

Francis Young, *Twilight of the Godlings: The Shadowy Beginnings of Britain's Supernatural Beings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 365 pp., \$39.95 (hardcover/e-book).

The title of this book neatly introduces its primary topics. "Twilight" touches on the idea of the "long Celtic "Twilight"" of Yeats and Tolkien, the "magic bag" of the British Iron Age into which many writers have haphazardly ascribed supernatural beliefs and practices. This relates to prevalent theories about the "survival" of Pagan beliefs into the Middle Ages, where Christianity merely masked older ways of worship. Young challenges these theories, which were born in the Celtic Revival of the nineteenth century and continue today in various forms. He examines the origins of supernatural beings in British folklore and whether these beings have direct lines of descent in the cultural imagination and practices through the millennia between 300–1300 CE. Borrowing the term from Terry Pratchett, Young defines "godlings" as "small gods, neither entirely human nor divine, without cult followings or temple complexes dedicated to their worship, such as nymphs, fauns or satyrs, and deities of fate and chance." When tackling a topic so varied and complex, this kind of nuanced definition and careful terminology is effective and necessary. It also provides useful vocabulary for future scholars, particularly as it is laid out in the first chapter.

This is a timely book, building on the latest research and interdisciplinary methodologies, particularly drawing from folklore and religious studies, history, and archaeological evidence. It is organized chronologically and thematically with a sensible overall structure. Young's argument is clear: "the 'small gods' of early medieval England were largely fresh cultural constructions of the period, con-fected at need in the aftermath of Christianization and under the influence of Christian learning, against a background of the detritus of Roman, Brittonic, and Anglo-Saxon paganism" (30). He carefully lays the groundwork for this argument with an excellent array of primary sources and analysis. Young's translations and footnotes are exemplary, providing thorough intellectual framing and ease of reading. He engages with a variety of scholarly works and authors, including Michael Ostling, Alaric Hall, Richard Firth Green, Sarah

Semple, Tim Flight, Emma Wilby, Diane Purkiss, and Ronald Hutton. Perhaps the scope is too ambitious, but Young manages to wrangle the sweep of the medieval millennia and sea of secondary literature. Young's most innovative contributions occur in the sections about the Romano-British period, its impactful contributions to spiritual life in the British Isles, and the advent of Christianity, which could have been expanded on.

The stark categorization undertaken by scholars to identify and define what is Pagan and what is Christian in the historical record is undergoing a needed reformation. Ronald Hutton mentioned this in his 2022 book *Queens of the Wild*, stating that this revisionism has shattered a former near-uniformity of thought but has not produced a new one; rather, it has opened space for many competing positions. Young takes a sensitive and intelligent position on this topic in his third chapter, offering a compelling interpretive model of Christianization and syncretism. He argues that Christianity did not obliterate godlings nor entirely refashion them in its image, but that there was a space for them to continue to exist, a spiritual place "that God and the saints could not reach which involved the propitiation of spirits to protect against random fate" (83). He further argues that godlings are not "pagan [*sic*] survivals . . . but indeed artifacts of Christianization" (38). He then describes the processes of "demonization" and "undemonization" of godlings, reflecting local needs and religious fluctuations, in the centuries following conversion. Of the many voices in the field offering competing approaches to this subject, Francis Young stands out as knowledgeable, lucid and convincing.

Young concludes that the godlings of Britain are ancient, culturally constructed with elements of local folklore and learned culture, which have undergone cycles of restoration, reinvention and replacement. This is best exemplified in his discussions about water spirits of wells and streams, and goddesses of Fate. A book with such an unwieldy timescale cannot linger on details, but a deeper analysis of some points would have been beneficial. Throughout the book there are tantalizingly brief mentions of fascinating sites or examples which encourage further investigation, and the text may have benefitted from a deeper look. For instance, as an example of a shrine dedicated to local godlings, Young mentions the shrine of Coventina at Carrawburgh on Hadrian's Wall (79). A fuller investigation of the history of the site, a description of the related artworks or structures, and an explanation of how it functioned as a godling

shrine through time would have been enlightening. That wanting more is the strongest critique of this book speaks to its strengths.

Twilight of the Godlings will be critical reading for anyone studying religious life in medieval Britain and fairy belief, Paganism in the British Isles, supernatural beings in medieval literature, and the history of Christianity in Britain.

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