

The Fairy Poetry of Robert Herrick: Concerning his Miniaturistic Technique*

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In this paper, I will examine the fairy poetry of Robert Herrick (1591-1674). A characteristic of these poems is a satirical miniaturization of seventeenth-century society into a world of fairies. It is necessary to realize that those poems are not simply lyrical songs which were written in a traditional style. The folkloric factors, which are one of the charms of his work, prove Herrick to be a propagator or scholar of folk belief and legends. However, study of supernatural beings such as fairies, as a matter of fact, helped to keep folk beliefs and legends alive. The fairy poetry genre demonstrates Herrick's characteristics.

1. Introduction

From the sixteenth to the middle of the seventeenth century, interest in fairies was both intensive and extensive. In the Elizabethan era, fairy poetry reached its golden era. This situation came about because of the success of fairy imagery in the works of William Shakespeare (1564-1616) which led to the popularity of fairies among seventeenth-century England poets. Robert Herrick was among those who resisted the fairy world. Compared with poets of the Elizabethan era, his fairy poetry presented a complicated style combining a simplicity pleasing to the curiosity and imaginative, detailed expression of fairy imagery with an emphasis on minuteness. However, his satirical literary style aroused interest and reflected microcosms of the English society of the time. This folkloric character, one of the allures of Herrick's poetry, gives us a view of Herrick as a kind of propagator or investigator of folk belief and legend. As a matter of fact, elements of supernatural existence such as fairies had helped to propagate folk belief and legend in literature since the Middle Ages and it is therefore no wonder that this characteristic fairy imagery is found here and there in his collection of poems.

The major change in Herrick's versification occurred when he was sent to Devonshire in

southeastern England, to become the vicar of a parish after living in the brilliance of London court life. At first he was in despair but gradually came to appreciate the virtues of country living. The provincial beauty and widespread customs and practices of the people must have looked fresh to his worldly London eyes. William Shakespeare had brought provincial folktales to London, while Herrick must have been influenced by the superstition and pagan beliefs which he encountered when he took up his pastorage in Devonshire. Herrick created a world of sparkling literary gems polished by his own hands and based on the beauty of the rural district, dairy maids and inherited superstitions.

This is an examination of matters related to fairies which are a particular theme of the prologue to the collection, 'The Argument of His Book,' referring to the works in his *Hesperides* (1648).

I write of Groves, of Twilights, and I sing
The Court of Mab, and of the Fairie-King.
(5, 11-12)¹⁾

2. Fairy Poetry

Michael Drayton (1563-1631) and Robert Herrick are said to be the representative writers

who described fairies in their own work in the seventeenth century, after fairy themes had reached their peak during the Elizabethan era through the works of Shakespeare. In the Elizabethan era, created a small and beautiful world of friendly fairies, showing them to ordinary people who still believed in the activities of fairies and other superstitions. He recreated fairy imagery from age old legends or from those which appeared in Greek and Roman mythology and in the French romantic stories of the Middle Ages, however, compared with Shakespeare's works, it is difficult to say that the fairy world created by Herrick is beautiful. Herrick wrote about the world of fairies in a matter-of-fact way which seemed to bring the fairy world out into daylight to make it visible in some sense and it is difficult to deny that the fairies thereby lost the fantastic beauty which they had known for ages. For example, in the poems 'Oberons Palace' and 'Oberons Feast,' it is difficult to ignore an impression of the grotesque. The close examination of each morsel on the tiny mushroom table in 'Oberons Feast,' such as "The hornes of paeprie Butterflies" (119, 26), "that we call the Cuckoes spittle" (119, 28), "A little Fuz-ball-pudding" (119, 29), "sugred Rush" (119, 33), "the sagge / And well bestrutted Bees sweet bagge" (119, 33-34), "Emits eggs" (119, 36) must remind us of the evil brew simmering in the cauldron of the witches in *Macbeth*.²⁾ The dishes for the fairy king continue to discourage the reader's appetite.

