

# The Witch's Book of Fairytales

By Yvonne Owens

## Preface



Edward Burne-Jones, *Eros and Psyche*, 1867

**Elven abductions, soul retrievals, ghostly visitations and romances** with the ‘Monstrous’ or ‘Exotic Other’ have long been the special fare of folklore and fairytales. For fairytales to perform their ancient role of subverting stale power structures or re-invigorating the status quo, they must be deeply and profoundly liberating, shifting the ground of social perceptions, beliefs and assumptions. Often, fairytales are powerfully erotic and sexually awakening, serving as ‘coming of age’ narratives in both allegorical and fairly direct terms. This makes fairytales subtly, if profoundly, subversive, and for this reason our ‘rational’ cultural paradigm has long held them in an ambivalent esteem, combined of such conflicting responses as awe and distrust, respect and a scoffing

dismissal. Yet fairytales are fallen myths and still carry the charge of spiritual transformation and evolutionary change -- as well as the almost religious awe that surrounds those things we secretly suspect have the potential to truly change us and transform our lives. Popular contemporary novelists like Isabelle Allende, Salman Rushdie, Jeanette Winterson, Paulo Coelho and Neil Gaiman work in the literary genre dubbed 'Magical Realism' or 'Fantasy Realism' and the late Angela Carter put great stock in traditional Fairytale plots, characterizations and themes. Fairytales will never die because we need them -- as much as we need the Wise Fool or the Sacred Victim, the Hero's Journey and storytelling's function of psychological and spiritual renewal.

Heroes, goddesses and gods descend into the Underworld (called Hades, Anwynn, Land Below Waves, the Hollow Hills, Avalon, and other names in various cultures) in search of wisdom. Gwion, who became Taliesin, was a young magical apprentice of the great Goddess, Cerridwen, who is a Welsh deity related to the Scottish Callegach. Both can manifest as extremely young and beautiful, or extremely old and frightening. Cerridwen had set Taliessin the task of stirring her magic cauldron for a year and a day, at which point its magical brew containing 'all wisdom' would be ready, It was intended for her son, Morfran, hoping to gift him with beauty, grace, poetry and song, (collectively called 'Arwen'), attributes greatly prized by the Celts. But -- just as the final minute for its brewing was completed -- the brew erupted, boiling and bubbling from the pot, splattering Gwion's thumb with hot liquid.

Gwion, without thinking, put his thumb in his mouth, and thereby gained the wisdom and knowledge Ceridwen had intended for her son. Realizing that Ceridwen would be furiously angry, Gwion fled. Ceridwen chased him but, using the powers of the potion, he turned himself into a hare. She became a greyhound. He became a fish and jumped into a river. She transformed into an otter. He turned into a bird; she became a hawk. Finally, he turned into a single grain of corn amid a pile of grain. She then became a hen and, being a goddess, she found and ate him without trouble. Because of the potion, Gwion was not destroyed. Ceridwen became pregnant, and -- knowing it was Gwion -- she resolved to kill the child when he was born. When the day of his birth came, however, he was so beautiful that she couldn't follow through with her plan. She threw him in the ocean instead, sewing him inside a leather-skin bag (or set him in a coracle,

depending on the story). Once again, Gwion did not die, but was rescued on a Welsh shore – near Aberdyfi according to most versions of the tale – by a prince named Elffin ap Gwyddno. The reborn infant grew to become the legendary bard Taliesin.

