Horned Gods, Horny Men, Witches, and Fairies: Pagan Remnants in Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

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Fairies, witches, and horned men dancing around in a haunted forest at midnight: such elements may be approached with skepticism and laughter by theatrical audiences today. Just as we find ourselves amused by quaint notions of cuckoldry and horniness that seem out of place, we also scoff at the idea that, once upon a time, theater-goers (and the general populace) might have believed in witchcraft, fairy lore, and horned gods.

Although *The Merry Wives of Windsor* contains a cornucopia of references to horns, cuckolding, horny men going horn-mad, and the horned hunter Herne (as well as witches, fairies, and midnight forest rituals), a lack of access to historical and religious contexts of pagan practices and beliefs often obscures modern understanding of the significance of these elements within the play. By examining cultural remnants of paganism and witchcraft and how Shakespeare employs them, we can achieve a more dynamic and contextual approach to interpreting and performing *The Merry Wives of Windsor.*

Twenty-first-century audiences, although familiar with jokes about horny men, are likely to be less conversant with the multiple layers and associations the word "horn" conjured in the minds of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is strewn with horns: "horn-mad" jealous men, horned Actaeon, the horns of cuckoldry passed to wronged husbands, the financial horn of plenty that a horny Falstaff hopes to get by seducing the wives, and Herne's horns borne by Falstaff in act 5. In order to

analyze and appreciate the complex word-play around which the themes of *Merry Wives* revolve, we must first look at the etymology of the word "horn"—the word used to signify sexual desire, virility, manliness, cuckolding, fecundity, and abundance. "Horn" and its derivatives come from the Old English "cern," a word that is also the root of "cornucopia," a horn of plenty overflowing with ripe fruit and harvest bounty.

Nature provides one explanation for the associations: rutting stags lock horns in battle to establish sexual dominance and mating rights with fertile does. For both humans and animals, being "horny" or having horns implies lust, springtime mating antics, male rivalry, and sexual conquest. The more virile animal wins the fight and the female, while the loser is forced to symbolically wear the horns—or fall under the dominion of—his winning rival. Francisco Vaz de Silva, approaching sexual horns as a signifier, explains how this animal symbolism plays out in *Merry Wives*: "His horns connote transgressive virility, the otherworldly origin of which is clear. . . . In short, Shakespeare's usage of horns imagery suggests that a man, in seducing another's wife, transfers his own horns of virility onto the cheated husband's head even as he asserts male supremacy over the cuckold."[1] While "horns," "horny," "horn-mad," and "dis-horned" all have masculine associations, the root word has feminine meanings as well.

"Cern" also signified the horn of plenty, a cornucopia overflowing with the products of Nature's bounty—an image still popular today, especially during harvest festivals and holidays such as Thanksgiving. Any culture dependent upon plants and animals for food and survival would have recognized and celebrated the importance of female fertility as well as male virility. Thus, the "horn" of plenty referenced both phallic potency and feminine ability to conceive and bear fruit—horticultural and human. Falstaff's desire to claim the wives' horns of plenty in both physical and financial senses plays on the multiple layers of meanings attached to the words horn and "cern."

Yet another layer, that of pagan religious remnants still in play in early modern culture, wraps itself around "cern." It is also the root of Cernunnos, the Celtic horned god. The Gaulish *karnon* and the Latin *cornu*, cognates to "cern," help us trace the lingustic and religious path of horned gods from ancient civilizations

to the Elizabethan stage. In act 2, Pistol compares Falstaff to Actaeon, whom the Goddess Diana turned to a stag after he saw her bathing (2.1.117).[2] Ancient Greeks worshiped Pan (also known as Hermes), a horned deity associated with nature and sexual prowess. Egyptians revered Apis, a bull deity, and Ammon-Ra, a horned ram deity. These universal images of virility persisted and traveled into Europe, rooting themselves in particular locations and legends that still endure.

