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The Green Children of Woolpit:

A Weird Allegory of Isolation, Otherness, and Belonging

Abstract:

The English folk legend of the Green Children of Woolpit has enduring appeal. First appearing as a wonder tale in the medieval chronicles of William of Newburgh and Ralph of Coggeshall, the children's story has attracted numerous retellings across a range of creative forms. The sudden appearance of the green-skinned brother and sister, dressed in strange clothes and speaking an unintelligible language, has been the subject of multiple theories, from the scientific to the speculative, with the children recast as fey folk, aliens, lost immigrants and malnourished foundlings. Focusing on two recent short story re-visionings of the tale, this creative-critical essay examines the legend through a consideration of the original tale's landscape in Suffolk, and explores representations of otherness, gender and the nonhuman found in these retellings.

key words: green, children, Woolpit, folktale, fairy, retelling

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Once upon a time, in the village of Woolpit in Suffolk, two strange children suddenly and inexplicably appeared. Their skin was green, their clothing odd, and they spoke an incomprehensible language. The local people brought them to the manor house, where the kindly lord took them into his care. The children refused all food except raw beans, which they stripped eagerly from the pods. The youngest, a boy, became sickly and died. His sister, the green girl, began to eat bread, grew stronger, and slowly lost her green color. After some time in the village, she learned the local language, and was able to tell the story of how she and her brother had arrived there. The children had been tending their flocks in their native land when they heard the distant ringing of bells. Entranced, they followed the sound, walking through a long tunnel until they emerged above ground. Unused to such bright sunlight, they wandered in confusion until the villagers found them. The land they came from was a place of twilight, but the girl could not fathom how to return there, so she made a new home amongst the people of Suffolk, where she grew healthy, married, and lived happily ever after.

That's one version of the story.

This creative-critical essay explores how the Green Children of Woolpit narrative continues to be adapted and reinterpreted, and what this tale, with its medieval origins, might offer readers and writers in the 21st century. It will give particular attention to two very recent versions of the story by fiction writers: "A Retelling" by Daisy Johnson (Johnson 2020), first created as short story for audio, broadcast in 2019 and published in an anthology; and my own flash fiction, "Green is the colour" (Overall 2021), published in *Neon* magazine and reproduced here. Both make use of landscape, site-specific or imagined, in the act of retelling.

Medieval roots

The green children's story first appears in two medieval chronicles: William of Newburgh's *Historia rerum Anglicarum* ([1201] 1719) and Ralph of Coggeshall's *Chronicom Anglicanum* ([1207] 1875). Both chroniclers present the material as a 'wonder' tale, something marvellous and mysterious, but nevertheless true. Caroline Walker Bynum summarises this sense of wonder as "induced by the beautiful, the horrible, and the skillfully (sic) made, by the bizarre and rare, by that which challenges or suddenly illuminates our expectations, by the range of difference, even the order and regularity, found in the world" (Bynum 1997: 21).

While acknowledging a desire to scrutinise and probe (*rimari*) the story's origin, the language in William's account of the green children is heightened and emotional, signifying the strangeness of the tale: it is an unheard of (*inauditum*) prodigy (*progidium*) that warrants attention (William [1201] 1719: 90-91). As Bynum notes: "Describing the … green children born from the earth…William finds himself forced to marvel (*mirari*) at what he cannot grasp" (Bynum 1997: 23). The appearance of the green children is more than a novelty: William does not choose to record it simply as a source of amusement or astonishment, but as something meaningful, to be considered further. However, he does not offer an interpretation, leaving it for his readers to say what they will of it (*dicat quisque quod voluerit*) and reason it out as best they can (*ratiocinetur de his ut poterit*) (William [1201] 1719: 93). We might imply that from William's perspective, anything outside the expected order of God's creation must have significance, making it worthy of inclusion in such a chronicle.

