The *glamourie* of the fairies continues to appeal and hold us in their mischievous grip. Spyra has provided a masterful insight into the slippery nature of the fairy folk in the context of medieval literature and romance texts such as old favourites *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Thomas of Erceldoune*, *Sir Orfeo*, and Robert Henryson’s *Orpheus and Eurydice*, shedding new light on old tales. The inbetwixt nature of the fairy motif—in literature and in folklore—is examined in close detail. A particular strength of the book is its focus on the concept of liminality and its wider application to the fairies of romance. The author endeavours to make sense of what fairies are and how they functioned in literary understandings and interpretations, striding the divide somewhere between reality and fiction, at once literal and metaphoric. Drawing on an erudite range of theoretical perspectives, from Arnold Van Gennep, to Victor Turner, to Mary Douglas, this study presents a conscious blend of old and new approaches to folk belief in the context of literary criticism. Like King Orfeo or Thomas the Rhymer, the reader will be spell-bound on a venture “through the maze of fairy-ridden texts” and be all the better for the journey.

—Dr Lizanne Henderson, University of Glasgow

An interesting and original application of heavy-duty anthropological and literary theory to a celebrated and beloved group of medieval texts.

—Professor Ronald Hutton, Bristol University

*The Liminality of Fairies* offers an innovative, superbly researched study of the relationship between medieval romance and fairy lore, one that offers new insights and provides a firm foundation for future research.

—Dr Juliette Wood, Cardiff University
The Liminality of Fairies

Examining the fairies of medieval romance as liminal beings, this book draws on anthropological and philosophical studies of liminality to combine folkloristic insights into the nature of fairies with close readings of selected romance texts. Tracing different meanings and manifestations of liminality in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Launfal*, *Thomas of Erceldoune* and Robert Henryson’s *Orpheus and Eurydice*, the volume offers a comprehensive theory of liminality rooted in structuralist anthropology and poststructuralist theory. Arguing that romance fairies both embody and represent the liminal, *The Liminality of Fairies* posits and answers fundamental theoretical questions about the limits of representation and the relationship between romance hermeneutics and criticism. The interdisciplinary nature of the argument will appeal not just to medievalists and literary critics but also to anthropologists and folklorists as well as scholars working within the fields of cultural history and contemporary literary theory.

**Piotr Spyra** is Assistant Professor in the Institute of English Studies, University of Łódź (Poland), where he teaches medieval and early modern English literature. He is the author of *The Epistemological Perspective of the Pearl-Poet* (2014) and a number of articles on medieval English poetry and Renaissance drama.
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Piotr Spyra
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Introduction

The eminent British folklorist Katharine Briggs begins her book on *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature* (1967) by saying that it “is not an attempt to prove that fairies are real” and clarifies that she is “agnostic on the subject” (ix). Briggs was a towering figure in folklore studies and her scholarly achievements command respect. If one wanted to read her disclaimer in a tongue-and-cheek manner, however, the inclusion in the book of a chapter on the Cottingley fairies, supposedly captured on photographic film in the early decades of the twentieth century, definitely sounds an alarm. Briggs herself explains that she includes this section “for the sake of fairness” since the photographs “have never been proved to be fraudulent” (*Fairies* ix–x).1 Should anyone assume that such a candid expression of unqualified sympathy for the various testimonies collected in the book, and giving credence to “aesthetic truth [rather] than fact” (Briggs, *Fairies* ix), reflects an earlier state and climate of scholarship, a look at some of the latest publications on fairies is bound to raise a few eyebrows. In their excellent study of *Scottish Fairy Belief* (2001), Lizanne Henderson and Edward J. Cowan somehow consider it relevant to mention that they “are not concerned with proving the reality, or otherwise, of fairies; such an endeavour would be as futile as it is irrelevant” (2). Barbara Rieti grants the issue more relevance and goes so far as to include a section titled “A Note on My Own ‘Belief’” in her *Strange Terrain: The Fairy World in Newfoundland* (1991), in which she follows one of her informants in remarking that fairies “probably don’t exist, but I wouldn’t say they don’t” and claims that “there is a certain unwarranted arrogance on the part of those who dismiss them out of hand” (13). And in Dennis Gaffn’s *Running with the Fairies* (2012), an anthropological study that seeks to draw scholarly attention to the modern phenomenon of fairy belief, interpreted by Gaffn in religious terms, the author confesses he is a convert and that just like his informants, he “too came to ‘feel’ fairy energy” and its subjective reality inasmuch as he “recognise[s] and accept[s] the limits of traditional scientific investigation” (11).