Northern Europeans also left abundant evidence of horned-deity worship. The Gundestrop Cauldron, a second-century CE artifact found in Denmark, is one example of Celtic horned god art that traveled from country to country.[3] Another is the first-century Pilier des Nautes (Pillar of the Boatmen), discovered in 1710 beneath the Cathedral of Notre Dame, which displays the name and horned likeness of Cernunnos together.[4] Inscriptions to Cernunnos in France, Luxembourg, northern Italy, and on Hadrian's Wall in England further confirm the extent of his influence.

The horned god entrenched himself in London and the surrounding English countryside, abetted by invading tribes. Writer Seán Mac Mathúna explains that London's St. Paul's Cathedral was built on a site originally linked to the Stag Goddess. He includes as evidence an account drawn from John Stone's 1598 *Survey of London* by Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell to confirm that Elizabethans still enacted horned-god rituals on the site: "A buck and a doe (Diana's sacred animals), would be slaughtered at the high altar upon a certain date each year, after which the head would be paraded about the cathedral upon a pole while horns were blown to announce the sacrifice, these being answered by horn blasts from every quarter of London. Commentators at the time remarked: 'It seems we have our Diana worship back.'"[5]

Edain McCoy, in *Celtic Myth and Magic*, explains that Herne is the British name of the European horned god Cernunnos. She notes that he was "probably the most widely-worshipped God-form in European paganism."[6] McCoy also illuminates the multiple roles Cernunnos played: "He was the randy goat representing the fertility rites of Bealtaine, and the master of the hunt who came into his full power in late summer and early fall. He was the primal fertility God, consort to the Great Mother, and the male

creative principle. He is also honored as a death deity, and the hunt is sometimes viewed as metaphor for rounding up the souls of the living to take to the Underworld's gates, and as a God of the woodlands, animals, revelry, and male fertility.[7]

Cultural rituals took place throughout England. Remnants of horned-god worship included May Day dances, festivals, maypoles, and picnics to celebrate spring, fertility, and merrymaking. Elizabethan Londoners held major May Fairs in Greenwich, Southwark, Hay Market, and, from May first to the fifteenth, in the area still known today as Mayfair (even though festivities there were suppressed in 1764). Until 1718, a 134-foot maypole stood by the Church of St. Mary in the Strand, less than two miles from the Globe Theater. More rituals and events occurred during the harvest, when, according to tradition, the horned god led the Wild Hunt, was sacrificed, and then became god of the Underworld. These autumnal observations coincided with Samhain, a Celtic fire festival associated with the end of the harvest, the beginning of the dark portion of the year, death, and the spirit world.

Charlton's Horn Fair, one such celebration, featured a procession that ended at the Church of St. Luke, whose feast day occurs on October 18. Editors Ben Weinrub and Christopher Hibbert explain in *The London Encyclopedia* that during this pagan festival, "The Men would be dressed as women . . . all would wear horns, blow horns, carry horns, and at the fair, would buy trinkets carved from iron."[8] The "dance of custom" round Herne's oak could well be part of such seasonal rites (5.5.76).

Herne himself appears as a local Berkshire figure—Richard II's favorite huntsman who hangs himself (for a variety of reasons) from an oak in Windsor Forest and returns as a ghost, a demon, or a phantom leading a train of souls captured during his Wild Hunt. Shakespeare uses both local legend and broader horned-god mythos. In act 4, scene 3, Mistress Page reminds her fellow conspirators of Herne's associations with death and the Underworld:

> There is an old tale goes, that Herne the hunter,
> Sometime a keeper in Windsor forest,
> Doth all the winter time, at still midnight,
> Walk round about an oak, with great ragg'd horns,
> And there he blasts the tree and takes the cattle,

> And makes milch-kine yield blood, and shakes a chain
> In a most hideous and dreadful manner:
> You have heard of such a spirit; and well you know
> The superstitious idle-headed eld
> Received, and did deliver to our age,
> This tale of Herne the hunter for a truth. (4.4.30-42)

When the conspirators decide that Falstaff must wear horns to his midnight rendezvous at Herne's Oak, they simultaneously associate him with the virility and potency of the Horned God and its opposite, the cuckolded husband, whose horns signify his lack of masculine prowess. Falstaff's act 1 decision to seduce Mistresses Ford and Page makes him a hunter, but by act 4, he becomes the hunted—the quarry of women bent on exposing and emasculating him. Falstaff re-enacts Herne's roles as god of revelry and god of death during act 5 when his public humiliation kills his own prospects as lover and facilitates Anne Page's elopement and two false marriages of her would-be suitors to young boys.