Ralph of Coggeshall also considers the story "wonderful" (*mirum*) (Ralph [1207] 1875: 118). Elizabeth Freeman examines how Ralph's choice of language places his story "firmly within the milieu of the wonder tale", stating that "the kind of wonder described by Ralph is the wonder which appears most commonly among writers of history - that is, the wonder which needs to be tested and explained" (Freeman 2000: 132). The green children

themselves are the immediate subject of wonder, their freakish otherworldliness exposed to what Freeman terms “open-mouthed curiosity” (132), but once unlocked, the details of their story offer further cause for wonder and speculation.

Both William and Ralph claim to base their reports on eye-witness testimony, although their narratives are recorded some years after the supposed event. William does not name his sources but refers to the story being “spoken of by many people”, and states that he is eventually persuaded himself by “the evidence of so many witnesses of such weight”; Ralph cites an individual directly involved in the story, Sir Richard de Calne, claiming to have elements of it from de Calne and his household firsthand: “as we have often heard from the knight himself and his household” (Clark forthcoming: Appendix).[1]

For both chroniclers, the appearance of the green children is a mystery within living memory, worthy of preservation. William presents his account alongside strange reports of living creatures found trapped in rocks, revenants, and a mysterious nocturnal revel. His version of events, as translated by Clark (forthcoming), can be summarised as follows:

- The events occur during the reign of King Stephen (1135-1154) and are well known.
- The location of the story is an East Anglian village, four or five miles from the site of the martyr Edmund’s monastery (now Bury St. Edmunds).
- Near the village are “very ancient ditches” used as pits for trapping wolves, “Wolf-pits”, which give the village its name.
- During the harvest season, two children, a boy and a girl, emerge from the pits. Their bodies are “all green” and they wear clothes of unknown material.
- The children wander “dazed” into the fields and are seized by reapers. They are brought to the village, where they are held for several days.

- The children refuse to eat until beans are brought in from the field, which they seize. They look "inside the stems" for food until a bystander pods the beans. The children eat them raw.
- The children live on beans for several months until they begin to eat bread. At this point they change color, learn the language and are baptised.
- The boy dies soon after, but the girl remains healthy. She eventually marries and is said to be alive close to the time of writing.
- The children claim to have been inhabitants of "the land of St Martin", and to have been feeding their father's flocks when they heard a "loud noise". They suddenly found themselves transported into the fields, where they were discovered.

Ralph's version is one of four weird wonder tales in his episodic English chronicle. The elements are essentially the same as William's, but with some noteworthy differences. Ralph's account can be summarised as follows, drawing again on Clark's translation (forthcoming):

- The location of the story is "St Mary of the Wolfpits" in Suffolk.
- Two children, a boy and a girl, are found by locals at the mouth of a pit. They have green-tinted skin and speak an unintelligible language.
- The children are brought to the house of Sir Richard de Calne. They weep "inconsolably", refusing food until they see newly cut beans brought into the house, which they seize. When shown the beans within the pods, they eat these raw.
- The children continue their diet of beans for some time. The boy suffers "a sort of weakness" and dies after a short while.

- The girl's diet becomes more varied. She stays healthy, losing her green color. She is baptised and lives in the service of Richard de Calne for several years. The girl is described by the family as "very wanton and impudent".
- The girl recounts her homeland as a place with no sun where the inhabitants all have green skin. She claims that she and her brother were following their flocks when they found a cavern, heard the sound of bells from within, and wandered inside for some time before emerging into sun and heat that struck them "senseless". Hearing the villagers, they attempted to escape, but could not find the cavern entrance again and were caught.

