm, and throw the numbing spell".

¹ Briggs, The Anatomy of Puck, 152, 153.
The custom of invoking the spirits by rhyme and doggerel was common. Milton's invocation to Sabrina is markedly superior in lyrical polish and beauty to the usual ballad-like invocation to fairies in traditional English necromancy:

Sabrina fair
Listen where thou art sitting
Under the grassy, cool, translucent wave,
In twisted braids of lilies knitting
The loose train of thy amber-dropping hair,
Listen for dear honor's sake,
Goddess of the silver lake,
Listen and save
(858-865)

Rise, rise, and heave thy rosy head
From thy coral-paved bed,
And bridle in thy headlong wave,
Till thou our summons answered have.
Listen and save.
(884-888)

Greek goddesses had to be content with the briefest of epithets from their poets. They might be "grey-eyed", "white-armed" or "lovely-tressed". The English poet is generous to this lovely goddess. Sabrina performs her rites to unloose the spell of Comus:

Brightest lady look on me,
Thus I sprinkle on thy breast
Drops that from my fountain pure,
I have kept of precious cure,
Thrice upon thy finger's tip,
Thrice upon thy rubied lip,
Next this marble venomed seat
Smeared with gums of glutinous heat
I touch with chaste palms moist and cold,
Now the spell has lost its hold.
(909-918)

Spence describes a similar ritual connected with a fairy cure of

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1 cf. Spence, Fairy Tradition, 165, 188, 249. See also MacBeth I, iii, IV, i.
sickness. A bowl was filled with water from a wellspring which flowed in an easterly direction:

When full it was lifted out, some water was poured into the shell, which the patient was made to drink, part of the water being sprinkled on his head and breast, over the heart. The remaining water was thrown in three portions over the patient's head.  

The presence of the divine is everywhere in folklore. The Lady is aware of nightmarish fantasies in the woods:

A thousand fantasies  
Begin to throng into my memory  
Of calling shapes, and beckoning shadows dire,  
And airy tongues, that syllable men's names  
On sands, and shores, and desert wildernesses.  

(204-208)

She sees "visibly" "pure-eyed faith", "white-handed hope", and the "unblemished form of chastity" as they come like angels to her aid. Jove send an attendant spirit to watch over "true servants" of virtue. The woods are people with sorcerers, fairies, elves, nymphs, hags, goblins, as well as with mysterious and shadowy forms. The spirit of the river is available for help.

In keeping with the masque convention the world of reality is never far from this realm of fantasy. We are aware that the young people taking part in the performance are children of the host and his friends. Sabrina neatly links the fairy tale to the facts of the occasion:

I shall be your faithful guide  
Through this gloomy covert wide,  
And not many furlongs thence  
Is your father's residence,  
Where this night are met in state  
Many a friend to congratulate

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1 Fairy Tradition, 169.
His wished presence, and beside
All the swains that there abide,
With jigs and rural dance resort,
We shall catch them at their sport,
And our sudden coming there
Will double all their mirth and cheer.

The country dancers perform, and the children are presented to their parents. This is true masque tradition.¹

The more one reads the masque the more he is aware of its rustic as well as court origins. It is this rustic element which Milton emphasizes in *Comus* with its out-of-door setting and emphasis on fairy.

3. *Paradise Lost*

To the reader not familiar with the tradition of the masque or with this aspect of Milton's earlier poetry, the masque features of *Paradise Lost* might not be apparent, or might appear to be only courtly. While the influences of the masque upon this great epic poem are chiefly courtly, they are also connected with the general folk element in Milton and sometimes are entirely rustic.

The first of these influences upon *Paradise Lost* is seen in Milton's fondness for spectacle and his elaborate setting of scenes. In the Greek epic the scenery changes with the action. When Odysseus escapes from the Cyclops and goes to the Isle of Aeolus, he leaves the land of the Cyclops behind. The great scenes of *Paradise Lost* take place in Hell, Chaos, Earth, and Heaven. But these are all parts of one single picture. At times the attention is focused on one region, but at other times the whole vision can be seen at once.

Satan's fall from heaven is seen in this latter perspective:

Him the almighty power
Hurled headlong flaming from the ethereal sky
With hideous ruin and combustion down
To the bottomless perdition, there to dwell
In adamantine chains and penal fire,
Who durst defy the omnipotent to arms.
Nine times the space that measures day and night
To mortal men, he with his horrid crew
Lay vanquished, rolling in the fiery gulf
Confounded though immortal:

(1, 44-53)

When Satan makes his perilous journey through Chaos, he seems a tiny figure who is the plaything of the winds. We are aware of the total picture of the universe. Below him is the "fiery gulf" of hell with his own "high capital", Pandemonium. Here the fallen angels are pursuing their several ways to "ease their minds":

...each his several way
Pursues, as inclination or sad choice
Leads him perplexed, where he may likeliest find
Truce to his restless thoughts, and entertain
The irksome hours, till this great chief return.

