

Richard Firth Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars: Fairy Beliefs and the Medieval Church* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016). Print, 285 pp., US\$55.00, ISBN: 9780812248432.



R e v i e w

Elf Queens and Holy Friars is a book that deals with the reception of fairy belief by the Medieval Church and its clash with that of the people that lived with these ideas, or, as Richard Firth Green phrases it, in the introduction: ‘the struggle between the official and unofficial cultures of the Middle Ages’ (p. 2).

For this purpose, Firth Green has divided his book into five chapters and a postscript, starting with the chronological evolution of fairy belief and the variations across different European geographic areas. In the second chapter he defines both cultures mentioned above, and then uses both primary and secondary literature to explain how they understood said belief. After having settled this initial debate, the next chapters ‘offer readings of various aspects of fairy belief’ (p. 2), such as the typology of *incubi* and changelings. He finishes by discussing fairyland, the place fairies are believed to inhabit, and where they take humans they have abducted. For this last chapter, he relies heavily on the example of Arthurian legend. This is all seen through the filter of the Church as evidenced by the primary sources the author resorts to. The book ends in a postscript where Firth Green moves the narration further, past the official chronology of the Middle Ages, evidencing the influence of the topics discussed previously and giving a glimpse as to how they continued evolving.

The author defines from the beginning of the book what he understands as ‘fairy’, given the complexity of the term and its different nuances according to context and timeframe. Firth Green takes advantage of this complexity to enlist different opportunities for further research: ‘If fairies are demons, it follows that

demons, or at least some demons, are fairies, and this insight opens up a world of still largely unexplored ecclesiastical material for investigation' (p. 16).

He also takes into account the different methodological approaches adopted for the study of fairy belief, such as literary analysis and studies of '*ferlies* as things' (p. 12). He then reconciles both branches with his own idea of how this topic should be researched: first *ferlies*, then literary studies.

Firth Green is consistent in the manner in which he constructs his arguments throughout the book. His paragraphs begin by making a statement, which he then supports with evidence from primary sources, engaging in discussion with secondary literature when it is pertinent. Even though this is a useful way to explain different theses to the reader, the extracts could be explained further in order to tie each argument together before proceeding to the next one.

Even though Firth Green relies heavily on primary sources, he is also critical of them. He keeps in mind that there is a bias in the texts he is quoting because of the nature of their authors who are 'members of a clerical elite who officially did *not* believe in [fairies]' (p. 13). He also justifies his use of these sources in spite of their prejudice, by stating that 'the attempts of such people to rationalize, negate, or dismiss fairy beliefs can tell us a great deal about both their vigor and their ubiquity' (p. 13).

It has been mentioned earlier that Firth Green also engages in discussion with secondary literature. It is particularly valuable that he does not dismiss the sources with which his views clash. Instead, he uses the same methodological approach of resorting to primary texts in order to provide evidence for why his thinking is different to that of other scholars. This structure allows the reader to participate in an active dialogue with the text as it presents different angles from which the topic is understood which can then be used to generate a new one.

In the later chapters, Firth Green often references topics discussed in the earlier ones, such as the brief return to *incubi* fairies from Chapter 3 that he makes in Chapter 4, or the use of a quote from the first chapter as evidence for arguments in the fifth one. This aspect results in a cohesive text that keeps the reader involved and that also appeals to a sense of complicity between reader and author.

The language and tone, whilst academic, is not overly complex, and makes it easy to engage with the text. Students who wish to become versed in the topic will find a comprehensive study that makes use of a vast body of primary sources and, whilst far from an annotated bibliography, the secondary literature quoted would also help when approaching the subject. Academics with knowledge in the original languages of the quotes Firth Green presents (Latin, Middle English and Old French) can engage in a different type of discussion with the text. *Fairy Queens and Holy Friars* is a book that can be valuable to scholars at different stages and doing studies in the subject from different methodologies.

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