Fairies are indeed a curious subject of scholarship and invite different methodologies from various disciplines. Book-length academic studies
dealing with the topic are still few and far between, with writers sometimes finding themselves veering between the Scylla of dismissing the vivacious tenacity of the fairy faith for the sake of academic rigour, and the Charybdis of unmoderated enthusiasm. Studies of fairies in literature, to which this book belongs, seem to escape this dilemma by virtue of dealing with mediated fairy lore, which need not even communicate or involve actual belief, but acknowledging this only leads literary scholars to another problem. They may, on the one hand, adopt an approach that sees fairies in literature as a straightforward textual representation of a body of popular beliefs and customs, and doing so leads some to a position of treating literature instrumentally. As a result, one way to look at literary fairies has been to follow the socio-historical conditions of particular acts of translation from folk belief or popular culture to the written page. On the other hand, they may view works of literature or the systemic presentations of fairies in particular genres as self-enclosed worlds with their own internal folklore and logic and ignore the issue of their relationship with the broader cultural and folkloric context altogether. While both approaches have yielded interesting results, in this book I intend to focus precisely on how in order to make sense of what fairies are and what they do in literature one needs to attend to both aspects simultaneously and see them as essentially intertwined—and by no means contradictory.

The three genres of medieval literature that make extensive use of fairies and build on popular belief are the romance, the Breton lay and the popular ballad. Of these, the last category furnishes a number of interesting examples of fairy-themed texts, all of which, however, post-date the Middle Ages, although it must be noted that some of the later ballads almost certainly had medieval antecedents. With the former two, the extant material allows for a comprehensive analysis of fairy references, which form the structural core and thematic centre of several surviving texts and punctuate a number of others. In this study, I deal with a selected corpus of late medieval English and Scottish romance, of which Breton lays—the mini-romances that purport to derive their themes from the folk songs of early medieval Brittany—form an important subgroup. Five texts receive the greatest attention in the course of the book. These include Sir Orfeo, an English Breton lay in which “[t]he otherworld is more concretely evoked . . . than in any other romance” (Saunders, Rape 228); Sir Launfal, an idiosyncratic English rendering of Marie de France’s lay of Lanval that provides a detailed picture of a human–fairy relationship with its usual set of gifts and taboos; Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the Arthurian masterpiece of the Gawain-Pearl poet fraught with subtle allusions to the fairy world and to the power of fairy illusion; Thomas of Erceldoune, a ballad-like romance remarkable for its conglomerate of religious imagery and poignant symbolism; and the Scottish poet Robert Henryson’s Orpheus and Eurydice, admittedly not a romance proper but
a work that provides much useful context for the study of romance fairies through its double structure of romance-like narrative and allegorical moral commentary. The poems serve as excellent examples of the degree to which medieval fairy lore infused romance literature, and while it is true that the genre of fairy romance focuses on the human characters rather than on fairies, the selected texts taken together come close to composing an internally consistent primary-source compendium on the romance vision of the fairy world and its inhabitants. Thematically related to the lay of *Sir Orfeo*, Henryson’s Orpheus story also has much to contribute to this vision even if it does not mention fairies as often as the other works, and the conspicuous absence of fairies from its Moralitas section receives much attention in this context. Readings of the five romance narratives are also complemented with references to other works of English literature notable for their inclusion of fairies, such as Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* or ballads from Francis James Child’s collection, and to related continental material that served as inspiration for the English writers.

Rather than providing a cross-section of the entire body of medieval romance literature that features or mentions fairies, the book focuses in depth on a number of representative texts to consider both their internal logic, rhetoric and structure and the rich legacy of critical writing they have given rise to. This is because instead of dealing with the broad topic of literary themes and motifs associated with fairies, my approach focuses specifically on the concept of liminality and its applicability to the fairies of romance. A major criterion in the selection of texts was therefore the legacy of criticism and the engagement of critics with the notions of ambiguity and in-betweenness, however variously understood or implemented in particular readings. An important goal of this study is thus to make sense of and integrate the often contradictory pronouncements of critical readers and to point out the need to tackle directly the problem of what liminality is understood to denote, an issue that romance criticism has mostly hitherto only skirted around. In the remainder of the Introduction, I explore the significance of the liminal for folkloric and anthropological research into fairy lore as well as the ways in which the term has been invoked in literary criticism. The argument that follows suggests that liminality is an indispensable concept in the study of romance fairies and a foundational context for any investigation of the cultural manifestations of fairy belief. The guiding assumption of the book is that fairies in literature need to be studied from both ends, that is, both as reflections of extraliterary beliefs and practices and as literary formations that draw on non-fictional real-world sources but are subject to uniquely literary transformations. The goal of this study is therefore to investigate how the two planes relate to each other and to probe into the logic and dynamics of these connections in the context of liminality. The six chapters of the book are organized around different theoretical perspectives on the
Introduction

liminal that inform the readings of romance texts offered here with a view to furthering knowledge both about fairies and the hermeneutics of medieval romance. Since the guiding principle of the argument is that it is worthwhile to set the literary constructions of fairies against their extraliterary sources founded on popular belief, it is first necessary, however, to address directly the issue of fairy belief as such.