But Beards of Mice, a Newt's stew'd thigh,
A bloated Earewig, and a Flie;
With the Red-capt worme, that's shut
Within the concave of a Nut,
Browne as his Tooth. A little Moth,
Late fatned in a piece of cloth:
With withered cherries; Mandrakes eares;
Moles eyes; to these, the slain-Stags tears:
The unctuous dewlaps of a Snaile;
The broke-heart of a Nightingale
Ore-come in musicke; (119-20, 37-47)

This enumeration of peculiar food materials is not based on the world-of-mouth tradition

but would rather be the product of Herrick's imagination, designed to please the dilettante Thomas Shapcotte who was his friend and patron. As a matter of fact, in the dedication to Shapcotte, Herrick said that he dedicated these poem to Shapcotte because "Thou prizest things that are / Curious, and un-familiar". In 'Oberons Palace,' which was dedicated to Shapcotte, grotesque things continue to crop up one after the other. Herrick wrote these works by imposing his own imagination on the fairy tales of those days. As mentioned, the common theme of fairy poems is the peculiar and minute and when we read Herrick's fairy poetry, we must be aware of words written from the fairy's point of view rather than the human's, otherwise we lose the substance of his work.

Another distinctive feature of Herrick's fairy poetry is their satirical side. 'Oberons Palace' could be a concentrated and satirical story of courtly love between Oberon, the king of the fairies, and Mab, the queen of the fairies. On the other hand, in 'The Faerie Temple: or Oberons Chappell,' the indirect description seems to concern the antagonism between the religious groups of those days and this poet's religious standpoint. This means that Herrick's poems satirize seventeenth-century society by putting it into a miniaturized fairy world. Therefore it is necessary to realize that these poems are not simply lyrical songs. In this chapter, the most significant aspect of the society of fairies for Herrick is a distinct difference in description as an inherited tradition because there is room to sneak in political propaganda.

3. The relationship with fairy poems and their importance in *Hesperides*

Among Herrick's poetry, there are three prominent long poems and several short ones concerning fairies such as 'The Faerie Temple: or Oberons Chappell,' 'Oberons Feast,' 'Oberon's Palace,' 'The Fairies,' 'The Night-piece to Julie,' 'The Hagg,' and 'The Beggar to Mab, the Faerie Queen'. There are also several poems in which fairy words are found here and there, such as

"Ignis Fatuus (the wondering spirit)," "Will o' the Wisp," "Bells," "Bread," "Salt," "Holy Water," "Horseshoes" and "Iron" which are about fairies and warding off evil spirits, and there are poems about fairy trees related to witchcraft, such as "Oak," "Hawthorn" and "Yew". An example of a poem is as follows:

Bring the holy crust of Bread,
Lay it underneath the head;
'Tis a certain Charm to keep
Hags away, while Children sleep. (284)³⁾

In the three long poems about the fairy kingdom and the subjects of Oberon, the king of the fairies, a serial connection can be found between 'The Faerie Temple: or Oberons Chappell,' 'Oberons Feast' and 'Oberons Palace' according to the actual contents. However, there are pages between these poems in the collection for some unclear reason and 'Oberons Feast' and 'Oberons Palace' are dedicated to Herrick's friend Thomas Shapcotte while 'The Faerie Temple: or Oberons Chappell' is dedicated to another friend, John Merrifield. It is obviously the intention of the writer to skip pages among the arrangement of poems that have a connection of similar content. It could have been intentional to that the collection was thus presented due to the control of expression required by society in those days. There is a suspicion that Herrick separated these three originally connected poems as a form of rearrangement. In fact, in 1640, Herrick left Devonshire for London, without the Bishop's permission, to explore the possibility of publishing the manuscript which he had created. However, presumably he gave up this plan for some reason.⁴⁾ There is no existing collection of Herrick's poems in or around that year. The collection of poems was, after all, published eight years later, in 1648. However, considering the outbreak of civil war in 1642, he might have planned to publish the collection in 1640 which shows his political support of the Tories and awareness of the approaching pressure of republicanism. Therefore, he tried to criticize the deplorable state of society, using his pen as a weapon, by making it the world of fairies,

however, he had been obliged to change some parts due to censorship in 1640. It is possible to assume that one of the changes was the disposition of the arrangement of the poems. In *Hesperides*, different styles and meters are mixed up and thrown together in this one collection. This could be recognized as the "Sweet Disorder"¹⁵⁾ of which poets are fond, however, if we read thoroughly and analyze the work as a history of seventeenth-century English literature and the history of English society, a new and distinctive feature of Herrick's poetry becomes apparent.