Pagan deities are not the only remnants of non-mainstream religion to make their way into *The Merry Wives*. Shakespeare used witches and witchcraft as well. Although current audiences may automatically view witches as stereotypical Halloween hags, sexy enchantresses from films and television shows, or mall-Goth teenagers, early moderns had very different views. Whatever we may think of it today, witchcraft was a cultural and religious reality to Elizabethans. The *Malleus Maleficarum*, printed sixteen times between 1574 and 1669, specified that witches were real and that they derived their powers from the Christian devil, an entity whom they also believed was real. In 1562, the Elizabethan Witchcraft Act, which forbade "Conjuracions Inchauntmentes and Witchecraftes," was passed. Two hundred and seventy individuals faced trial as witches during Elizabeth's reign, indicating that church and government took witchcraft seriously. In 1597, the same year that *Merry Wives* may have first been performed for the Queen, James VI of Scotland (the future James I of England) published *Demonology*, a treatise that reiterated the ties between witches, demons, and devils. After James took the throne, he passed even more stringent laws to discover and punish them. Anti-Christian witches, real or imaginary, populated early modern culture.

In *Merry Wives*, characters treat witches in a matter-of-fact way that assumes their existence. When Master Ford encounters Falstaff in drag during act 4, scene 2, he not only accepts his wife's explanation that the fat crone is her maid's aunt, the witch of Brentford, but reminds her that he has forbidden entry to this woman because of her previous visits (4.2.158-59). To Ford (and everyone else), witches are obviously real; they even make house calls. After naming the woman a "witch . . . an old cozening quean" (thereby linking witchcraft and licentiousness), Ford lists the activities that define witches: fortune-telling, charms, spells, horoscopes, and other trickery of which he knows nothing (4.2.160-64). Rather than an imaginary witch that might inhabit children's bedtime stories and fireside folk tales, Shakespeare presents a physical witch whom Ford deems enough of a threat to his masculine authority and power that he thrashes "her" soundly.

When the Host of the Garter catches Falstaff in act 4, scene 5 consulting with the old, fat lady from Brentford, Falstaff admits that he has spent time with a "wise woman" who "hath taught me more wit than ever I learned before in my life" (4.5.59-62). Simple also seeks her advice to learn whether Slender will marry Anne Page (4.5.46-48). These characters act as if such consultations were ordinary, even routine, and they assume that whatever advice they receive is accurate—another indication that witches and wise women were part of the communities in which they lived. Like fairies, witches feminized and subverted the authority of male priests and rulers, appropriated secret wisdom, and had power over time, love, physical health, household affairs, and even fate (such as marriage arrangements). What we do not see in *The Merry Wives* are evil hags who cast malevolent spells on innocent targets or consort with the devil; instead, Shakespeare shows women and some men seeking the advice and knowledge of the local witch, while jealous or authoritative men react to her with fear and anger—not because she is an agent of Satan, but because she has power in the secret, domestic realm where he cannot meddle. Complex attitudes towards witches, then, provide us with multiple understandings of their places in early modern society: they operated outside state-mandated Christianity, they exercised power and abilities that men could not control, and they were part of everyday life in the villages and towns where they lived.