The Perpetual Recession of Fairies

One surprising thing every student of folklore and popular culture is bound to discover is that fairies have defeated the expectations of numerous figures throughout history who predicted the ultimate decline of fairy belief and claimed to have witnessed the onset of its demise. The conviction that this belief is dying out can be traced back to the late Middle Ages. In one of the Canterbury Tales, Geoffrey Chaucer, writing in the late fourteenth century, presents an Arthurian world of magic “fulfild of fayerye” but quickly adds that he speaks “of manye hundred yeres ago / But now kan no man se none elves mo” (“The Wife of Bath’s Tale,” ll. 859, 864–865). Chaucer’s overall scepticism and a sense of playful ridicule of naivety are almost paradigmatic of his approach to fairy belief. Nonetheless, almost exactly two centuries later, Reginald Scot reveals in The Discoverie of Witchcraft (1584) that not only was his generation brought up on old wives’ tales of “elves, . . . fairies, . . . changlings, Incubus, Robin good-fellowe . . . and other such bugs” but that this also left such a lasting impression that some of them were “afraid of our owne shadowes” (86). Scot’s book is a sceptical treatise on witchcraft, and the point he makes is that no reasonable person should take reports of the witches’ demonic activities seriously. Witches, Scot argues, belong to the same category as the goblins of the scaremongering tactics of tale-weaving grandams and nurses and would also one day be viewed as little more than a childhood scare, which is what fairies were slowly turning into in his age. The following hundred years apparently had little effect, however, for as Keith Thomas notes, in the late seventeenth century, Sir William Temple also had the impression that he was witnessing the beginning of the end of superstition and “assume[d] that fairy beliefs had only declined in the previous thirty years or so” (607); Temple repeats Scot’s argument as if nothing had changed, claiming that tales of fairies not only “fright children into whatever their nurses please, but sometimes, by lasting impressions, . . . disquiet the sleeps and the very lives of men and women” (qtd. in Fox 195).

A jump forward in time of another two hundred years or so once again seems to bring us to the very brink of extinction of fairy belief. Reading the rich collection of tales of fairy encounters by Walter Evans-Wentz, The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries (originally published in 1911), one has the impression that the author is trying to preserve a dying world of
belief, one that had somehow survived unscathed since the Middle Ages and through the early modern period yet is bound to succumb eventually to twentieth-century urbanization and globalization. Although highly fantastical in its quasi-scholarly analytical commentary, Evans-Wentz’s book is still a valuable repository of late nineteenth-century folk belief insofar as it preserves and systematizes a large number of testimonies collected across the British Isles and Brittany. These often come from the very aged, such as the ninety-six-year-old piper Donald McKinnon, whose views on the nature of fairies, the existence of which he takes for granted, the book records (Evans-Wentz 103–104). In this respect, the collection presents a decline of a worldview rather than looks forward to the future. And yet it seems that the future brought little change. In 1990, Margaret Bennett visited the Scottish village of Balquhidder, the birthplace and original home of the Reverend Robert Kirk (ca. 1640–1692), author of *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies*, one of the best textual sources for seventeenth-century fairy lore. Kirk is the hero of a local legend; after he moved to Aberfoyle and produced his book, he was allegedly taken by the fairies, and the legend says that he remains in Elfland trapped to this day. Bennett interviewed two of the senior residents of the village, who “regarded the fairies as an unspoken part of everyday life” but “were both of the opinion that these old beliefs were becoming a thing of the past” and could not name a single younger person that might share their attitude (105). However, subsequent interviews with the children of the village produced a surprising revelation; quite contrary to the expectations of the elderly Mrs. MacGregor, the children exhibited a great deal of enthusiasm for the topic and substantial knowledge. What they said about fairies and their nature matched perfectly the testimonies found in Evans-Wentz and Briggs and the general body of fairy lore, but even more significant, the extent to which the children’s worldview was infused with thoughts of fairies led Bennett to conclude that “belief in the fairies is clearly an important part of their world—even in the 1990s” (113).

