

Introducing the Modern Fairies Project

'Modern Fairies and Loathly Ladies' was an Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded research project, jointly run by the Universities of Sheffield and Oxford between 2016-19. Dr Fay Hield was the principal investigator, with Carlyne Larrington as co-investigator. The project aimed to find out how a group of artists – musicians, writers, illustrators, film-makers and poets – would create new art from traditional British tales about fairies and loathly ladies, magical women who appear as hideous hags, usually to teach a man an important lesson. The work it generated was incorporated into a coherent ninety-minute work-in-progress experimental performance, produced by Andy Bell and performed at The Sage, Gateshead in April 2019. Here's a link to film of the performances: <http://modernfairies.co.uk/blog/modern-fairies-gatherings-at-the-sage-gateshead>

Other aims of the project were to research into how audiences responded to these stories and ideas, sometimes very familiar and sometimes quite unknown. We also wanted to investigate how cross-media artist collaboration might work – its benefits and hindrances – and to find out what the benefits might be to The Sage, Gateshead cultural centre, our industry partner, in supporting and promoting this kind of unconventional, experimental performance.

The artists, whose work is foregrounded in the second podcast series, were a diverse group who were interested in developing coherent collaborative work. They included UK residents living in areas ranging from the Highlands of Scotland to Devon, from London to St Davids in Wales. Distinctive international perspectives were provided by American-born Terri Windling, and Patience Agbabi who is of Nigerian heritage. Some artists were previously associated with a 'folk music' background, although many did not identify as working in the folk or traditional idiom. They did, however, all have experience of working in various ways with narrative archival material.

The corpus of material presented to the artists as inspiration was selected from the huge range of folktales and other folklore of Britain offering a selection of representative tales about fairies and loathly ladies drawn from across the British Isles.

A list of the corpus with links to sources is available here:

<http://modernfairies.co.uk/blog/fairy-sources>

The tales were chosen partly because these stories engage with a wide and perennially relevant range of themes – including gender, family relationships, and large existential questions about time, loss, and value – and partly because we wanted to challenge and unsettle contemporary Disneyfied ideas of fairies as tiny, pretty, and benevolent winged females by foregrounding their very different presentation in traditional tales and songs. Loathly ladies were also incorporated into the corpus to offer a contrast to the beautiful, seductive fairy-queen figure, and to open up some different questions about the erotic supernatural and its relationship to power from those posed by other fairy narratives.

The first series of five podcasts – a series of conversations between Fay Hield and Carlyne Larrington – introduces the folk-material and the project and then ranges through the different themes that seemed to us to emerge from the stories. The individual episodes of series one unpack key topics: fairyland, fairy wives and fairy lovers, the helpful fairies who co-operate with humans, fairies and their conflicted relationship with their own, and human children, and finally the loathly lady stories. The podcasts introduce a wealth of story-material, combined with a thoughtful reflection on the enduring relevance and emotional impact of such tales in the modern world.

The second five-podcast series reveals the artists' responses to the fairy material, discovering which themes they responded to and which were not taken up, and showcasing the songs, poems and stories that they produced. Their imaginations were seized by the idea of Fairyland as a world parallel to our own, yet where time runs differently. What happens to mortals who visit there? They were also fascinated by the fairy relationship with children, the odd tale of the Green Children and the many highly disturbing legends of changelings produced some dark but fascinating work. As a collective, all the artists were deeply concerned by the climate emergency, and they developed works that co-opted the fairies as fierce, uncompromising guardians of the natural world, resisting the destruction visited by humans. The final episode introduces

a new theme that emerged out of the project, and which continues to inform some of the spinoff artistic works in progress that have grown out of 'Modern Fairies': human transformation into animals. Fay talks in particular about the songs on her 2020 album 'Wrackline' that explore the worlds of selkies and magical witch-hares, and we look back on the project as a whole.

There's lots more information about the project at: www.modernfairies.co.uk.

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