

'The Green Children of Woolpit: a weird allegory of isolation, otherness and belonging'

Now widely adapted as a folk tale, the story of the Green Children of Woolpit first appears in the chronicles of William of Newburgh and Ralph of Coggeshall. Presented as a 'wonder' tale, both authors consider the matter strange but true. Ralph refers to William's version, and the two accounts gradually become conflated over time, but as John Clark (1999) points out in his discussions of the texts, both William and Ralph claim to base their reports on eye-witness accounts. Their sources are different: William refers to several unnamed witnesses, while Ralph cites an individual directly involved in the story. For both chroniclers, the appearance of the Green Children is a mystery within living memory, worthy of our attention.

William presents his account alongside strange reports of living creatures found trapped in rocks, revenants, and a fairy banquet. William admits to dismissing the Green Children story at first, but is persuaded by 'the weight of so many and such competent witnesses', that he is 'compelled to believe, and wonder over' it, in spite of reason (Stevenson 1: 27).

William's version of events can be summarised as follows:

- A boy and a girl, completely green-skinned and strangely dressed, emerge from the wolf pits (dug as traps) outside the village.
- They wander, apparently astonished by their surroundings, into the fields during harvest time, and are seized by locals.
- The children do not eat until they see raw beans, which they consume avidly. Over several months they gradually accept other foods and their greenness fades.
- They are baptised and learn the language.
- Once able to communicate, they explain that they came from the land of St Martin and were transported here by following the sound of bells.

- The boy dies, but the girl thrives, marries and lives on.

In William's version, the children describe their otherworld as follows:

"The sun does not rise upon our countrymen; our land is little cheered by its beams; we are contented with that twilight, which, among you, precedes the sun-rise, or follows the sunset. Moreover, a certain luminous country is seen, not far distant from ours, and divided from it by a very considerable river."

(Stevenson 1:27 4)

Ralph of Coggeshall's version is one of four weird wonder tales in his English chronicle, otherwise concerned with crusade narratives. The elements are essentially the same as William's, with some striking differences. The children are taken to the home of a local knight, Richard de Calne, whose account Ralph draws on. The boy refuses other foods and dies of languor, while the girl's loss of greenness and subsequent baptism is emphasised as a moment of acceptance into the community, where she remains for some years. Ralph states that he hears often from de Calne about the events and the girl, who is described as 'loose and wanton' (Keightley 282).

There are numerous retellings and re-visionings of the Green Children in English, dating from the seventeenth century onwards (Clark 2006). Writer Kevin Crossley-Holland has revisited it across different forms since the 1960s; it features in very recent short stories by Daisy Johnson – and myself. The enduring popularity of the tale and the desire to puzzle out its meaning has led to numerous theories and scholarly studies. Were the children lost aliens? Visiting fairies? Malnourished babes in the wood? Terrified Flemish immigrants? Is this the garbled echo of some ancient ritual, resurrection belief, or encounter with another race? Or is it an allegory for the dangers of heresy and the refusal to conform?

The Green Children's vast and diverse influence on literature is pithily summarised by John Clark in the introduction of his article for the journal *Science Fiction Studies* (2006):

...It has generated entries in dictionaries of fantasy literature, folklore, fairies, “The Unexplained”, and “alien encounters”. It has been alluded to in academic discussions of the methods of twelfth-century historians; it is considered the original exemplar of a standard folktale motif; and it has been described as “a classic of forteana” in the magazine Fortean Times.

(Clark 209)

Since the article, Clark has become an authority on the Green Children’s many incarnations, and is working on a book drawing together his research and translations of the sources (Clark 2023).

I couldn’t say where I first read about the Green Children. It is one of those stories that is in my bones, a folktale of my childhood. I decided to write my own version very suddenly, during the December 2020 lockdown. The strangeness of this liminal period seemed to echo the twilight otherworld of the Green Children’s origins.

Here’s an extract from my process journal capturing the idea:

I take my daily walk to the spinney at the end of the road... I sit on the rope swing, lashed together for the children whose back gardens border onto this skinny pocket of wildness... I let my boots drag as I swing, carving arcs through mud and spongy leaf-litter, rest my eyes on patches of green and drink it in. I’ve stared at a computer screen for far too long. I could belly-crawl into that clump of scrub and shrub and climber, curl up and stay there, blinking through dew-damp and frost.

It speaks to me, this green. A voice comes: a sharp tin-whistle of a sound. It tells me how it feels to come from the green, to be green, to emerge, blinking, from a hole in the ground lined with the roots of that ivy, choked with this leaf litter. All at once, the story tumbles out. It is the fate of the green girl, one of the legendary Green Children of Woolpit.

I returned home and immediately drafted the story. The sense of isolation brought about by reduced social contact, and a keen awareness of the nonhuman, brought me closer to the green girl's perspective. Lockdown had become a threshold space between worlds.

[Reading from 'Green is the colour' (Overall 2021)]

Looking again at the early sources, I can see how Ralph's version has fed into my own retelling of the Green Children story. The physical crossing over from one world to another is mirrored in the children's movement from social isolation to belonging. In Ralph's account, how this transition plays out results in different fates for the siblings. The boy will not conform to human norms, will not eat bread and never lives to receive the sacrament: as such he is unable to fully transfer himself into this world. He retains the outward signs of his otherness, withers and dies. The girl is willing to adapt to and adopt human ways: once she has lost all traces of her otherness, she eventually passes as one of the community. It is not enough to cross between worlds: in order to live in this one, the Green Children must give up their origins and become fully integrated.

Ralph's other wonder tales are fascinating in themselves: his account of the wild man of Orford, some forty miles from Woolpit on the Suffolk coast, shares interesting parallels. The Green Children emerge from the pit, the wild man from the sea, both entering the human world through an element in the landscape that is outside human control and habitation: earth and water. While they look similar to us, their bodies – green-skinned and strangely dressed, or wild-haired and naked - signify their otherness. Neither can speak the local language, and they eat raw foods, beans and fish respectively: they have yet to be civilised or Christianised. Only the green girl successfully crosses all of the required thresholds, physical and social, to become indistinguishable from us. At this point, the wonder stops, and she is no longer remarkable.

Why do we need these stories? Why do we keep retelling them? The Green Children offer a contemporary allegory for issues of identity and our need for belonging and acceptance. There are also parallels to be drawn between the idea that the fey or their descendants live undetected among us, and a human disregard for the presence and

continuation of the nonhuman. Perhaps stories like this can serve to remind us that, when we tame the green, and all otherness is gone, we risk finding ourselves at the end of wonder.

Dr Sonia Overall

Canterbury Christ Church University
sonia.overall@canterbury.ac.uk

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