Even more than witches, fairies play a key role in *The Merry Wives*, not only as a plot device to effect Falstaff's humiliation and Anne Page's elopement, but, like witches, as a location of Otherness that tested religious and cultural tensions. Attitudes towards fairies also occupied a spectrum ranging from cultural belief to sophisticated skepticism, creating the multiple levels of receptivity that Shakespeare used in *The Merry Wives*. H.W. Herrington observed in *The Journal of American Folklore*, "Fairy mythology in England is ancient, far antedating the accession of Elizabeth. . . . Oberon, Robin Goodfellow, Queen Mab, and all their crew, formed for Elizabethans a real mythology, received with wavering degrees of faith, with skepticism, with an amused tolerance, or with a purely poetical acceptance."[9]

Early Modern writer Reginald Scot (1584), referenced by Wendy Wall in 2001, was one of the skeptics, anxious to discredit fairy belief by relegating it to the nursery. Wall explained how Scot linked fairy belief with children and the lower classes: "What the lower classes are imagined to consume becomes identical with what 'old wives' whisper to elite children in their 'nursery days,' with the result that non-discriminating readers of cheap print are coded as immature."[10] Keith Thomas, writing in 1971, also narrowed the cultural location of Early Modern fairies by defining fairy lore as "a store of mythology rather than a corpus of living beliefs."[11] By retroactively collocating superstitious old wives, young children and fairies in this mythological cradle of cheap print, we may too easily elide the possibilities of actual and cultural remnants of fairy belief in Shakespeare's England and the ways in which it represented and tested religious and sociopolitical transitions both on and off the stage. Regina Buccola, in her book *Fairies, Fractious Women, and the Old Faith*, explains that fairy lore and religion are essential in our quest to understand such writing: "The fairy tradition is every bit as significant in our critical attempts to situate early modern texts in their historical contexts as the references to classical texts and struggles associated with state-mandated religious beliefs are widely agreed to be."[12]

Although twenty-first-century audiences tend to relegate witches and fairies to the same basket of superstition and scorn that contains aliens, Bigfoot, and Santa—beings credible only to children or those with child-like minds—remnants of fairy belief

added another complex, multi-layered element to early modern culture. They appeared in works by Edmund Spencer, John Lyly, and others, representing an amorphous, ever-changing Other with glamour, power, and the ability to turn the ordered world of their writers, readers, and audiences upside-down. Steeped as they were in centuries of lore, tradition, myth, folk culture, and even religious practice involving fairies, Elizabethan readers and theater-goers had a far different store of associations and received beliefs to draw upon than do twenty-first-century audiences. As Buccola writes, "Many early modern theatergoers considered it possible to interact with an otherworldly, fairy realm even as the characters that they watched on stage were supposed to do."[13] When we let go of the idea that only poorly-educated, superstitious folk admitted the possibility of fairies, we open ourselves to their use, not only as a symbolic or representational location of forbidden desire, secrets and power to change social order, but also as a real possibility to enact those desires and changes.

Shakespeare plays on these multiple levels of fairy belief in act 5 of *The Merry Wives*. Although Falstaff insists in scene 5 that guiltiness and surprise created a "received belief" in the fairies "in despite of the teeth of all rhyme and reason," he does so only after the Fords and Pages appear and reveal that the entire ritual was a staged performance (5.5.24-29). Moments earlier, however, Falstaff "lies down upon his face" (5.5.49-51) because he cannot see fairy rituals and live to tell about it; he also expresses fear that the "Welsh fairy" will turn him to cheese (5.5.82-83). Welsh parson Hugh Evans further illustrates the mix of Christianity and unauthorized fairy belief when he says he will instruct the children how to impersonate fairies (4.4.69). Either Evans or Anne Page, then, is very familiar with the precise steps of fairy rituals to cleanse, sweep, and bestow fairy blessings, as evidenced by Anne's detailed injunction at the ritual's start (5.5.60-77). Even as we acknowledge comedic and ironic intentions in this scene, we also see that the characters act as they do because cultural remnants of pagan and fairy beliefs inform their actions.

When we consider act 5 from the perspective of an audience with some degree of fairy belief, new possibilities emerge. The merry wives and Ann Page both become far more subversive if their audience believes that fairies can help them overturn

male authority and control their own bodies and romantic fates. Plausibility, rather than absurdity, moves the text into a space where the secret, female realm holds power and control beyond the purview of jealous husbands—just as Ford fears. Falstaff's humiliation and punishment moves from incomprehensible silliness staged by otherwise-competent adults to just—if hilarious—consequences witnessed by a sympathetic audience (who may, themselves, have been the subjects of fairy mischief).