The fact is that “[t]he notion that the fairies were always slightly out of reach, slipping beyond human ken as they vanished into the mists of time, is exceedingly tenacious and of long duration” (Henderson and Cowan 24). Throughout the ages, people time and again consigned fairy belief to previous times, backward and remote places or the ignorance of childhood, which makes what Barbara Rieti refers to as “the perpetual recession of the fairies” (Strange Terrain 51), a fundamental feature of this belief that must be taken into account in any scholarly attempt to make sense of it.7 As Diane Purkiss puts it,

[f]olklore, including the works of early modern folklorists like John Aubrey and Robert Kirk, figures the fairies as always departing, or “flitting”; fairy beliefs, too, are always already on their way out,
always already a matter for half-forgotten tales told by grandmothers or nurse-maids to forgetful children.

(“Old Wives’ Tales” 105)

Indeed, to quote Briggs, “[t]he strange thing is that rare, tenuous and fragile as it is, the tradition is still there, and lingers on from generation to generation substantially unchanged” (Fairies 3). A recent (2004) collection of reported tales of fairy encounters in Ireland by Eddie Lenihan and Carolyn Eve Green differs in no respect from earlier voices of folklorists and folklore-oriented enthusiasts. Lenihan expresses his positive surprise at the number of people in contemporary Ireland who take fairies seriously or at least exhibit a vivid interest in the subject, records an impressive array of stories from an apparently living tradition yet laments its imminent death, soon to be brought about by the development of technology and media as well as changes in mores and family structure:

[T]his strange conglomeration of respect, doubt, fear, hesitation, and conviction I have discovered in the swirl of modern Irish life . . . will not, cannot survive the immense pressures and distractions I have already mentioned. Under a different guise, maybe, but not as fairy belief. And what a tragedy that will be[.]

(Lenihan and Green 11)

One may hazard an educated guess that reality will somehow prove him wrong, and it is perhaps the awareness of all the times when such predictions have indeed been proved false that motivates some scholars to include disclaimers stating that their book does not mean to prove the reality of fairies. It is worth remembering that whatever their intentions and motivations were, the writers of fairy-inflected medieval and early modern literature similarly drew on a body of lore surrounding a phenomenon “always already on the point of disappearing” (Purkiss, The Witch 159) but never quite gone for good.

Yet while fairy beliefs may indeed be “a sign of an outmoded structure of belief” (Purkiss, The Witch 159), viewed synchronically they perform important social functions regardless not only of the reality of actual fairies but also of the sincerity of belief. Differentiating among fervent belief, a positively inclined ear, proclivity to take interesting tales seriously or a mere sceptical acknowledgement that some unusual events may theoretically be possible is extremely difficult, especially with regard to past belief in historically remote times. Modern scholars of the fairy phenomenon often draw parallels between belief in fairies and unidentified flying objects (Rojcewicz 479–498), and the same methodological problems hold for the latter. If, as one survey suggests, more than fifty percent of Americans, Germans and Brits claim they believe in aliens (Main), does this mean that none of the “believers” would be in the least surprised
if the alleged alien visitors openly revealed themselves to humankind? Quantifying belief is methodologically problematic, and the sociological turn in fairy research has convincingly illustrated that one can successfully circumvent the whole issue and focus on what the presence of fairy belief does within a given community rather than become involved in futile attempts to gauge the extent of “genuine” or sincere belief.

The notion of the changeling is a perfect example of how fairy belief may operate within the world-view of a particular group. Common to a number of traditions across the British Isles, it allowed people to make sense of congenital disorders and of “failure to thrive” in infants and children (Munro 251–279), which would be interpreted non-medically through a paradigmatic model of child abduction and substitution by supernatural forces. Additionally, it provided parents with a loophole in the generally upheld moral code, allowing them to mistreat the child with impunity due to its supposedly alien nature. Often, traditional methods used to get rid of changelings, which included extreme physical abuse, were “little more than socially countenanced forms of infanticide” (Eberly 232). The changeling narrative could also be used “as a white lie to soften the cruel reality of accidental death” (Lamb 42), with the supernatural explanation deflecting blame from those responsible for the untimely demise of the unfortunate child (Lamb 42–43). Munro, Eberly and Lamb provide many examples, ranging from the early modern period to the early twentieth century, in which the idea of the changeling operates as a mutually intelligible notion within a given community, allowing its members to name and interpret certain phenomena through a common interpretive key, to communicate uncomfortable truths or to report unwelcome facts in a non-overt manner—all this regardless of the sincerity of any given individual’s belief.