(11, 521-527)

Above Satan is his goal, the earth, "linked in a golden chain" to heaven, the "pure empyrian" which is God's dwelling place. This is spectacle depicted in grand poetry in one elaborate masque-like stage setting.

This aspect of the masque originates in the Miracle Plays which are a form of Christian not pagan folklore. In the reading of Medieval literature, it is often difficult to untangle Christian and pagan folklore, as indeed the people of the seventeenth century did not do. Instead they wove the two together, and each generation re-explained them in terms of their own beliefs until the original meanings were lost. When folk traditions entered the court, they
took on something of the grandeur and richness usually associated with the Renaissance royalty.

Instrumental music, dancing, and song are important features of the masque which come in an unbroken tradition from the fertility rites. There is a good deal of this in Paradise Lost. The "mighty standard" of Satan is raised to the "sound of trumpets loud and clarions". And "all the while sonorous metal blowing martial sounds" is rallying the infernal hosts. Spectacle and music are combined throughout Milton's description of the assembling of Satan's armies:

All in a moment through the gloom were seen
Ten thousand banners rise into the air
With orient colors waving; with them rose
A forest huge of spears: thronging helms
Appeared, and serried shields in thick array
Of depth immeasurable; Anon they move
In perfect phalanx to the Dorian mood
Of flutes and soft recorders.

By "wondrous art" Pandemonium is built:

Anon out of the earth a fabric huge
Rose like an exhalation, with the sound
Of dulcet symphonies and voices sweet,
Built like a temple, where pilasters round
Were set, and Doric pillars overlaid
With golden architrave; nor did there want
Cornice or frieze, with bossy sculptures graven,
The roof was fretted gold.

In Hell the milder angels sang "with notes angelical to many a harp" so that their harmony "Suspended Hell, and took with ravishment The thronging audience". In heaven the blessed angels sing in praise to God:
Then crowned again their golden harps they took,
Harps ever tuned, that glittering by their side
Like quivers hung, and with preamble sweet
Of charming symphony they introduce
Their sacred song, and waken raptures high;
No voice exempt, no voice but well could join
Melodious part, such concord is in heaven.

(111, 365-371)

After the work of creation is finished, the heavenly throngs join in
a great symphony and choir to hallow the seventh day of worshipping
their creator:

...the harp
Had work and rested not; the solemn pipe,
And dulcimer, all organs of sweet stop,
All sounds on fret by string or golden wire
Tempered soft tunings, intermixed with voice
Choral or unison;

Occasionally Milton interposes his own lovely lyrics. There is the
beautiful "Hail holy light" passage where Milton greets the light
after his descent into Hell. Eve makes her youthful statement of
love to Adam in a poem that has the delightful freshness of a love
song:

With thee conversing I forget all time,
All seasons and their change, all please alike.
Sweet is the breath of morn, her rising sweet,
With charm of earliest birds; pleasant the sun
When first on this delightful land he spreads
His orient beams, on herb, tree, fruit, and flower,
Glistening with dew; fragrant the fertile earth
After soft showers; and sweet the coming on
Of grateful evening mild, then silent night
With this her solemn bird and this fair moon,
And these the gems of heaven, her starry train:
But neither breath of morn when she ascends
With charm of earliest birds, nor rising sun
On this delightful land, nor herb, fruit, flower,
Glistening with dew, nor fragrance after showers,
Nor grateful evening mild, nor silent night
With this her solemn bird, nor walk by moon,
Or glittering starlight without thee is sweet.

(IV, 639-666)
Adam and Eve sing their evening hymn to God in worship. (IV, 724f.)

The angels join in the hymn, "Great are thy works, Jehovah" until the "empyrean" rings "with hallelujahs".

Dancing is also an important feature in Paradise Lost. The fairies keep their "midnight revels", and with "their mirth and dance Intent, with jocund music charm" the wary peasant. Adam and Eve sing about the angels who "with songs and choral symphonies", "circle" God's "throne rejoicing". Raphael describes the dance of these same heavenly beings:

That day, as other solemn days, they spent
In song and dance about the sacred hill,
Mystical dance, which yonder starry sphere
Of planets and of fixed in all her wheels
Resembles nearest, mazes intricate,
Eccentric, interwoven, yet regular
Then most, when most irregular they seem,
And in their motions harmony divine
So smooths her charming tones, that God's own ear
Listens delighted.