Remnants of paganism, witchcraft, and fairy belief not only help explain The Merry Wives, but they also form a shadow text that tests the social and religio-political tensions of early modern Christianity in Elizabethan England. Despite state-sponsored Protestant reform, both Catholicism and pre-Christian practices persisted beneath the official surface. Shakespeare's use of horned gods, witches, and fairies highlighted the ongoing threat they posed in a shifting religious environment. As Buccola points out, "Religious reformers . . . were also uneasy about the potential challenge fairy belief posed to the primacy of the Christian tradition."[14] Francis Dolan further explained how reformers conflated non-Christian remnants with Catholicism, creating a double target: "Some early modern writers connected Catholic women not just to illiteracy and materialism but also to superstition, oral transmission, and the occult. This set of associations . . . works to discredit Catholicism and relegate it to the past."[15] The 1566 *Examination of John Walsh* linked "fairy-endowed healing abilities to witchcraft and sorcery, witchcraft and sorcery to priests and 'papistry,' and . . . so-called fairies and what they have to teach to priests and papistry."[16]

By feminizing and conflating the Otherness of fairy belief, witchcraft, folk magic, and paganism with superstition and papism, reform Protestants sought to overwrite and subsume traditions they viewed as threatening and destabilizing. Buccola explained the importance of fairy tradition in this fight: "In fact, fairy beliefs and the popular plays and public debates associated with them played an important role in the, at times, violent doctrinal battles waged throughout the period."[17] By portraying Christian characters who openly incorporated these pagan remnants into their everyday lives, Shakespeare explored questions of assimilation, assumption, and identity central to this contested ground.

Such open questioning is possible only in a space where everyday life is suspended, then re-presented free of normal constraints. Theater creates just this kind of liminal space, where nothing is quite what it seems. When audiences enter the theater zone, they leave the demands and concerns of daily life behind. They must suspend disbelief, accepting the stage as a representation of other realities for the duration of the play. Time, place, and identity are fluid, with actors portraying humans and mythical creatures, boys portraying female characters, and events occurring onstage that are not possible in real life. Such a liminal space allows questioning and subversion of order and authority, enactment of hidden desires and socially unacceptable goals, and expression of alternative (forbidden) ideology.

The liminal zones of *Merry Wives* include the physical spaces in which Shakespeare's characters act out their subversive desires and goals. Buccola states, "The fairy space in which the wives' ultimate triumph unfolds is a liminal zone: a wood on the margins of the Windsor community, delineating the space between ruler and ruled."[18] Dark, wooded areas also served as traditional sites for pagan rituals, witchcraft, and fairy rites, as well as the boundary between human society and Nature. Herne's Oak as the location of the midnight ritual incorporates all of these associations: fairies, Nature, magic, and the horned god of the Wild Hunt and the Underworld, whose antlers represent his virility and his animal nature. He cannot be controlled by human authority, just as remnants of his religion persisted in spite of Christian efforts to extinguish it. Finally, all the action takes place before the rulers arrive and outside their domains, suggesting that pagan fairy rituals occurred long before the arrival of Protestant rulers and continue in dark, secret spaces beyond their reach.

The characters themselves embody liminality through their shifting identities and behaviors. The unruly wives pretend to succumb to Falstaff's advances, but are really out to trap him. Parson Evans leads some of his congregants in pagan fairy rituals. Falstaff pretends to woo the wives, but is really after their husbands' money. Later, he impersonates a horned god figure, but gets pinched, burned, and humiliated by children impersonating fairies. To derail Anne Page's would-be abductors, boys impersonate Anne, while she impersonates the Queen of the

Fairies. Liminal spaces within the theater and the play itself allow the text to embody non-Christian, alternate realities that co-existed with state-mandated religion.