This kind of dynamic, one involving acknowledgement of a shared world-view rather than arising out of the fervency of shared belief, can also be identified in many other accounts typical of fairy lore. The stories of berry-pickers in Newfoundland collected by Peter Narváez supply a few interesting examples. In one report, a married girl known for her obsession with fairies went missing in the woods after going berry-picking all on her own and was found the next day half-naked and in a distraught condition (Narváez, “Newfoundland Berry Pickers” 346). She claimed she had been beckoned to by the fairies, which served as an explanation for the entire affair, and it may be argued that the “allusion to fairies shielded her from further violence by her attacker and implicitly protected her reputation by denying that the act even occurred” (Lamb 38). In another, similar story that ended with pregnancy, the girl’s father refuted the doctor’s suggestion that she was pregnant by firmly asserting she had been taken by the fairies—the ultimate explanation for finding the girl in a delirium out in the wild (Narváez, “Newfoundland Berry Pickers” 357). Whether used as an alibi or as “a reasonable, comprehensible
cause” for certain occurrences, fairy beliefs “furnished one of the few culturally sanctioned explanations available for temporal disjuncture and embarrassment, an acceptable rationale everyone has been familiar with” (Narváez, “Newfoundland Berry Pickers” 357). “Familiarity,” in such cases, does not need to involve sincere belief, and all it takes to let the matter rest is the mutual recognition and acceptance of a convention, or mere possibility, from all parties involved. The same holds for another story, reported in the seventeenth century by John Aubrey, in which a man, asked by his wife where he got all the extra money he kept bringing home, answered that it was of fairy origin. Predictably, the inflow of money stopped immediately, and

whether because his wife’s objections became unpleasant in themselves, or else endangered his activity by signaling her withdrawal of silent assent, he ceased the practice, or at least he ceased telling his wife about any future sums of ninepence he “found.”

(Lamb 40)

For the convention to be operative within a given group, a degree of sincere belief must be diffused between its members, but, like in the preceding story, the individuals directly involved need not fully believe in order for successful communication making use of fairy beliefs to occur—in fact, one can easily read the man’s statement as a non-explicit admission of theft and see the change in his behaviour as the intended result of the women’s implicit chastisement.

With this in mind, let me state that this book not only does not attempt to prove the reality of fairies but also avoids the problematic of the sincerity and degree of fairy belief, focusing instead on how folklore and popular culture contributed to a number of medieval literary narratives. The fact that belief in fairies was widely accepted in the late Middle Ages will loom large in the analyses that follow, but the context is important regardless of the extent of genuine belief of any given group or individual, including the authors of the texts analysed here and their readers. The subject of this study is the liminality of fairies, a defining feature of their presentations both within literature and in the extant body of fairy lore. The book explores various ways of understanding liminality and their applications in literary hermeneutics, but before outlining the nature of the problem and its significance for understanding the phenomenon of fairy belief and its literary inflections, it would be instructive to define the beings in question and thus delimit the scope of critical focus. This proves rather challenging, especially that the category encompasses a whole variety of creatures and is subject to some historical change, with the term fairy arriving in the English language only at a particular point in history. A brief historical overview of fairy lore in the British Isles will outline the problems that arise with attempts to produce a clear and distinct
In order to suggest, in the end, that the solution lies precisely in seeing the issue as essentially intertwined with the challenge of making sense of the concept of liminality.

The Nature of Fairies, or What’s in a Name

No general academic history of fairies either in the European or the British context has yet been written. The closest to a comprehensive diachronic account of the development and mutations of fairies in British culture is an article by Ronald Hutton, published in 2014. “The Making of the Early Modern British Fairy Tradition” focuses on the period between the twelfth and the seventeenth centuries. This is because our knowledge of earlier fairy belief is at best sketchy—in fact exponentially sketchier and sketchier the further back one moves from the comfortable vantage point of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which provide a plethora of relevant sources and a firm foothold for research into the fairies of the past. What we do know is that “the term ‘fairy’ itself arrived in Britain from France only in the high and late middle ages, and that the beings to whom it was to be applied were known before this, across most of Britain, as ‘elves’” (Hutton, “Making” 1138).