There is a great vision of the spiritual realms of the heavens delivered from the mouth of Taliesin in Geoffrey's 'Life of Merlin' from the 12thC. Geoffrey was Bishop of St Asaph in Wales, and friends with Jocelyn of Furness who seems to have incorporated aspects of the 'Merlin' story into his own 'Life of St Mungo'. Both were keen to retell local Pagan mythology within a pseudo-historical Christianized framework, and to do it in a way that would influence popular culture, consigning ancient 'religious truths' into the realms of fantasy, and helping reinforce the foundations of European Christianity. The tale of Amergin the Bard is an earlier story that shares some of the same motifs. Merlin is said to have gained his deep wisdom through his descents into the Hollow Hills and his sojourns in the Crystal Cave – where, in contemporary art as well as newly-crafted magical narratives, Taliesin visited him in a vision and bestowed healing powers upon the wizard. There is also the persistent rumor that Merlin actually IS Taliesin, reborn. Certain prophecies of Taliesin's are sometimes ascribed to Merlin, such as the famous words describing the fate of Britain: "Their Lord they shall praise, their language they shall keep. Their land they shall lose - Except wild Wales."

'The Smith and the Devil' belongs to a family of tales from oral transmission known as 'Tricking the Devil' tales. There are many, many versions, including Death and the Maiden themed stories, 'The Abbess' genre of tales, and the Beatrix lineage of stories, among others. They are Trickster stories from shamanic healing narratives, whereby a hero or heroine tricks the spirit of an illness, 'curse' or Death himself by outsmarting it. An old Eurasian tribal saying has it that "Smiths and Shamans were hatched in the same nest." (Mircea Eliade, 'Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy') Metal "smiths," by whatever name, have always had quasi-divine status and semi-shamanic roles, like artists and artisans, makers or creatives in any culture. Metallurgy was known and practiced by the ancient horse tribes of the Eurasian Steppe, and before that by the prehistoric inhabitants of Eastern and Central Europe (Marija Gimbutas, 'The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe'). In Old Europe, metal craft was mainly applied to the making of sacred

ornament, grave goods, and altar ware. It is the early beginnings of alchemy and science, and has always been associated with divine agency and magic.

The *Witch's Book of Fairytales* collection has pilfered from various sources for its contents. It includes some traditional, multi-cultural fairytales and lore (in original retellings) and some completely original (new) tales. They have one thing in common however; they are all told from an alternative or underground perspective -- that of the 'exoticised Other,' which is to say the succubus or fairy, the transgressive woman, or Witch. This 'alternative' point-of-view is consistent throughout the collection. *The Lover Who Came As A Star* of Part I (*Transformation Tales*) has its roots in extremely ancient ground. The tale is basically a variant of the Psyche and Eros myth, itself having sprung from myth cycles that may well be prehistoric, though we have seen in more recently in its incarnation of 'Beauty and the Beast'. The epiphanies and descents of Osiris, Dionysos, Eros, Castor and Pollux, Kore, Demeter, Persephone, Psyche, Inanna, Ishtar, Astarte, and Ereshkigal can be traced to the Underworld Journey of shamanic lore, which has its own roots in the seasonal metamorphoses of hunter/gatherer and agricultural societies' religious practices. There are also versions of Thomas the Rhymer, East of the Sun and West of the Moon, and many other traditional tales which issue from venerable pagan traditions disguised as mere, harmless 'Tales of the Folk.'

Transformational magic of the lunar god and the earthly 'source,' or aquatic goddess, ruling growth and change, fertility and seasons, is the common theme of many of these stories. The earliest forms of Eros were the diminutive, masculine, perfectly formed, winged 'erotes' of Archaic Greek and Minoan religions. Essentially, they were pollinators – tiny god forms who were the lovers of the flowering plants in spring, fertilizing them and bringing them to bear in the religion of the Melissae, or Bee and Butterfly priestesses. Values from earlier layers of culture survive into the present day through the medium of folk and fairytales. Stories featuring the redemptive 'beasts' or daimons of the Underworld, the erotic (and abducting) Fairy Queens of many a heroic saga, and the harrowing of Hades by various Psyches, Janets or Star Maidens are tales about soul retrieval. The heroine ('hera') or hero ventures into the Otherworld to retrieve the souls of their many-aspected Eros, or Love. Hearing their tales positions us right back

into the transcendent world of Saviour Heroes, Wildwomen, Wise Fools, and Sorceresses.

