

**Simon Young & Davide Ermacora. *The Exeter Companion to Fairies, Nereids, Trolls and Other Social Supernatural Beings*. University of Exeter Press, 2024.
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Simon Young and Davide Ermacora put together this *compendium* of European folklore through their own insight and the impeccable contributions of sixteen other scholars via fourteen independent studies. All eighteen of them attempt –and, quite frankly, succeed– to weave the supernatural phenomena across Europe and throughout the past two millennia, shedding new light onto the similarities and differences between beings pertaining to legends, stories and myths, and their social nature mirroring human societies.

Chapter 1 “Introducing the Social Supernatural” serves as a guide to comprehend this volume and the aim of the authors. By coining the term “supernatural society”, Young and Ermacora strive to prove that European folklore entities mostly reflect human societies and do so by means of a combination of the following attributes: choral actions or group activities, discernible hierarchies, shared homes either in nature or in human settlements, symbiosis between the earthly and the otherworldly and distinct personalities of these entities. While some beings may pertain to a collective rather than a supernatural society, Young and Ermacora propose to look at it in terms of a social spectrum, given the apparent threefold division of the continent with regards to this trait: all-female collectives tend to thrive in Eastern Europe, supernatural societies in the north-west and a richer and more varied supernatural ensemble in the south.

In Chapter 2 “Ireland: The Tribes Of the Gods and the People of the Hills”, John Carey describes these two groups as supernatural societies heavily linked to the human world, making most aspects of daily life dependent on them. Their social mechanics seem to parallel that of a human society, with a distinct hierarchy and specific roles (kings, druids, cooks, musicians). Also, most accounts confer them magical powers with spiritual or god-like statuses, even regarding these supernatural societies as having been bonded to the first Gaelic settlers, thus making every human subservient to them, as they personified the land they lived in and their prerogative to grant rule over the territories.

Chapter 3 “The Isle of Man: They Call Them the Good People” brings us closer to the Manx fairylore, the first written evidence of which dates back to the 17th century. Stephen Miller helps us to understand their fairies, those that could be anywhere at any given time and differed from other beings like water horses, mermaid-like entities or even ghosts. Fairies coexisted with humans in their households, were addressed by many names, and were responsible for every inexplicable circumstance (sudden illnesses, abductions, death) or fantastic occurrence. They are portrayed as neither benevolent nor malicious and humans needed to abide by their rules and offer them gifts, otherwise they would face severe consequences. Their place in society was clear: they passed judgement and placed morals and standards upon humans. According to Miller, as Manx language went extinct in the 20th century, so did the belief and the presence of fairies on the island.

Jeremy Harte puts together a corpus of legends and stories in Chapter 4 “England: Small Fairies Are Beautiful Fairies” where he analyses the themes contained in them and powers displayed by the English fairies. These tales survived thanks to the storytellers –often fairy fixers and scammers– who had either experienced firsthand or heard of their wonders (bestowing health, causing harm, gifting treasures). The English fairies, as Harte puts it, liked to be hidden and were linked to common places so as to make them more relatable to listeners. Modernity came with a dwindling in fairy belief, and so did their powers and wealth, as they became more proletarian. No longer did they feature as wealthy and trickster-like spirits but as common household ones that were once their moral compass.

Chapter 5 “Iceland: The Elves of Strandir” introduces us to the traditional conceptualisation of elves by the hands of Matthias Egeler, who strays from the modern concept of fairy and elf that has permeated society

recently. These entities (originally *alfar*) were hidden people in a parallel society modelled on human equivalents (economy, settlements, social organisation) and were thought to be indistinguishable from us, just somewhat wealthier. Their origins have a direct Christian background, and their purpose is moralistic as expected (rule breaking meant supernatural punishment). In the vast and empty Iceland, the author points out, they served to rationalise misfortune and contributed to make danger controllable. By having a cramped local mythology, locals coped with biting isolation, turning emptiness into a sense of community. It was not a matter of pure belief but convenience.

In Chapter 6 “Scandinavia: My Neighbour the Troll”, Tommy Kuusela focuses on the figure of the Nordic troll and makes a distinction between Norwegian folktales and Swedish legends, the latter coming from real-life experiences (through fear, intoxication, hallucinations) and the former being merely accounts of fiction. Trolls are mostly depicted as ancient, grotesque, big, noisy and disruptive beings (hence, the modern internet troll conception) attracted to beauty which explode in anger or by direct exposure to sunlight. Kuusela mentions their lifestyle is an inversion of ours; they symbolise danger, human fears and our innermost desires as well. A fear of them reinforced the importance of being a good member of human society.

Chapter 7 “The Netherlands: *Witte Wieven* and Other White Apparitions” moves away from the concept of fairy and centres around white women as demons of the earth or of the air. Yseult de Blécourt compiles possible origins of these entities as being a link between a goddess of Death and the common people, or even a byproduct of Nordic Valkyries, for they were seen as apparitions that attracted young men and lured them towards certain death. Inhabiting hollow trees, castles or riding white horses, these ghosts are found to be pagan, de Blécourt mentions, as their tales placed them always near pre-Christian burial grounds. Unsocial by nature, but a somewhat collective of entities, white women were worth including in this volume.