In addressing the Anglo-Saxon period, Hutton rightly singles out Alaric Hall’s in-depth analytical study of texts referring to elves. In *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England*, Hall draws concrete conclusions from a limited body of textual evidence such as charms or even single references to “the elf-word in Old English” (*Elves* 4). He argues that what we know about Old English belief is only elite culture and that it is difficult to posit a more general Anglo-Saxon understanding of fairies that would apply across the social spectrum (Hall, *Elves* 18–20). What we learn from his work is that there is no reason to believe that elves were “small, invisible or incorporeal” (Hall, *Elves* 68); quite the opposite, they “were like humans in some crucial respect(s)” (Hall, *Elves* 66), and “the early Old English evidence suggests corporeal anthropomorphic beings mirroring the human in-groups which believed in them” (Hall, *Elves* 68). One piece of evidence for this is the fact that the declension of *aelf* was uniquely similar to the declension of words denoting people or peoples (Hall, *Elves* 62). In being so much like human beings, Hall observes, Old English elves were no different from their equivalents in medieval north-west Europe such as the Scandinavian “álfar, the medieval Irish *aes síde*, the inhabitants of the medieval Welsh Annwn, medieval Latin *fatae* and Old French *fées*, Middle English *elves*, and the Older Scots *elvis*” (*Elves* 68). They were not monsters, and their alignment with ogres, evil phantoms and giants that one finds in *Beowulf* (ll. 111–112), which lists all these alongside elves as the ancestry of Grendel, may have been a result of “the early pressures of Christianisation” (Hall, *Elves* 74). Interestingly, there were apparently no changelings in Old English fairy lore (Hall, *Elves* 117), and no word for a
female elf until “the earlier eleventh century, [when] the meanings of _aelf_
had extended to include a female denotation, later to be well attested in
Middle English” (Hall, _Elves_ 88). Still, the paradigmatic beauty of fairies,
especially fairy ladies and fairy queens, and of the fairy kingdom, that
was to be the hallmark of later Middle English sources, is already hinted
at in the description of Abraham’s wife Sara (in the Old English _Genesis
A_ ) and Judith (in the Old English poem _Judith_) as _aelfscyne_, that is, “not
simply beautiful, but perilously so,” “in a dangerously seductive way”
(Hall, _Elves_ 93).

With regard to the Middle English period, Richard Firth Green’s _Elf
Queens and Holy Friars_ (2016) stands out as a particularly valuable
resource. Green’s book is predominantly about the demonization of fair-
ies, a process through which elite church culture sought to discourage
positive or lenient attitudes towards fairy lore. Fairy-belief was, according
to Green, a phenomenon of popular culture, but he understands the latter
term as denoting not only the cultural expression of the lower classes but
also involving the secular elite, that is some at least among the nobil-
ity, including medieval aristocrats, “perfectly capable of entering into the
belief system of the little tradition as fully participating members” (Elf
44). Green prefers therefore to speak of fairy lore rather than fairy folk-
lore, and in his view, the social divisions between the two perspectives on
fairies have more to do with involvement with the church’s didacticism
and doctrinal policies than with social status (Elf 42–47). Demonization,
which was a major factor in shaping medieval attitudes towards fairies,
subjected vernacular beliefs about these beings that posited them as mor-
ally ambiguous to the rigour of the dualistic moral grid of Christianity. In
effect, it conflated them with the more openly demonic agents of evil such
as fallen angels, positioning them as the enemies of God and the Church
Militant. Green’s discussion of the process includes a bold but convincing
suggestion, supported by much textual evidence, that the idea of purga-
tory may in fact have been introduced so that it could supplant common
beliefs about the existence of the fairy otherworld—which, like purgatory,
could not be identified with either heaven or hell—or, at least, that it was
“sedulously promoted . . . as a corrective to it” (Elf 191).

The notion of the fairy otherworld, sometimes referred to as Elf
land or Faerie, brings us to an idea fundamental for fairy belief at large—
that of a “parallel world to the human one, with human-like inhabitants
who occasionally have their own sovereign,” one into which “humans
could blunder” (Hutton, “Making” 1138). Highly influential, this idea
structures numerous medieval and early modern stories of human–fairy
interactions. But while romance literature made much use of it, allowing
Geoffrey Chaucer to produce his cliché-laden “Tale of Sir Thopas,” a
parody of fairy-themed romances revolving around the protagonist’s ven-
ture into this realm and his love for the fairy queen, non-literary sources
provide a more complex picture. Tales of marriages or sexual encounters
with fairies presuppose their generic similarity to human beings in both appearance and size, but it would seem that a parallel tradition of smaller beings existed alongside, as exemplified by Walter Map’s story of King Herla and the pygmy king (Map 13–16) or Thomas Walsingham’s little red man (J. Wade 81). Although their presence in extant sources is to be noted, diminutive fairies did not, however, leave a distinctive mark on English literature until the times of Shakespeare, and it is their human-sized counterparts that predominate in late medieval literary texts. In fact, all the fairies discussed in the present study fall into this category of “human-like beings who have sumptuous lifestyles, mirroring those of the contemporary human social elite, and dispose of apparently superhuman powers” (Hutton, “Making” 1140). Hutton is also right to point out that medieval chroniclers such as Gerald of Wales or Gervase of Tilbury also mention “a tradition of human-like creatures which live in or enter homes, where they can make themselves useful to the human occupants by helping them with tasks, or play mischievous tricks on them” (1139). This particular strain of fairy lore was to prove particularly influential and prominent in the early modern period, but it is worth noting that it was already there in the Middle Ages. The overall picture that emerges from all this is one of heterogeneity, and it may well be that in addressing medieval fairy lore as a whole it would be wiser to speak broadly of various “fairy creatures” than of fairies as such, since the latter term was, initially at least, a literary one and usually appeared in the context of fairy “lovers, councillors, and protectors for the human knights or ladies . . . and sometimes . . . predators upon them” (Hutton, “Making” 1140) rather than the various other types of similar supernatural beings found in the native tradition.