Neither chronicler offers us a solution to the puzzle of the green children. Ralph and William relate the 'facts' as they have them, leaving the reader to wonder at, speculate upon, and interpret meaning from them. This presentation of the unexplained and fantastical is also found in the writings of Walter Map and Gervase of Tilbury.[2] As contemporary readers, we might assume that medieval chroniclers would frame the green children as somehow demonic, or signifiers of lingering pagan superstitions, but both William and Ralph offer accounts that are curious and rational rather than credulous or moralistic. Although William later suggests that some wonders might be the work of magicians drawing upon the powers of evil angels (*mali angeli*) to deceive men, he finds the matter of the green children too puzzling (*abstrusior*) to fathom (William [1201]1719: 97; Clark forthcoming: Appendix).[3] In Ralph's account, the girl's loss of greenness and subsequent baptism is emphasised as a moment of acceptance into the community: she is separated from the last vestiges of her strange otherness, whatever their origin, and enters the ordered Christian world. She is then permitted to remain a member of the Woolpit community for some years, despite her apparent 'wantonness'. The green girl's story is given fairytale closure in William's account,

through her marriage to a man "at Lynn" (*Lennam*); now King's Lynn in Norfolk, roughly 45 miles north-west of Woolpit (see [9] below).

Liminality, fairy lore and folk memory

Ronald Hutton locates the green children's story as a cornerstone in the development of British fairy lore, identifying it as a medieval narrative of "alleged encounters between humans and non-human beings which could not easily be fitted into conventional Christian concepts of angels and demons" (Hutton 2014: 1138). The story becomes a staple in the literature of fairy and folklore following Keightley's translation of Ralph's account, which appears in *The Fairy Mythology* (1850), a pioneering work of comparative folklore (Dorson 1955). Francis Young places the story "squarely… within medieval traditions of fairy narratives" (Young 2019: 39) and charts its literary assimilation via numerous writers (41-44). Young frames the story himself by including it, along with Ralph's wild man of Orford and mischievous spirit Malekin, in his chapter "Fairies in Medieval Suffolk" (36-38).

Young cites the difference between Ralph and William's accounts as evidence that the story of the children was already "part of a complex oral and textual tradition" (41), and casts doubt on Ralph's use of direct testimony from Sir Richard de Calne, suggesting the chronicler draws upon disclosures "made to the monks of Coggeshall rather than Ralph himself" (40). Following Hutton, Young summarises the green children's fairy traits: green is associated with fairies; human food is treacherous to them; they live in a twilight land, where time behaves differently, reached through underground caverns; they respond powerfully to the sound of church bells (41).[4] He identifies the moated site of Woolpit's Lady's Well as the likely place of their appearance, suggesting it may have "enjoyed a supernatural reputation before it was sanctified by the church" (40). Fairies dwell in a state of liminality that is other than death (36), making a site on the edge of the village an appropriately 'in-between' spot.[5]

Reaching even further back into the landscape's past, Young also draws on East Anglian writer William Dutt's use of the "notorious pygmy theory", in which the green children are "a folk memory of Neolithic people…living in underground caverns…the source of stories about fairies" (44).

Psychological readings and recastings

The memory of a 'lost' people is also the basis of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's interpretation: focussing on William's account, he reads the green children's story as an allegory of "England's difference-riddled history" (Cohen 2008: 75). Cohen claims the children "spectacularly embody the cultural diversity from which the kingdom had been formed, the hybridity it had long disowned" (75), a cultural identity William struggles with. The green children are uncomfortable physical reminders of English society's suppressed guilt and trauma: guilt over the exile of the Britons and treatment of them as the Welsh (81), and the trauma of the Norman conquest, at odds with a vision of the inevitable triumph of Englishness (80). Cohen notes the tensions of an English identity based on delineating the monstrous otherness of the Welsh, Irish and Scots (89); but it is the presence of Normans in English history, and their absence through assimilation, that Cohen identifies as William's biggest problem:

> How, then, to narrate the advent of a people who had conquered a race that did not need conquering, who had altered it profoundly, and who were no longer to be found in England but who never left? (85)

Cohen argues that the green children serve as an allegory for the Normans in William's account, going so far as to claim that the green boy chooses to die rather than assimilate (90-91). Given that in the account by William – which Cohen offers in a full translation (83-84) – the green boy eats beans and bread, learns the language and receives the

holy sacrament, it is hard to see where Cohen locates this heroic defiance. Indeed, Cohen quotes William, stating: “They became like us” (83). The plural here suggests no definitive difference in attitude between the green children, yet Cohen considers the green girl docile in her assimilation: she “vanishes into mundane life” (88), while her brother is “an adamantly alien interloper who refuses assimilation, adulthood, history, Englishness, modernity” (91).