Chapter 8 “Iberia: Moors, *Gentiles* and *Encantadas*” displays the richness and variety of Iberian mythology through accounts of *viejas* (old women), nymphs, *damas* (ladies), *moros* (subterranean beings), *encantadas* (enchanted women), *gentiles* (prehistoric giants) and fairies. José Manuel Pedrosa outlines two complications regarding folklore analysis: the distortion of texts by religious scholars and the late adulteration—rather, invention—of folk tales. Pedrosa implies that thematic classification is nigh impossible but instead proposes one according to contact between both worlds: human settlements, frontier world (cemeteries, ruins, bridges) and the uncivilised (caves, mountains, forests). These beings are mostly female; they kidnap and seduce male travellers, guard treasures and are confined to certain areas. Most *encantadas* are described as being social, while *moros* are more unsociable. Gentiles are the male social supernatural, prehistoric giants governed by elders who would disappear with the advent of Christians.

In Chapter 9 “France: Humanlike Societies and Spaces among the *Fées*”, Andrea Maraschi counts on the comprehensive collection of supernatural beings gathered by a 12th century intellectual. This includes multiple entities such as demons, *succubi*, sirens, dragons, werewolves or the very social *fées*. *Fées* inherit traits and powers from *Parcae* and nymphs (divination and erotic nature). The writer analyses *fées* who shared household with humans (disturbing or harming them), some that resembled humans and those that mirrored human societies (snatching them in need of assistance). Sometimes portrayed as deceivers, other times as benign but mostly demonised by Christianity, these beings once had the purpose to ease loneliness and provide wonder to the community.

Chapter 10 “German-Speaking Europe: *Mossweiblein*, *Wichtel* and *Nixen*” details these three beings across Germany, Austria and German speaking Switzerland. Janin Pisarek and Florian Schaefer study them as judges and correctors of human behaviour. The *Mossweiblein* (mostly female) were friendly societies that dwelled in forests, visited households, sought intimacy with humans and exchanged favours with rewards, while the *Wichtel* (dwarves) lived underground, stole human food and mostly did not interact with humans. On the other hand, the *Nixen* were water spirit demons that embodied the dangers of bodies of water and behaved maliciously as humans often do. Their violent interactions and lust for mortal men often served as warnings against social misconduct.

In Chapter 11 “The Hungarians: Heavenly and Earthly Fairy Societies”, Éva Pócs details the characteristics of the Hungarian variant of fairy, the *szépasszony* (or fair ladies). These female beings resemble demon mares for they could torment humans during sleep, as well as seduce men through music and dance before attacking or even kidnapping them. Some accounts depict them as harvest protectors and witch fighters, nonetheless, portray them as deadly to humans. Pócs points out that these narratives are rooted in personal beliefs and *szépasszony* personify beauty and sexual desire. Another interesting aspect is the duality of half-fairy, half-human women who could cycle through both worlds. This, Pócs mentions, could signify the inner desires of poor women to overcome the hardships of mundane life.

Dorian Jurić describes the supernatural entity known as *vila* in Chapter 12 “Western Balkans: A *Vila* Like a *Vila*”. The *vila* is a tall young woman with long golden hair, winged and with goat feet. These beings are gregarious and gather in small groups in the wild, where humans cannot access or dare not enter. Perhaps derived from the geographical location of the Balkans, these entities share common properties with sirens, nymphs, elves and fairies, though they are only female and show almost complete independence from humans. They do try to induce humans to dance and sing to exhaustion, though these encounters are only malicious during nighttime. *Vila*, Jurić notes, represent only the female half of the human society.

Chapter 13 “Greece (and Italy): The Nereids, Those from Outside” familiarises the reader with the concept of *exotica* (referring to the outside or supernatural) in the form of nymphs, witches, female demons and nereids. Tommaso Braccini mentions that this view of the supernatural emphasises the striking differences between their kind and humans. In particular, nereids (nymphs not bound to the sea) were vengeful and jealous of their counterparts and would often kidnap, kill or eat humans. However, most often they were

ambivalent towards them, and some offered dangerous gifts and skills in exchange for proper payment, provided a certain degree of measure and respect. Said to be nigh immortal, these female entities often danced, ate and played together to entice humans and fulfil their desires.

In Chapter 14 “The Balts: *Laumės* and *Laimės*”, Francis Young and Saulė Kubiliūtė discuss these two entities which cannot be classified as standard fairies, contrary to its direct translation into English. While *laumės* are considered water beings who draw comparisons to nymphs (stealing children, providing gifts and being cannibalistic), *laimės* trace their origin to goddesses of the sky or fate. The latter are portrayed as protectors and deciders of children’s fates, rather than fiery-tempered beings. Young and Saulė leave an interesting thought to the reader: the possibility of remote cultures arriving at supernatural tales with striking resemblance regardless of contact, given a shared mythological inheritance and societies living in somewhat similar conditions across Europe. Perhaps we could call it *folkloric convergence*.

Chapter 15 “Ukraine: Courtship Rituals and Legends of the *Bohyni*” focuses on the most social entities within the supernatural in Ukraine, the *bohyni*. Natalie Kononenko describes them as non-hierarchical and dangerous, pertaining to the demon realm (with a clear Christian influence). They warn young men and women of the consequences of sex outside of matrimony. Women who had been deflowered and left unmarried would become outcasts and, in some tales, driven towards suicide or death, becoming *bohyni* (unquiet spirits) in the process. Furthermore, *bohyni* stories warned against submitting to sexual desires, especially with overly sexual and attractive women (as were the *bohyni* depicted, with exaggerated sexual traits). Female victims of the *bohyni* were also stripped of their ability to talk, as a clear metaphor on their capacity to speak on their own behalf, doomed to become pariahs.

