



Classics in Short No.36: Hobberdy Dick

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Brian Alderson on Katharine Briggs's **Hobberdy Dick**.

?What fools mortals were! They had not so much as a spayed bitch in a house with two ghosts in it.? But at least they had Hobberdy Dick...<!--break-->

Philip Pullman is not the only chap

to give the chapters of his fictions apposite epigraphs. Pretentious, say some (?Look! I've read **Paradise Lost** ? Jerusalem ? **The Faerie Queene** ??) but such things can lend a kind of authentication to the text, placing a new story in an old tradition.

That is certainly true

of the epigraphs which Katharine Briggs chose for the twenty-five chapters of **Hobberdy Dick**, and these also bear witness to her pre-eminence as a folklorist, which I mention in my review (p22) of the reissue of her **British Folk-Tales**. Nursery rhymes, border ballads, snatches of folktale, seventeenth-century poetry are all aptly laid under contribution in order to root her historical romance in the ambience of its times.

The romance,

set in Nollie Cromwell's time, is conventional enough: a puritan Cheapside merchant has ambitions for the squirearchy and moves his family to Widford in Oxfordshire. His son by his first wife, now dead, has a taking for country life, and also ? in the teeth of parental opposition ? for his stepmother's waiting-gentlewoman, last survivor of the old family that owned Widford Manor. Straight-dealing ? and the discovery of some handy buried treasure ? ensure that: *Jack shall have Jill, / Naught shall go ill; / The man shall have his mare again, / And all shall go well.* (Epigraph to Chapter 24.)

The story

that is layered in with these events is what turns the book from the conventional to the classic. For there, on the fringe of things, subsisting in parallel with human activity, are the chthonic powers: the ghosts, bogles, lucifugi, and such, whose time is not our time and whose irregular interventions in our affairs may have unpredictable consequences.

Hobberdy Dick

is the house-spirit of Widford since ?time out of mind? ? a shadowy, raggedy, unkempt apparition, occasionally caught in the corner of someone's eye, and with a deep-rooted concern for the right management of house and land. It is his benign working in favour of the lovers (and, somewhat melodramatically, in preventing the abduction of a daughter of the house by witches) that swings the plot towards its happy conclusion; but it is his character as ancient guardian that holds the reader. For the true conclusion is that sanctioned by fairy lore: the offer of mortal cloth for Dick to wear which

will bring him eternal release from servitude.

The intertwining of the strands

in this tale is carried out with practised ease. Katharine Briggs loved writing and was devoted to the study of folk customs from childhood on (her D.Phil at Oxford, much curtailed, was on 'Some aspects of folk-lore in early seventeenth-century literature') and, by choosing the period of the puritan regime after the Great Rebellion, she supplied her story with that dramatic tension between old belief and new enlightenment which is of permanent concern. (What was that big march* about just now? Have not present generations abolished Whitsuntide, advanced tinned goods as proper fare for a Harvest Festival, and determined to cut Easter loose from the phases of the moon?) Katharine Briggs's absorption in 'the personnel of fairyland' gave a naturalness to the supernatural goings-on in her story, while the precise attention she gave to its setting reinforced this. Much of her youth had been spent in Scotland, but in 1939 she had bought a house in Burford and her love of the Cotswolds, with their green roads, their barrows, and their standing stones brought accuracy to her portrayal of both landscape and local dialect.

The recent reissue of

Hobberdy Dick by Jane Nissen Books is most welcome. It retains the drawings that Scoular Anderson did for the Puffin edition of 1972, although it would be nice to know if the strange, toned illustrations of the first edition of 1955 could have been used. (They were by Jane Kingshill, Dr Briggs's god-daughter.) It would also be nice to know why no edition is in print of Dr Briggs's earlier book for children: **Kate Crackernuts** (not published till 1963). It draws upon her profound attachment to Scotland and is a novelised reconstruction of the folktale with the same title - a powerful story which could be seen as something of a forerunner to Janni Howker's incomparable **Martin Farrell**.

* The Countryside Alliance march took place in London in September '02.

The illustrations, by Scoular Anderson, are taken from the Jane Nissen Books edition (1 903252 05 9, £5.99 pbk).

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