

RIGHT, WRONG, STILL OPEN

What Keightley claimed and what became of it. The short version: the collection held and the argument did not.

Keightley's book makes claims of two kinds — about the material, and about what the material means — and the two have fared very differently. This section takes the large ones in order.

1 · The tales and the collectors are genuine. SUSTAINED.

Thiele, Faye, Afzelius and Arndt were real collectors doing real work, early enough that their informants had not read anyone else's book. Modern Scandinavian folkloristics still uses them. Keightley's translations are faithful enough that scholars without Danish have used this volume as a route to Thiele for two centuries. This is the part of the book that has lasted, and it is most of the book.

2 · Fairy comes through Italian *fata* from Latin *fatum*. SUSTAINED.

This is the accepted derivation. Keightley argues it against the Persian and Gothic guesses of his contemporaries and wins on the evidence. His related point — that *faërie* in Middle English named the enchantment or the country before it named the creature — is also standard now.

3 · Oberon descends from Alberich by way of Huon of Bordeaux. SUSTAINED.

A literary descent, securely traced, and Keightley traced it. It is the cleanest piece of comparative work in the volume, and it is clean precisely because the evidence is textual rather than analogical.

4 · Spenser's fairies are not popular fairies. SUSTAINED.

Keightley's section on the Faerie Queene says that Spenser's fairies are allegory and Italian romance with almost nothing of folk belief in them. Later criticism agrees, and he states it more plainly than most.

5 · Norse belief survives in Shetland and the Orkneys. SUSTAINED.

The *trow* is troll and the *hogboon* is *haugbúi*, the barrow-dweller of the sagas. Norse words for Norse beings, still current in the nineteenth century in islands that had been Norse-speaking. This is the strongest argument in Volume I and Keightley makes it almost in passing.

6 · The European fairy descends from the Persian *peri*. NOT ESTABLISHED.

The resemblance is real and the descent is asserted. Keightley had no Persian and read his romances in translation; his own observation that Galland's French Nights turned the jinn into fairies shows how a resemblance can be manufactured in the translating, and he does not turn that observation on his own argument.

7 · The light-elves and dark-elves of the Eddas are two ancient orders. NOT SUSTAINED AS HE HAS IT.

The division appears in Snorri's Prose Edda, written about 1220 by a Christian systematising older material, and effectively nowhere else. The dark-elves are also indistinguishable in practice from the dwarfs. Keightley organises a great deal of this volume on a distinction that rests on one late witness.

8 · The northern dwarfs and the German dwarfs are one people. NOT ESTABLISHED.

The comparison is worth making and the conclusion does not follow from it. Two mining peoples will produce stories about small underground workers without needing a common ancestor, and the borrowing routes between Germany and Scandinavia in the intervening thousand years are too many to control for.

9 · Resemblance implies descent or borrowing. ABANDONED.

This is the method rather than a claim, and it is the thing that has changed most. The comparative school went on to solar mythology and was demolished by Andrew Lang in the 1890s for explaining everything and therefore nothing. What replaced it — independent invention, tale-type indexing, diffusion studied route by

route — keeps Keightley's instinct to compare and drops his confidence about what a comparison proves.

10 · That this book describes European fairy belief. TRUE ONLY WITH A LARGE QUALIFICATION.

It describes the fairy belief that had been printed, in languages Keightley could reach, by 1850. Rügen gets fifty pages because Arndt published; the Feroes get two because nobody had. Anyone quoting this book for the distribution of a belief should ask whether the distribution is of the belief or of the collectors.

What this adds up to

Ten claims. Five sustained — the collectors, the etymology, Oberon, Spenser and the Norse survival in the islands. Three not established: the peri, the Eddic elf-orders as he has them, and the identity of the German and Scandinavian dwarfs. One abandoned, the method itself. And one true with a qualification the size of half of Europe.

Which is to say: a first-rate collection of translations inside a second-rate argument, made by a man who told you where he got everything. Read it for what it gathered and for the names it names. Do not read it for what it concluded.

*From The Fairy Mythology by Thomas Keightley, Volume I — The North, Valice Classics 17. Free at
valicepress.com/companion/fairy-mythology-vol-1*