Osiris, Minos, Dionysos, Mithras, Gilgamesh and countless other heroic 'divine sons' of the Maternal Cave or 'Underworld' have been all been hailed as 'Opener of the Way' through the millennia -- as the One who comes to release captive souls from their underworld imprisonment or 'soul tomb.' But in this collection the redeemers are nearly always women, after the earliest thematic patterns, with the most ancient of precedents in Inanna's rescue of her lover Damuzi, as well as of her dark sister, Ereshkigal. The seasonal significance of this motif is clear. When Love, Youth, Truth or Beauty are taken hostage by the forces of darkness in the Underworld, we experience the long, dark night of the soul, the withdrawal of energies from the mundane world of daily events, or -- at the very least -- the barren cold of a long, hard winter.

No one above ground was able to have sex while Ereshkigal was imprisoned in the Underworld, a plot twist that gave Inanna's quest in search of her captive sister the edge of urgency. Spring could not arrive and fructify the earth while Persephone was held captive by Hades, making life dreary and impoverished for all mortals -- as well as for Persephone's grieving mother, Demeter. This is why so many traditional tales are accounts of seasonal abductions. The Ice Queen, Pluto, Hades or the Queen of Fairy takes Tam Lin (Castor, Pollux, Eros, The Twelve Dancing Princesses, Arthur, Mabon, or Persephone) into the Underworld (or 'Hollow Hills') for that sojourn we define as the 'off-season.' This can be seen as the winter of the soul, or the seasonal drama we all resonate to through the rituals and festivals of the 'Divine Child' and his or her birth, death and reappearance/resurrection in the spring. Orpheus retreated to the mountainous heights of Thrace in his grief over the loss of his wife, Eurydice, to the underworld realm of Hades, just as Demeter mourned her loss of her divine daughter, Persephone to the world below, both of them bringing on hard, cold winter with their grief. Early Orphic narratives cast the resurrected Beloved, Eurydice, as warming Light and Renewal.

Traditional shamanic shape-shifting motifs can be seen in such stories as 'The Lover Who Came as a Star' as well as deeply spiritual transformational themes. In *The Witch's Book of Fairytales*, 'The Lover...' is an Eastern European tale that conflates Eros with a magical bird, in this case an amorous gander. In the magical

worldview, Venus was both a goddess and a dove. She was also a star, as is Eros. He is, in fact, the same star, but as the evening or morning star, when Venus appears as one of the first and the last, or the brightest, of the stars in the sky. Joseph Campbell called these birdmen ‘Star Sons,’ for this magical complex of associations and correspondences.

‘Lucina and The Wolf’ is another kind of ‘Beauty and the Beast’ or ‘Psyche and Eros’ tale, as is the ‘Illya and Lenka’ trilogy. ‘Illya and Lenka’ makes use of Hungarian werewolf mythology, specifically the traditional belief that werewolves are the children of Christian priests who have broken their vows of celibacy, and that they shapeshift by crossing over a magical body of water. Hungarian ‘Taltos’ shamanic lore has it that Birch rods (or hoops) can assist in transforming werewolves back into human form, and this motif is also touched upon in my story. Voluntary shape-shifting into wolf form was considered an heretical form of witchcraft during the Inquisition and was preached against from the pulpit, which would make the practice (actually a form of clan and ancestor reverence) to have seemed to be rather popular.

That all of these tales appear to contain some resemblance to the story of Cinderella can best be explained by setting the tale among the constellation of Psyche and Eros stories, as it is really, simply another one of these. These tales fundamentally deal with the issues of spiritual jealousy and those demons of resistance that attend every beauty of the soul, every road to enlightenment. ‘The Abbess’ Tale’ of Part 1 relates the well-known story of Melusine, the enlightened shape shifter and Witch, as well as referencing some other Celtic tales of the divine feminine. Her story was crafted into that of *Elaine of the Ways*, builder of cities and roads. Breton Celtic tales of the divine feminine in the form of the shape-shifting witch/dragon were crafted onto those of *Elaine of the Ways*, an early Welsh tale that synthesizes stories of the boon-granting Witch Queen with the coming of the Romans into Britain. The construction of King Arthur’s purpose in founding the Code of Chivalry among his courts portrayed in this tale -- though sounding surprisingly ‘modern’ in its feminist and ecological leanings -- is taken from the anonymously-penned 13th-century introduction (called ‘The Elucidation’) to

Chrétien de Troyes' *Conte du Graal*, and reflects the woman-revering culture of the Occitanian 'Courts of Love' of medieval Provençal.