4. Herrick's religious philosophy and the factors of the Apocripha

In 'The Faerie Temple: or Oberons Chappell,' Oberon's chapel of the king of the fairies is described as follows:

A way enchac't with glasse & beads
There is, that to the Chappel leads:
Whose structure (for his holy rest)
Is here the Halcion's curious nest:
Into the which who looks shall see
His Temple of Idolatry:
Where he of God-heads has such store,
As Rome's Pantheon had not more.
His house of Rimmon, this he calls,
Girt with small bones, instead of walls.
(90, 1-10)

Now this the Fairies Wo'd have known,
Theirs is a mixt Religion.
And some have heard the Elves it call
Part Pagan, part Papisticall. (91, 22-25)

It is thought that this religion, which has aspects of both heathenism and papism, in the poems was meant to be, indirectly, the Church of England, to which Herrick belonged, and to be the place where the fictional world of fairies and the actual world meet. Another characteristic of Herrick's poems is that they step slightly outside of Christianity. Since Herrick yearned for ancient Rome and was always aware of the Roman poets, it is possible that he yearned also for the

atmosphere of heathensim in some way. The enumeration of grotesque foods for the king of the fairies in 'Oberons Feast' insinuates that he was influenced by Tobit in the Apocrypha.⁶⁾ This also leads into the description of the king of the fairies' "His house of Rimmon," of which the external wall is said to be made of small bones.

The inside of "His house of Rimmon" is described as if the viewfinder of a camera captures its targets through movements which change little by little. However, the decorations of the niche, the egg shaped hollow and arch are all weird things which the king worships, such as "Idol-Cricket" (90, 12), "Idol-Beetle-flie" (90, 14), "Idol-Canker" (90, 16) and "His golden god, Cantharieds" (90, 18). In addition, the saints who appear in the poems, such as St Fripp, St. Trip, St. Fill and St. Fillie, do not appear in Christianity and could be references to the Apocrypha. Or, this might be "a mixt Religion" which Herrick referred to. According to Herrick, there are innumerable saints like these and their names are written in a queer calendar. These names must appear in their church calendar because of the world of "a mixt Religion". The "mixt Religion" is emphasized as follows:

The Altar is not here foure-square,
Nor in a forme Triangular;
Nor made of glasse, or wood, or stone,
But of a little Transverce bone; (91, 54-57)

Roman Catholicism required retention of a strict social standing which Puritans opposed. Arguments about the shapes and materials of altars developed. The Church of England, although still leaning toward Catholicism, showed consideration of the Puritan idea of simplification of the traditional Catholic gold and polish. However, the puritans strongly opposed Catholic thinking. The altar which is mentioned in this poem could be a reflection of Herrick's original religious philosophy which is based on the Church of England and is neither Catholic nor Puritan because the altar is not square nor triangular and the material is bone.

5. The spirit of play and Herrick: Politics in recreation

It is easy to imagine that Herrick's way of writing, that is, expanding a story with actual customs, practices and legends of the day within a fictional world of fairies combined with his literary style of description of detailed minutiae and his love of small things, expresses his intellectual curiosity. The following 'The Fairies' is a short poem about the legends of those days.

If ye will with Mab find grace,
Set each Platter in his place:
Rake the Fier up, and get
Water in, ere Sun be set.
Wash your Pailles, and clense your Dairies;
Sluts are loathsome to the Fairies:
Sweep your house: Who doth not so,
Mab will pinch her by the toe. (201)