Michał Madej (2020) expands upon Cohen’s discussion. Madej appears to agree with Cohen that the green children represent a suppression of ‘Anglo-Saxon’ identity which has been gradually subsumed and integrated into the ‘English’ society of William’s time:

> On such a reading, the tale would constitute a vehicle for the chronicler’s personal beliefs, his thoughts and life experiences. Green children would constitute an alien element, a symbol of the Normans, who over a relatively short period underwent complete assimilation among the subdued inhabitants of England. (Madej 2020: 128)

Cohen sees William’s inclusion of the green children story and his “rant against Arthurian history” as “out of place” and therefore suggestive of subtext (Cohen 2008: 82). Madej follows Elizabeth Freeman (2000) in considering Ralph’s wonder tales as signifying the dangers of otherness, arguing that the positioning of these tales in Ralph’s chronicle is intended to draw parallels with forms of otherness encountered during the crusades, namely the differences between Christians and Muslims, and between “the Western and Eastern branch of Christianity” (129).

Although he does not argue the same for William’s other wonder tales, Madej implies, through juxtapositional discussion, that in the absence of further historical records, the real interest of the wonder tales in both chronicles is temporal (130). Rather than revealing any timeless human preoccupations or concerns, the green children’s presence in the chronicles tells us about the state of mind of their creators and their perceptions of threats

to ordered, Christian society. Madej suggests that both chroniclers use the plot of the green children's story, "whether consciously or not", to convey "their own thoughts, considerations and experiences" (130).

These interesting psychological readings by Cohen and Madej attempt to explain the intentions, conscious or unconscious, of the medieval chroniclers who included the green children in their histories. However, neither scholar considers why the story continues to hold a fascination and provide such traction for theories: rather, by adding their own discussions to a growing body of literature about the tale, they demonstrate, and contribute to, its continued interest and richness..

Moving away from readings of national identity and Englishness, Carolyne Larrington (2023) argues for a global approach to the green children's story. Embracing "postcolonial iterations of medievalism", Larrington connects the green children's displacement and alienation with contemporary migrant experiences (145). The children's origins in "a mysterious elsewhere… that accounts for their unusual skin colour and their pronounced cultural differences" makes the story ripe for reflections "on more contemporary attitudes to migrant or refugee children arriving in a new community" (145). The parallels include how these children are "treated and regarded" and how, once able to speak the local language, "they choose to speak of their earlier selves and their irrecoverable homelands" (145).

Like migrant and refugee children, age is also against them: coupled with the trauma of displacement and alienation, the green children lack agency. They are suddenly and inexplicably uprooted and, as minors with no resources or adult support network, and no means of returning home, they have no choice but to stay in Woolpit and attempt to assimilate. In light of these similarities, Larrington demands an "imaginative and empathetic

response" to the tale which takes in "those long-dead green children" and the "millions of their relatives across the world…who can never come home again" (156).

A tale of many retellings

The two source accounts of the green children's story from William and Ralph have become gradually conflated over time and retelling, passing from writer to writer (Clark 1999). The enduring popularity of the tale and the desire to puzzle out its meaning has led to numerous speculative theories about the green children's origins.[6] These range from the extraterrestrial – the green children are lost aliens (Duncan Lunan, 1996) – to the pragmatic – they are terrified, malnourished Flemish immigrants hiding out in the Suffolk countryside after an attack on their settlement (Paul Harris 1998).