(V, 618-626)

Adam is mistakenly delighted with Michael's description of the "bevy of fair women" who sing "Soft amorous ditties" and "in dance come on" and lure into their "amorous net" even grave men. (XI, 582-585)

The personification of Virtues and Vices was a carry-over from the morality plays into the masque. The influence of Spenser's Faerie Queene and of Jonson's masques is felt in Paradise Lost. At the gate of hell Satan encounters Sin and Death. Sin, the daughter of Satan, is both attractive and ugly:

This one seemed woman to the waist, and fair,
But ended foul in many a scaly fold
Voluminous and vast, a serpent armed
With mortal sting; about her middle round
A cry of hell hounds never ceasing barked
With wide Cerberean mouths full loud, and rung
A hideous peal: yet, when they list, would creep,
If aught disturbed their noise, into her womb,
And kennel there, yet there still barked and howled,
Within unseen.

(11, 666-673)

This horrific allegory continues until Sin opens the gates of hell so that a "bannered host, Under spread ensigns marching, might pass through" "to tempt or punish mortals. Sin and Death follow Satan and pave "after him a broad and beaten way Over the dark abyss" to the "frail world. Satan's journey brings him to the

...throne
Of Chaos, and his dark pavilion spread
Wide on the wasteful deep: with him enthroned
Sat sable-vested Night, eldest of things,
The consort of his reign: and by them stood
Orcus and Ades, and the dreadful name
Of Demogorgon: Rumor next and Chance,
And Tumult and Confusion all embroiled,
And Discord with a thousand various mouths.

(11, 959-967)

Though this introduction of masque-like features into Milton's epic poem is not folklore proper, it shows, nevertheless, the influence of folk tradition upon Milton's art form. It is probably true, as Enid Welsford suggests, that "the masque episodes lived in his memory and colored his imagination". This does not make Paradise Lost any less an epic poem, but it does, when one happens to know the folk source of the masque, contribute to the characteristically English quality of the poem.

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IV

SUPERSTITIONS

Apart from the instances of folklore already discussed, there are in Milton’s poetry many references and allusions to other kinds of superstition which constitute a part of the folklore of all Europe.

1. Animal mythology

Certain animals were believed to have peculiar character traits, an idea that still prevails in modern expressions such as: "foxy", "as cranky as a bear", "as meek as a lamb". In Paradise Lost Satan is described in terms which suggest a great dragon, not the dragon of Revelation 12, but that of folklore:

Thus Satan talking to his nearest mate
With head uplift above the wave, and eyes
That sparkling blazed, his other parts besides
Prone on the flood, extended long and large
Lay floating many a rood, in bulk as huge
As whom the fables name of monstrous size,
(1, 192-197)

Briggs says, "The dragon is the most widespread of the fabulous monsters: rumours of it come from Europe, Asia and North Africa. It belongs also most undoubtedly to folk-lore". Gould believes that these mythical creatures originate in stories about alligators, flying lizards, huge snakes or extinct prehistoric animals. Whatever its origin the dragon represents something horrible and power-

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1 The Anatomy of Puck, 156.
2 Mythical Monsters, W. H. Allen & Company, 13 Waterloo Place, S. W., London, 1886, chapter VI.
ful. In the above passage the sinister nature of Satan is implied by the blaze of the sparkling eyes, and his power is suggested by the "monstrous size".

Then Milton in characteristic fashion piles simile upon simile to amplify the impression of hugeness. Satan is "in bulk as huge as" the Titans who revolted against Jove,

...or that sea-beast
Leviathan, which God of all his works
Created hugest that swim the ocean stream:
Him haply slumbering on the Norway foam
The pilot of some small night-floundered skiff,
Deeming some island, oft, as seamen tell,
With fixed anchor in his scaly rind
Moors by his side under the lee, while night
Invests the sea, and wished morn delays:
So stretched out huge in length the arch-fiend lay.

(1, 200-209)

The whale, a menace to small fishing boats, took on monstrous proportions in the minds of the peasants, and became a symbol of what was huge and dangerous. Hence the aptness of this epic simile. The impression is one of great bulk which might turn and destroy the unwary voyager. And Satan does turn, and rise from the burning lake to work "his dark designs".