Although we can read *The Merry Wives* as simple comedy or farce in which the would-be cuckold gets his come-uppance at the hands of unruly but smart women, Shakespeare's persistent play with the word "horn" and its associated terms points towards Herne's Oak, where Falstaff's horns symbolize the horned god and pagan remnants of ancient beliefs. Such remnants persisted into Elizabethan times as festivals, fairs, May Day celebrations, harvest rituals, and other observances, creating a shadow text that informs *Merry Wives*. Fairy belief and witchcraft, alternative paths that existed outside and beyond the reach of official Christianity, also percolate through the efforts of Mistresses Ford and Page to enact a ritual that will affirm their dominance, humiliate their would-be seducer and, unwittingly, give the Ford's daughter her own matrimonial freedom. While the play's characters use pagan remnants to get what they want, they also test the boundaries of religious and social conflict. By understanding how Elizabethans viewed horned gods, fairies, and witchcraft, and cultural sites these remnants occupied, we enrich the interpretive possibilities of *Merry Wives* for actors, directors, and audiences alike.

Notes

1. Francisco Vaz de Silva, "Sexual Horns: The Anatomy and Metaphysics of Cuckoldry in European Folklore," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 48, no. 2 (Apr 2006): 398-99.

2. William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, Illustrated (Ann Arbor: State Street Press, 2001). All Shakespearean citations refer to this work.

3. *Celtic Art & Cultures*, s.v. "Gundestrop Cauldron," http://www.unc.edu/celtic/catalogue/Gundestrup/kauldron.html (accessed July 20, 2012).

4. "Pilier des Nautes," *Seemarvels.com*, http://seemarvels.com/pilier-des-nautes/ (accessed July 1, 2012).

5. Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell, F*rom Hell: Being a Melodrama in Sixteen Parts, Vol. 2*, (Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink Press/Mad Love Publishing, 1994), quoted in Seán Mac Mathúna, "Evidence of Worship of the Horned God in early Celtic London," *Flame* 1, no. 3 (Winter 1999), http://www.fantompowa.net /Flame/herne_the_hunter.htm (accessed July 12, 2012).

6. Edain McCoy, *Celtic Myth and Magick: Harness the Power of the Gods and Goddesses* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Llewellyn Publications, 1995), 269.

7. Ibid.

8. Ben Weinrub and Christopher Hibbert, *The London Encyclopedia* (New York: Macmillan Reference, 2011), quoted in Seán Mac Mathúna, "The Horn Fair in South London: London's First Carnival?" *Flame* 1, no. 3 (Winter 1999), http://www.fantompowa.net/Flame/the_horn_fair.htm (accessed July 12, 2012).

9. H.W. Herrington, "Witchcraft and Magic in the Elizabethan Drama," *The Journal of American Folklore* 32, no. 126 (Oct. - Dec., 1919): 447-85.

10. Wendy Wall, "Why Does Puck Sweep? Fairylore, Merry Wives, and Social Struggle," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 52 no. 1 (Spring 2001): 69.

11. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), 608.

12. Regina Buccola, *Fairies, Fractious Women, and the Old Faith: Fairy Lore in Early Modern British Drama and Culture* (Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania: Susquehanna University Press, 2006), 8.

13. Ibid., 40.

14. Ibid., 94.

15. Frances E. Dolan, *Whores of Babylon: Catholicism, Gender, and Seventeenth-Century Print Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 28.

16. Walsh, John. *The Examination of John Walsh: Before Maister Thomas Williams, Commissary to the Reuerend Father in God William, Bishop of Excester, Vpon Certayne Interrogatories Touchyng Wytchcrafte and Sorcerye, in the Presence of Diuers Gentlemen and Others. The. Xx. of August. 1566.* Imprynted by John Awdely, quoted in Buccola, *Fairies*, 173.

17. Buccola, *Fairies*, 8.

18. Buccola, "Shakespeare's Fairy Dance with Religio-Political Controversy in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*," in *Shakespeare and the Culture of Christianity in Early Modern England*, ed. Dennis Taylor and David N. Beauregard (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), 167.