'The Inquisition of Beatrice de Planissoles,' the first of the *Forbidden Tales* collection, is based on actual testimony recorded at Madame de Planissoles' trial for heresy, in Provence, in the 14th century. 'The Angel in the Wasteland' references some beliefs around the fall of the Rebel Angels from early heretical Christian mythology, not from the Manichaean heresy or Catharism of Beatrice's experience, but from the Gnostics. Both 'The Priest's Bedside Companion' and 'The Vicarage' portray early examples of esoteric Christian magic. The first makes reference to the Church Father's doctrines concerning succubae and the latter to an account of a modern priest's ritual to acquire illicit love. The same story, with different, medieval principal players, is portrayed in both verse and illuminations in the manuscripts commissioned by the 13th century Galician king, Alfonso X El Sabio (titled 'Los Cantigas de Sancta Maria' or 'The Miracles of the Virgin'). In 'The Vicarage,' one finds an unsettling montage of these ideas infusing a magico-religious version of Nobokov's *Lolita*.

Part 2, titled *Arthurian Tales*, is just that. It is composed entirely of tales based on Chrétien de Troyes, Geoffrey of Monmouth, Mallory, and contemporary chroniclers. All of my tales focus upon Lancelot, presented from his, Nimue's or Merlin's perspectives on his various deeds. He seems to be accountable to an alternative morality in the lesser-known tales, or to a chivalrous standard that smacks of paganism or the heresies characteristic of the great 13th century 'Courts of Love.' Some of these stories are rare or 'apocryphal' accounts of the 'peerless knight,' not always included in the more 'noble' or heroic narratives of his amorous and magical exploits. This underground tradition of Lancelot includes very varied portrayals of the knight, some of which were noble, and others which were ignominious or even simply, to modern perceptions, completely amoral. These little-known stories were popular fare for the troubadours of the 12th -- 15th centuries.

The last of *The Witch's Book of Fairytales'* collections, Part 4 (*Tales of the Troubadour*) comes from similar storytelling traditions. 'The Lay of Abelard and Heloise: The Last Letter' is based on the published Personal Letters of Abelard and Heloise, the most famous medieval sexual transgressives. Second only to Lancelot and

Guinevere, and leading the tragic lovers Tristan and Iseult, their shared grave in Paris annually attracts pilgrims of love to this day. Ecclesiastics, scholars, lovers, and a tragic, married pair, they left us little in the way of manuscripts, though Abelard was reputed to have written many themes, essays, dissertations, and love songs. Only the letters survive (and these have probably been censored, edited and constructed according to monastic ideological standards so as to propagandize ascetic principles of monastic scholasticism). One of his surviving hymns, *O Quanta Qualia*, smacks of pantheist, nature reverencing values, touting the labors of the year and the seasons as did the ancient pagans, Varro and Virgil, in *Rerum Rusticarum Libri Tres* and the *Georgics*. A variation on this 12<sup>th</sup>-century hymn can be heard on Kristin Sweetland's 2002 album, *Root, Heart & Crown*. Most of Abelard's early theoretical and theological works were burned as heretical.