Herrick enjoyed life as a vicar in the countryside. The kind of life he lived as a clergyman may have been abhorred by the Puritans. Judging by his natural epicurean endowments, the reason he was moved to treat with superstition and legends in seventeenth-century England, upon which the Puritans frowned, by daring to create a world of fairies, might have been not only his standpoint as a Royalist poet but also his spirit of play. In the third line of 'The Argument of his book,' Herrick refers to the "May-poles", the Festival of May, which James I encouraged as an amusement in *The Book of Sports*. The "Wakes" were also encouraged by Charles I in *The Book of Sports*.⁷⁾ Even though this was entirely forbidden among the Puritans, it was one of the subjects in each poetry collection and it is demonstrable that Herrick established the poetry collection as an assistance to or in accordance with the proclamations of *The Book of Sports*. These had been promulgated by both James I and his son Charles I in 1618 and 1633 due to strong antipathy to the Puritans who had severe views about "sports". Herrick's ideology, with his fondness for Anacreontic "carpe diem," and his natural tendency toward recreation must have forced confrontation with orthodox

Puritanism which rejected beauty and joy and denied natural human emotions. It is possible to consider Herrick's *Hesperides* a book which indirectly criticizes "sabbatarianism" and through its discussion of traditional recreations. It was written as an answer to the proposals of *The Book of Sports*, which was an attempt to restrain the influence of Puritanism. Issues of the right and wrong of recreation in manners and customs was one of the significant political problems in those days.⁸⁾ I assume that Herrick's *Hesperides* presents the political intentions of the Royalists.

However, Floris Dellattre (1880-1950) said that the fashion of writing fairy poetry would end in the seventeenth century, meaning 1650 after the Elizabethan era passed away.⁹⁾ This is two years after Robert Herrick published *Hesperides*. Analyzing the facts that, in 1649, a year after publication of the collection, Charles I was executed and republicanism was established by the Puritans, creates a feeling that the world of fairies depicted by Herrick was fated to ruin in literature as well as in the real world after all.

Notes

* This paper is based on "Oberon and Mab: The intellectual background of Robert Herrick's Fairy Poetry" *Discourse of the man and woman: from Shakespeare to Dryden*, Ed. Keiichiro Uetsuki. Tokyo. Kinseido, 1998, 41-66.

- 1) All references to Herrick's poems are to *The Poetical Works of Robert Herrick*, ed. L.C.Martin (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1956) and quoted by page number(s) and line(s) in parentheses.
- 2) In Act 4, Scene 1. Hecate and the three witches were dancing around a simmering cauldron throwing in slices of snake and eye of newt. It is difficult to deny that Shakespeare tried to create a scene full of spectacle so as to flatter James I who was strongly interested in witches and demonology, or Herrick himself was conscious of the eyes of the King behind Chapcotte.
- 3) This poem which is quoted from *Hesperides* is about "The usefulness of bread which deters fairies" as was believed in those days. Bread was widely employed as a talisman against fairies. It was customary to carry a piece of dried bread in one's pocket when one was going to an area haunted by fairies (Briggs 42). The "hags" which appear in this poem are devils which give people nightmares by sitting on their stomachs while they are sleeping (Briggs 216). Herrick mentions several other anti-fairy incantations in the poem.
- 4) According to the records of the London publishing association, on April 29, 1640, a report of the plans to publish "Poems written by Master Robert Herrick" by Andrew Crooke, the publisher, was accepted (Chute 221).
- 5) In 'Delight in Disorder,' Herrick praises "disorder". Herrick finds beauty in the disorder of Julia's clothes and mentions that a casual style of dress is more attractive to the human heart than perfect beauty.
- 6) See Tobit 6:7, 6:15-16 (*The Shorter Books of the Apocrypha* 37, 38).
- 7) In 1618, there was a judge of public peace and order in Lancashire who tried to forbid people to play on Sunday. An influential Catholic landowner incited public opposition. "The Book of Sports" was published by James I in connection with this argument after his tour of Lancashire. The book forbade obstruction of publicly sanctioned events such as recreation and dancing after Church worship on Sundays. According to the book, people had the freedom to maintain traditional customs and practices such as "May-game," erecting the "May pole" and decorating the Church with rushes. ("The Declaration on Sports" 565-67).
- 8) In chapter 1, which is about public amusement in the seventeenth century, Malcomson discusses the case of *The Book of Sports* as amusement involving political issues (Malcomson 75-88). See Marcus, "Herrick's *Hesperides* and the 'Proclamation made for May'" 49.
- 9) Dellattre 191.

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