

Who is Queen Mab?

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN Act 1, Scene 4 of 'Romeo and Juliet' Romeo declares: "I dreamt a dream to-night."

"And so did I," replies Mercutio.

"Well, what was yours?" asks Romeo.

"That dreamers often lie."

"In bed asleep!" adds Romeo, making a play on his friend's words. "While they do dream things true."

"O, then," says Mercutio drily, "I see Queen Mab hath been with you." And by way of explanation he launches into this speech of astonishing beauty.

*She is the fairies' midwife; and she comes
In shape no bigger than an agate-stone
On the fore-finger of an alderman,
Drawn with a team of little atomies
Athwart men's noses as they lie asleep:
Her waggon-spokes made of long spinners' legs;
The cover, of the wings of grasshoppers;
The traces, of the smallest spider's web;
The collars, of the moonshine's watery beams;
Her whip, of cricket's bone; the lash, of film;
Her waggoner, a small gray-coated gnat
Not half so big as a round little worm
Prick'd from the lazy finger of a maid.
Her chariot is an empty hazel-nut
Made by the joiner squirrel . . .*

Once settled in her chariot, Mercutio says, Queen Mab

*. . . gallops night by night
Through lovers' brains, and then they dream of love;
O'er courtiers' knees, that dream on court'sies straight;
O'er lawyers' fingers, who straight dream on fees;
O'er ladies' lips, who straight on kisses dream —
Which oft the angry Mab with blisters plagues,
Because their breaths with sweatmeats tainted are . . .*

The feisty bringer of dreams goes on to visit another courtier, a greedy parson, then a soldier, who wakes up thinking he has heard a drum, swears a prayer or two, and falls asleep again. Mercutio goes on:

*This is that very Mab
That plats the manes of horses in the night
And bakes the elf-locks in foul sluttish hairs
Which, once untangled, much misfortune bodes.
This is the hag, when maids lie on their backs,
That presses them, and learns them first to bear,
Making them women of good carriage.
This is she —*

"Peace, peace, Mercutio, peace," Romeo interrupts. "Thou talk'st of nothing."

"True," agrees Mercutio. "I talk of dreams, which are the children of an idle brain, begot of nothing but vain fantasy."

For anyone interested in folklore Queen Mab was too good a character to waste. A contemporary of Shakespeare's, Michael Drayton, showed her in a poem called 'Nymphidia' (1627) cuckolding her husband Oberon by setting off one night for a date with Pigwiggen.

*Her chariot of a snail's fine shell,
Which for the colours did excel:
The fair Queen Mab, becoming well,
 So lively was the limming;
The seat the soft wool of the bee,
The cover (gallantly to see)
The wing of a pied butterfly —
 I trow 'twas simple trimming.*

Oberon pursues her, riding on an ant, and his spy Puck tells him where she and Pigwiggen are hiding with their servants. Mab's own spy, Nymphidia, brings warning, and while the Queen hides in a hazelnut 'scattered by a squirrel', Pigwiggen challenges Oberon to a duel:

*And quickly arms him for the field,
A little cockle-shell his shield
Which he could very bravely wield
 Yet could it not be piercèd;
His spear a bent both stiff and strong
And well-near of two inches long —
The pile was of a horse-fly's tongue
 Whose sharpness nought reversèd.*

It's a comic tour-de-force. His coat-of-mail is of fish-scales, his rapier is a hornet's sting, and he gallops along on an earwig.

*His helmet was a beetle's head
Most horrible and full of dread
That able was to strike one dead,
 Yet did it well become him;
And for a plume a horse's hair
Which, being tossèd with the air,
Had force to strike his foe with fear
 And turn his weapon from him.*

Oberon and Pigwiggen are battling away when Proserpina fetches a bagful of fog from the Styx and a bottle of water from the Lethe. She 'unties the poke' so that no one can see anything for smoke, then makes them all drink the water of forgetfulness, and everyone forgets the whole thing.

This idea of fairies being very small is not one I'm familiar with from Gaelic tradition. I think it's an attempt by Renaissance man to find a place within his own environment for the traditional belief in a parallel otherworld. If the old folks keep telling you there are fairies out there and you can't see them, it must be because they're very small. The invention of the microscope put paid to that one!

In Gaelic tradition the otherworld people were often small, but not *that* small. They often mingled unnoticed with humans and even mated with them. We hear far more about giants, the likes of Fionn mac Cumhaill. But tiny people do appear in jokes and witchcraft stories. Here's a joke:

*Clann 'ic Mhannain chur na braide
Ged nach b' fhaid' iad na cas biodaig'.*

("The Buchanans are expert at thieving / Even when they're no taller than a dagger handle."
As for witchcraft stories, the Rev. John Gregorson Campbell tells a few in his book 'Witchcraft and Second Sight in the Highlands and Islands'. In Skye, he says, a certain woman used to leave home every night, and her husband wondered what she was up to. One night he followed her. Uttering the name of the devil she turned into a cat, then got together with seven other cats. They jumped into a sieve and went off to sea in it. The husband upset the sieve by

naming the Trinity, and all the women were drowned.

In an Argyll version the witches boarded the sieve in the Sound of Mull ‘*against* the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost’. The husband put his foot on it ‘*in* the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost’, so it sank. And in a Tìree version the women were passing Kennavara Hill in egg-shells on their way to Ireland when the husband, unsuspecting this time, saw them and wished them God speed. That had the same effect. The egg-shells sank, and the women were drowned.