Facing such a hotchpotch of different images, one may feel inclined to agree with Hutton that fairies “could not easily be fitted into conventional Christian concepts of angels and demons” (“Making” 1138), but as Green has persuasively shown, that is precisely what happened, with the medieval church effecting a certain flattening of the finer differences between various members of this class of beings by labelling all of them as demonic in nature and origin. This only fostered the sense of their reality, however, since the discourse of demonization took fairies seriously, and even when it suggested that they were merely demonic illusions, it viewed the presumed supernatural source of these illusions as alarmingly real and threatening. The process progressed gradually to reach its peak in the early modern period, and some of the most intriguing source materials concerning fairies from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries come from witchcraft trials where fairies emerge as the witches’ familiars. This is particularly prominent in the Scottish records, with the cases of Bessie Dunlop, Elspeth Reoch and Isobel Gowdie serving as representative examples. The attitude is best encapsulated in the treatise Daemonologie (1597), authored by King James VI of Scotland, in which, after dividing
spirits into those that haunt solitary places or houses, another class that pesters people, yet another consisting of demonic agents that can take possession of individuals, and finally fairies, he explains that

although in my discoursing of them, I devyde them in divers kindes, yee must notwithstanding there of note my Phrase of speaking in that: For doubtleslie they are in effect, but all one kinde of spirites, who for abusing the more of mankinde, takes on these sundrie shapes, and uses diverse formes of out-ward actiones, as if some were of nature better then other.

James mentions stories of how “there was a King and Queene of Phairie, of such a jolly court & train as they had, how they had a teynd, & dutie, as it were, of all goods: how they naturallie rode and went, eate and drank, and did all other actiones like naturall men and women” (74), only to dismiss them as the work of the devil playing on the fallible senses of simpletons; he is therefore uninterested in the finer details of these illusions or the variety that they exhibit. Yet, just like in the Middle Ages, several different classes of beings seem to be bundled together under the label of fairies.

In *The Anatomy of Puck* (1959) Katharine Briggs summarizes the various views on fairies in the sixteenth century by arguing that “[w]hen the Jacobean writer drew upon his native traditions for fairy ornament he had, so far as one is able to judge, four main types of fairies to choose from” (*Anatomy* 12). To make matters even more complex, the first category, one that provided the greatest inspiration for writers of literature, can further be subdivided into an arbitrary number of subordinate classes (*Briggs, Anatomy* 12). The two main groups among them are the human-sized aristocratic fairies that roam the countryside in cavalcades—hence known as the “Trooping Fairies”—often found “hunting, hawking . . . and feasting in their palaces” (*Briggs, Anatomy* 13) and their more lowly, ordinary counterparts; the latter, too, like to ride in procession but sometimes take on diminutive forms or shape-shift and have a special penchant for cleanliness (*Briggs, Anatomy* 14). The second major category discerned by Briggs includes various household spirits that “do domestic chores, work about farms, . . . keep an eye on the servants and generally act as guardian spirits of the home” (*Anatomy* 14); she mentions here the hobgoblin and Robin Goodfellow, but the brownie would also easily fit this profile. The third class, in turn, is composed of mermaids and water spirits, and the fourth, of giants, monsters and hags. Briggs also mentions a number of differences between fairies of the various countries and regions of the British Isles (*Fairies* 105–110); her works present the aristocratic Irish fairies and the monstrous kelpies, bodachs, glaistigs (*Fairies* 106) and other fairy monsters of the Scottish Highlands as quite unlike
each other in many ways, some common features notwithstanding.15 If it is possible, the way Briggs does, to outline the distinctive dissimilarities among the fairies of the Lowlands and Highlands of Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, the Isle of Man, the Eastern Fens, the Midlands and the North, how is one to justify approaching them all critically as a single class of beings? It would be prudent to inquire whether seeing all these various creatures as essentially being of one nature is not a product of modern folkloristics. But that is certainly not the case, as may be seen in A Midsummer Night's Dream. Shakespeare's play features a pair of human-sized fairy royalty and the concurrent motif of a fairy mistress surrendering herself to her mortal lover; Robin Goodfellow, who cleans the stage with his characteristic broom—a nod towards the tutelary spirits of the day that made sure the country maids kept the kitchens tidy; and a number of diminutive, insect-sized fairies that serve as Titania’s train, a product of the “fashion for the miniature” (Briggs, Anatomy 56) that was a standard feature of early modern fairy lore, especially so in literature. All these form a supernatural conglomerate that clearly belongs together in the woods of Athens, despite their ostensive differences.