These "designs" lead Satan to make the hazardous journey "up to the fiery concave" of Hell and the triple gates where he encounters Sin and Death. Sin is partly attractive, but shows she has inherited the dragon-nature of her father Satan. This ugly and lurid picture of Sin, who is half woman and half serpent, is doubtless drawn from Spenser's monster Error. (Faerie Queene, 1, i, 14-15) Spenser's source for Error and the Red Cross Knight must have been the mummers' play St. George and the Dragon. The origins of this seemingly
Christian play can be traced back to the ancient Sword Dance and the pagan fertility rites of the May Day.¹ And in England's oldest epic, Beowulf slays a fire-breathing dragon that has been ravishing the countryside. (Beowulf, XXXII-XL)

The dragon imagery was well enough established in English literature and folk tradition to give its use in Paradise Lost a domestic flavor. Here Milton is doing with scriptural allusions what he often does with classical material. He weaves into them so many strands of his own country's folklore as to produce a thoroughly English fabric.

Once again, this time in the temptation of Eve, Milton colors his Biblical story with allusions which belong to the local and even the rustic scene. Here Satan assumes the less frightening guise of a serpent. The fruit of the forbidden tree, he claims, pleases his senses more

Than smell of sweetest fennel or the teats
Of ewe or goat dropping with milk at even,
Unsucked of lamb or kid, that tend their play.
(IX, 580-583)

The mention of fennel is appropriate because it was an emblem of dissimulation. Ophelia in Hamlet offers fennel to Claudius as a symbol of flattery. (IV, v, 180) It was also believed to give quick-sightedness.² Satan is practising deceit by implying that the fruit of the forbidden tree will give clearer insight than the fennel.

² Verity, A. W., Paradise Lost, Cambridge University Press, 1921, 579.
The idea that serpents suck the milk of sheep and goats was a folk belief. Not only will the "fair apples" satisfy Eve's desire for knowledge, but they will be nourishing and wholesome as milk, though stolen.

2. Portents in nature

Astrology cannot generally be considered as folklore, but certain superstitions connected with it are native to many primitive peoples. Johnstone Parr says that "those Elizabethans who distrusted astrologers had faith to some extent in the power of the stars". Even in the seventeenth century prominent literary figures such as Sir Thomas Browne and John Dryden had a certain amount of faith in astrology.

Milton speaks of the influence of the stars upon man. To the Christ-Child the stars were beneficial:

The stars with deep amaze
Stand fixed in steadfast gaze,
Bending one way their precious influence,
(Nativity Ode, 69-71)

They brought happiness to Adam and his bride:

To the nuptial bower
I led her blushing like the morn: all heaven,
And happy constellations on that hour
Shed their selectest influence;
(Paradise Lost VIII, 510-513)

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2 Tamburlaine's Malady, University of Alabama Press, 1921, chapter IX, 85.
In both of these passages the astral "influence" and the "pathetic fallacy" are almost merged. Nature, awed by the Saviour, has cast off her "gaudy trim"; the wind and ocean are stilled; the "stars stand fixed with deep amaze"; and the sun checks "his wonted speed".

For the happy innocent pair in Eden,

the earth
gave sign of gratulation, and each hill;
joyous the birds; fresh gales and gentle airs
Whispered it to the woods, and from their wings
Flung rose, flung odors from the spicy shrub,
Disporting, till the amorous bird of night
Sung spousal, and bid haste the evening star
On his hilltop to light the bridal lamp.

(VIII, 513-520)

Milton attributes the "noxious efficacy" of heavenly bodies to the Fall:

To the blanc moon
Her office they prescribed, to the other five
Their planetary motions and aspects,
in sextile, square, and trine, and opposite,
of noxious efficacy, and when to join
Their influence malignant when to shower,
Which of them rising with the sun, or falling,
Should prove tempestuous.

(X, 656-664)

Here the connection with astrological beliefs is quite definite.
Milton links this "influence malignant" with all that is unpleasant, destructive, and subject to decay in nature.

The winter constellation Orion was believed to be the cause of the cold winds which generally began about the time of its appearance in the fall sky. Satan's legions are as "thick" as

...scattered sedge
Afloat, when with fierce winds Orion armed
Hath vexed the Red Sea coast,

(1, 314-316)
Likewise planets were supposed to exercise an evil "influence" upon the earth. Sin and Death leave the gate of hell to journey over the "passage broad" to the earth:

...they with speed
Their course through thickest constellations held
Spreading their bane; the blasted stars look wan,
And planets, planet-struck, real eclipse
Then suffered.

(X, 410-414)

Here the planets themselves are "planet-struck" by the presence of Sin and Death. In Shakespeare we read, "The nights are wholesome then no planets strike". (Hamlet, 1, i, 162) In this instance, it is the earth that generally feels the ill effects of the planets. And the moon too could be harmful. Michael lists "moon-struck madness" as one of the maladies caused by the curse incurred by Adam's sin.