In 1900 Fr Allan McDonald made a Gaelic poem ‘Luinneag an Amadain Bhig’ which was in the same metre as Drayton’s and was obviously inspired by it. The title is a reference to the popular Ossianic ballad ‘Laoidh an Amadain Mhóir’ (‘The Lay of the Big Fool’) in which the Amadan Mór, having accepted a drink from an otherworld stranger, finds that his legs have disappeared from the knees down. Though naturally somewhat reduced in height, he remains as heroic without his pins as six men with them, and eventually gets them back.

Fr Allan’s poem makes fun of the Eriskay postmaster, a shy little man called Dugald MacMillan (*Dùghall mac Thormoid*). Probably he has joined the militia and has been trying on his uniform.

*B’ éibhinn fhaicinn ’na chuid uidheim –
Clogaid air de phlaosg nan uibhean,
Casag air de phlaide bhuidhe
Ruighinn bàrr a lùdag.*

(“He looked funny in his uniform – / An eggshell helmet on his head, / A coat on him of yellow plaiding / That reached the tips of his pinkies.”)

*Sheinneadh e phìob mhór gu duineil
Dha’m bu mhàla eàrr an t-seangain;
Trì chasan toisich an t-sníongain
Duis an inneil chiùil ud.*

(“Manfully he’d play a pipe / Whose bag was the ant’s rear end; / The ant’s three front legs were the drones / Of that musical instrument.”) The Boer War is on, and Fr Allan imagines Dugald on a mission to assassinate the Transvaal president, updating Pigwiggen’s armoury of weapons a little.

*Cha do dh’iarr e bom no lyddite,
Innleachd Mhaxim ud, no Vickers –
Fhuair e brog an àite biodaig
'S dh’fhalbh a bhriogadh Chrùgair.*

(“He didn’t need a bomb or lyddite, / Yon Maxim gun, or Vickers – / With cobbler’s last in place of dirk / He set off to murder Kruger.”)

Now Fr Allan doesn’t mention Queen Mab, but I suspect he had a pretty good idea who she was. In the famous ‘Ora nam Buadh’ or ‘Charm of the Graces’, which his friend Alexander Carmichael had got from Duncan Maclellan, a crofter at Carnan in South Uist, the woman being charmed is told:

*Is tu gleus na Mnatha Sithe,
Is tu beus na Bride bithe,
Is tu creud na Moire mine,
Is tu gnìomh na Mnatha Gréig,
Is tu sgeimh na h-Eimir aluinn,
Is tu mein na Dearshul agha,
Is tu meanm na Meabha laidir,
Is tu taladh Binne-bheul.*

Carmichael translates it like this. “Thine is the skill of the Fairy Woman, / Thine is the virtue of Bride the calm, / Thine is the faith of Mary the mild, / Thine is the tact of the woman of

Greece, / Thine is the beauty of Emir the lovely, / Thine is the tenderness of Darthula delightful, / Thine is the courage of Maebh the strong, / Thine is the charm of Binne-bheul.”

Carmichael may have misheard Duncan. There’s no mention of Maebh in anything else he ever collected. However he obviously thought had bagged a unique mention in Scottish Gaelic of a mythical character famous from the oldest Irish sagas, and we have no way of proving him wrong. Meabh, he tells us, is “queen of Connacht and wife of Ailill. She lived at ‘Rath Cruachan’, the fort of Cruachan, and was the cause of the ‘Tain Bo Cuailgne’, ‘Cattle-Spoil of Cooley’. She is the type of bravery.”

Yes, Maebh was brave. And shrewd. And strong-willed. She caused a war between Connacht and Ulster. She was also very promiscuous, and cuckolded her numerous husbands. “I never was without one man in the shadow of another,” she said once. Her name means ‘she who intoxicates’, and she should have lived in Hollywood. She sure was a queen. But was she a fairy?

Well, in the sagas she’s a real flesh-and-blood woman, and a present-day Irish scholar has written: “Apart from some onomastic recollections, she does not figure at all in the later folklore.” But Lady Wilde (Oscar’s mother) chose to tell in her ‘Ancient Legends of Ireland’ of Queen Maeve in her chariot, and in his book ‘The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries’ (1911) W. Y. Evans Wentz talks of ‘the great fairy-queen Meave, who made herself famous by leading against Cuchulainn the united armies of four of the five provinces of Ireland, and all on account of a bull which she coveted’.

So there’s little to choose between the mythology of one nation and the fairyland of another, and it’s easy to see how the chariot-borne Queen Maeve of Connacht became the chariot-borne Queen Mab of Shakespeare. F. G. Stokes says in his ‘Dictionary of the Characters and Proper Names in the Works of Shakespeare’ (1924): “The first mention in literature of Queen Mab ‘the fairies’ midwife’ is that contained in the elaborate description of her by Mercutio . . . Keightley suggested that the name was a corruption of ‘Habundia’, who, according to Heywood, ruled the fairies. But W. J. Thoms, *Three Notelets* (1865), quotes Beauford, *Antient Topography of Ireland*, to show that ‘Mahb’ was the chief of Irish fairies.”

It had taken them two-and-a-half centuries, but the scholars had worked it out.

28 June 2002