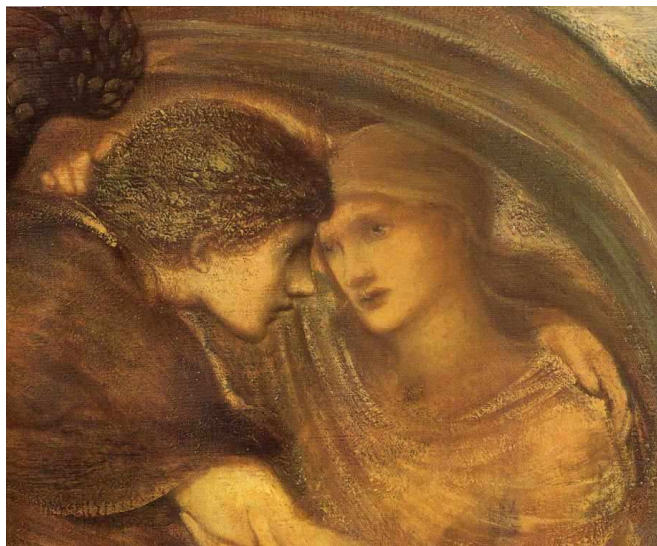
For this tale, I have proceeded as if Heloise had written Abelard one last letter from her convent cell, just before his death. I've tried to let the monologue, essentially a memoir, speak in her voice, as expressed in the historical letters, and to let her have her full say (for once) on matters secular, sexual and divine. Much of her narrative's dialogue between the lovers is modeled on the erotic language of the Song of Songs, call-and-answer ritual oratory that seemed perfectly suited to this task. The legendary couple did actually quote extensively from both biblical and classical authorities in their letters, like all medieval scholars and clerics. Abelard was a troubadour as well as a scholar and priest, and he wrote many songs about his love for Heloise during their courtship. His romantic lyricism was the actual agent of their enduring fame as star-crossed lovers as, being songs safely ensconced within the popular, oral tradition, they could not be burned. These songs, now also lost and forgotten, would have undoubtedly been spread abroad by itinerant troubadours. Heloise and Abelard were famous, and their story was well known (and well-loved) in its own time.

Some of the stories existed in metric verse form or as ballads through centuries of retellings and fireside performances. The verses in 'The Apocryphal Tales of Lancelot,' 'Lucina and the Wolf,' and 'The Moor and the Dowry' are my own lyrics, set to traditional or original melodies. The Scottish tale, 'Tam Lin,' is probably best known today in its ballad versions, with anywhere from thirteen to eighteen rhyming verses. 'Tam Lin' and Irish 'Etain and Midir' are very ancient, traditional Celtic tales, of the



Scottish and Irish oral traditions, for which troubadours (and, earlier, Bards) would have, no doubt, received repeated requests in Mead Halls, taverns, or great courts of the rich and powerful. My original interpretations are based on these traditional renditions and also owe a lot to various modern-day troubadours, who have performed these stories marvelously well. ‘Thomas and the Well’ is my version of the 16th century tale, with possibly much older roots, immortalized by Sir Walter Scott in a long poem as ‘Thomas the Rhymer.’ That it is a close relative of ‘Tam Lin,’ very possibly a direct descendant, is obvious. Like Orpheus, Thomas was a poet and musician who visited the Underworld.

The final tale in this collection is a retelling of ‘Yonec,’ one of the traditional Breton *lais* of Marie de France. I believe this late 12th century author to have perfectly expressed the medieval troubadour ‘voice,’ inasmuch as she was writing for a courtly audience, from well within the chivalric codes then being popularized by Eleanor of Aquitaine, Marie of Champagne and Chrétien de Troyes (among many others). With ‘Yonec,’ we return once again to the spirit-spouse or bird/lover of the Psyche and Eros tales, with definite ‘Cinderella’ elements. Like ‘The Lover Who Came as a Star,’ Yonec arrives on the wing, entering through the window. He – like all amorous, avian, winged Eros figures and ‘star sons’ – will stop at nothing to make his beloved his own. And the heroine of this tale, whom I’ve named ‘The Lady Branwen,’ like the Little Goose Girl, a latter-day Psyche, will stop at nothing in order to bring Love and Spring, Life and Renewal back into the world.



**Edward Burne-Jones, Eros and Psyche (detail)**