Certain unusual phenomena in the heavens, such as the appearance of comets or eclipses of the sun and moon, have from antiquity been regarded by men as affecting their lives. Often these signs have been associated with spectacular events in human affairs—events which were generally disastrous. Milton likens Satan to a comet which brings "Pestilence and war":

Satan stood
Unterrified, and like a comet burned,
That fires the length of Ophiuchus huge
In the arctic sky, and from his horrid hair
Shakes pestilence and war.

(11, 707-711)

The "sword of God" that drives Adam and Eve from the garden blazes

1 Allen, Star-Crossed Renaissance, 73, 74.
"fierce as a comet". And Milton uses the image of the eclipse to
describe Satan, the ruined archangel, who has not yet lost all his
"original brightness":

As when the sun new risen
Looks through the horizontal misty air
Shorn of his beams, or from behind the moon
In dim eclipse disastrous twilight sheds
On half the nations, and with fear of change
Perplexes monarchs.

(1, 594-599)
The sun, dimmed in eclipse, brings harmful elemental changes. So
Satan in eclipse portends spiritual and moral disaster to the world.

"An eclipse was proverbially an evil omen, the precursor
of troubles", and "an unlucky moment for beginning any lawful design".1

It is in this latter sense that Milton refers to the eclipse in Lycidas:

It was that fatal and perfidious bark
Built in the eclipse, and rigged with curses dark,
That sunk so low that sacred head of thine.

(100-103)

This is the hopeless pagan answer that the young Milton first gives
to his own anxious question regarding King's untimely death.

These examples of superstitions connected with astrology
can certainly be separated from astrology proper which required com-
plex equipment and involved techniques. Any layman could make his
own estimate of the efficacy of these signs which were clearly
visible to everyone. Peasants knew little or nothing about science.
The irregular movement of planets among the stars, the rise of winter
constellations, the darkening of sun or moon in eclipse, or the rare

1 Verity, Lycidas, 139-140.
occurrence of a comet aroused feelings that ranged from vague misgivings to actual terror. Milton refers to these phenomena with the force of folk belief. They were superstitions which had long held the popular mind, and Milton's own belief, or semi-belief, in them reinforces the English quality of his work.
CONCLUSION

A great deal has been said about Milton's debt to the classics and his knowledge of the Bible. Some have written about the philosophical and political influences of the seventeenth century upon his writings. But there has not been much mention of the influences of folklore upon Milton's poetry.

The folklore content enriches and broadens Milton's poems, and is a part of the general baroque effect. It achieves a contact with the thinking of the common uneducated people which is generally thought to be lacking in his work. "Lofty", "grand", "solemn", and "sublime" are words generally applied to Milton. Seldom do we hear "homely" or "rustic". Perhaps the overall grandeur of the poet does somewhat dazzle the reader so that he fails to see the homelier passages. These are not limited to the parts containing folklore, but they do include them.

Milton's fairy lore contains the rusticity of the English fireside. It ranges from delicate "yellow-skirted fays" to clumsy Puck stuffing himself with cottage cheese and threshing grain, or from lovely Sabrina with her "soft alluring locks" to the ugly "night-hag" who sucks "infant blood". Only in the Nativity Ode are the Christianizing influences, which identified fairies with demons, felt at all. Elsewhere Milton presents the true native fairies, elves, and witches—sometimes with an ephemeral and airy beauty, at other times with their rustic clumsiness. They are
elemental spirits in their natural habitat. They are never merely pretty. Fear of them, something that is generally lacking in the response to the literary fairy, is mingled with admiration, and strengthens belief in their magic. They inhabit the green places of England; they dwell in springs and streams; they invade the rural homes.

Belief in fairies must have been in the very atmosphere of his times to so influence Milton, the man of books. His knowledge of folklore ranged from the tales of country servants to a familiarity with the court masque. During his childhood and youth he must have absorbed this primitive lore which was the inheritance of his people, just as later on he felt and was moved by the political winds of his time. His very skepticism about the existence of fairies saves him from the Puritan attitude to them so that he presents them with freedom and affection.

Whenever he uses native folklore along with the classical, he tends to make the Greek myth more English than Hellenic. Even some Biblical scenes take on a local setting. The British folk tradition of the masque has left its impression upon his great epic, though the poem is modelled on the classical form.

No one has ever questioned Milton's patriotism and his love of England. It is felt, not simply in his anger against the social and political abuses and the spiritual decadence which he saw around him, but also in his manifest interest in English history and ancient Celtic legends. Allusions to numerous superstitions add to the depth and richness of the poetry, and at the same time reveal something of the heart of Milton and his people.
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