Richard Firth Green reacts quite strongly against approaching the challenge of defining fairies proper with the tools and hopes of folkloristic taxonomy:

Are fairies different from elves? or goblins? or dwarves? or pucks? or brownies? and how do they relate to the French netons and luitons? or German Nixen or Kobolde? Moreover, are they of human stature or smaller? Are they ruled by a king, or a queen, or even a trio of queens? And what color are they? In my view all such questions as unanswerable, and any attempt at a totalizing definition will prove illusory. . . . It is not a matter on which we can properly legislate.

(Elf 2–3)

Green himself understands fairies as “that class of numinous, social, humanoid creatures who were widely believed to live at the fringes of the human lifeworld and interact intermittently with human beings” (Elf 4). This excludes both the “solitary creatures who inhabited the wilderness (giants and the like) [and] the social creatures who lived among humans (the various kinds of household spirit)” (Green, Elf 4). Green explains that he “shall treat as fairies all creatures who behave in the way I have just described” (Elf 5), and his definition is thus largely behavioural, although he tries to circumscribe fairies within a certain horizon of expectation concerning their physique (“humanoid”), affinities with the world of the spirit and spirituality (“numinous”) and their position of outsiders in regards to human society—the last of these criteria leading to the exclusion of tutelary beings such as the brownie. Since brownies and various Robin Goodfellow–like beings tend to appear more frequently in
early modern sources, his definition is arguably well suited for the late medieval period, but the stress it lays on the society of “the other folk” is also perfectly in line with post-medieval fairy lore, such as Robert Kirk’s late seventeenth-century depiction of the commonwealth of fairies existing in parallel to the human social world.

In this book, I take issue with Green’s approach only insofar as I find his definition lacking emphasis on the notion of liminality, a concept that he never mentions in Elf Queens and Holy Friars despite elaborating on it elsewhere. This omission is most likely due to the fact that his book is a study of the demonization of fairies, a process which seeks to do away with their overall in-betweenness and moral ambiguity, but as I wish to argue, any general definition of fairies must acknowledge the full dynamics of this process, that is, both the subjection of the understanding of their nature to a dualistic conceptual grid and their original and essential liminality that is the starting point for demonization, which then challenges and modifies it in shaping the fairies’ cultural representations. While fairies may indeed be predominantly humanoid and social, it is not inconceivable to classify as fairy creature beings that do not meet either of these criteria, such as kelpie shapeshifters or brownies, and folklorists such as Briggs have often done just that. By contrast, unless a given creature exhibits liminal features, or derives, in its demonized form, from an originally liminal template, it is difficult to speak of it as belonging to this class. It is the argument of this book that a working definition of fairies can best capture their nature precisely when it avoids definitive pronouncements, and while the following elaboration on the meaning of liminality will not in any way invalidate the claims made by Green, it will substantially complement them, doing so not by pointing to selected features or forms of behaviour usually exhibited by fairies but through inquiring into the underlying logic behind them. In short, fairies are to be understood as liminal beings par excellence, but the challenge in making use of this definition lies in ascertaining what this actually means and what its corollaries are. The term liminal has often been used loosely in scholarship and without clear methodological affiliations, which is a major issue in fairy research and one that this study seeks to overcome. A look at some of the manifold applications of the notion within fairy scholarship and literary studies at large will reveal the potential pitfalls and benefits of focusing on the fairies’ essential in-betweenness.

The Liminality of Fairies

Richard Firth Green’s point about fairies living “at the fringes of the human lifeworld” (Elf 4) is a valid one, although the exact meaning of “fringes” requires some additional commentary. The framework of liminality that underlies beliefs concerning the fairies’ place of habitation can be brought into focus if one compares the original folkloric material