

Nature and Faery: A Few Notes

Most novels do not gloss the folk associations of botanical details. The following notes are taken, for the most part, from Katharine Briggs's *an Encyclopedia of fairies, Hobgoblins, Brownies, Boggles, and Other Supernatural Creatures* (New York: Pantheon, 1976), a treasure-trove of accurate and well-glossed details that needs to be reprinted. For references to changelings and the non-sentimental view of Fairy Folk, see the handout with observations from Diane Purkiss (Course Materials).

Colors: **green** is the "fairy color," often associated with bad luck. Fairy animals tend to be **white** with **red** ears and tails. The scarlet hooves of the fairy horse are a reference to this motif. Red is also, however, the color of life, and some red objects are talismans of protection.

Animals: the "horse" of *FT* is closer to the **kelpie**, a dangerous inhabitant of pools and streams, than to the horses of the Celtic gods, the Tuatha De Danann.

cuckoo: the bird is a harbinger of spring, but it also has a negative connotation because it lays its eggs in the nests of other birds, and its hatchlings destroy the host bird's young.

Plants: **apple trees (especially grafted orchard trees)** are sometimes dangerous because the grafted tree (ME "ympe" tree) was considered a dangerous place to fall asleep; see the ME lay "Sir Orfeo."

mistletoe: a parasitic plant sacred to the druids and used in rituals. **Ivy** is also sometimes associated with magic.

elder: an ambiguous tree, since the blossoms and fruit are beneficial. There is a folk tradition that elder trees are associated with witches and are dangerous to children; another belief is that wounding an elder tree, or even brushing against one, requires an immediate apology.

willow: associated with malice (see Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*).

yew: traditionally a tree of the dead; planted in graveyards.

oak: a tree of strength, but also dangerous to cut. ("oak, ash, and thorn" are typically mentioned together in spells)

ash: the tall straight ash tree (the multi-branched tree of *Lai le Fresne* is clearly magical) is used as a symbol of nobility. It was especially valued for longbows

hawthorn: like the "ympe" tree, a tree of magic and one dangerous to sleep under. In one tradition, Merlin was imprisoned forever either in or under a hawthorn tree.

blackthorn, and other thorn bushes, are also associated with fairy-folk and are to be treated with caution.

rowan (or mountain ash): considered a tree of protection because of its red berries.

broom: not a tree, but its blossoms are associated with ambiguous magic. A sprig of broom became a battle-token of the Plantagenets (the term comes from the Latin name, *Planta genista* for the plant).

meadowsweet: a marsh plant used by the Welsh magicians Math and Gwydion, along with oak and broom, to fashion a bride for Lleu, a young man cursed never to marry a human woman. The woman, Blodeuedd, was later turned into an owl (see "Math, son of Mathonwy," the "fourth branch" of the *Mabinogi*), which makes one wonder about the feathers found in the bedroom in *FT*.