The unsolved mystery at the core of the green children's story keeps readers and writers returning to the material. Could it be the garbled echo of some ancient ritual, resurrection belief, or encounter with another race? Is it an allegory of the dangers of heresy and the refusal to conform? Do the green children represent nature spirits, enacting a symbolic opposition between the clinging 'pagan' past and medieval Christianity? The story opens a space between wonder and understanding that is yet to be closed, fostering reinterpretation and alternative meaning-making. For each opinion there is a potential contradiction. Mary Baine Campbell (2016) defines the story as early science fiction, arguing that the chroniclers' inclusion of eyewitness accounts and quotes from the green children themselves straddles fact and fiction, separating it from other wonder tales.[7] Nicholas Orme's observation that the children's story is written up by adults, and "we hear it at second hand" (Orme 1995: 75), highlights the difficulties of narrative attribution.

Alongside the transference of the tale from one document to another, there are numerous creative retellings and re-visionings of the green children's story in English.[8]

Creatively, the story lends itself to drama and music as well as prose. Norfolk-based writer Kevin Crossley-Holland has revisited it across different forms since the 1960s, including the libretto of an opera, created with Nicola LeFanu, for performance in the community (Crossley Holland 1990). In 2016, the Woolpit Festival commissioned a new musical by composer Andrew Wilson, "The Green Children", which premiered in the festival programme (Woolpit 2016). Patrice Baldwin has produced a teaching resource and lesson plan for Key Stage 2 drama teachers, encouraging retellings of the story in secondary school classrooms (Baldwin 2009). Cross-curricular links Baldwin suggests for consideration include topics from PSE (Personal and Social Education) classes: "awareness of self and others, empathy, tolerance, acceptance, cultural diversity, inclusion" (Baldwin 2009: 9); "New beginnings", "Changes" and "Relationships" (9); and "migration" in Geography classes (1;9). The resource is listed on Baldwin's website as "funded through National Drama by the DCMS" to help "Prevent Racism and Violent Extremism'' (Baldwin 2021). These retellings and reappropriations reflect the gradual shift from the medieval chroniclers' attempt to comprehend the children's appearance within a Christian context, through more speculative approaches, to a recent emphasis on personal identity and otherness. Each age finds its uses for the narrative, ensuring its ongoing transmission. At a time of heightened secular and religious tensions and divisive culture wars, an allegorical reading of the green children readily lends itself to difficult discussions about difference, otherness and belonging.

It is worth bearing in mind that, in addition to the interpretive nature of each translation of William and Ralph's accounts of the story, every scholarly re-framing of them also contributes a form of retelling. For example, when Bynum introduces William's account in her article on wonder, she refers to the children as having "been born from the earth" (Bynum 1997: 23). This image, however apt a flourish, is an embellishment, a small act of retelling. Larrington also succumbs to this tendency when she states the children "were both

bright green" (Larrington 2023: 143). The story is so alluring, so ripe for metaphor, that it is difficult to resist adding to or enhancing its imagery.

Pits and holes

The chroniclers' accounts of the green children's story are highly localised. Events take place and remain in a distinct East Anglian locale. [9] Although William records the tale from elsewhere (Yorkshire), Ralph is relatively local to the area (Essex). The immediate landscape of Woolpit is integral to the story in both 'source' accounts. In Ralph's version, the children are found "by the inhabitants of that place, near the mouth of a certain pit that is situated there"; in William's account, the wolf pits are referred to as "very ancient ditches", from which the children are said to have "emerged" (Clark forthcoming: Appendix). In both cases, the inference is clear: the wolf pit facilitates the children's miraculous emergence from underground. The pits offer a form of subterranean transportation found in other wonder tales, including the mysterious 'Peak cavern' recounted by Gervase of Tilbury (Oman 1944:10).

Were there really wolf pits in the area? Opposite the Swan Inn, beside the village pump, a visitor information board declares: "Welcome to Woolpit". Then it asks: "Why Woolpit?" The board, following the local museum narrative, is quick to set aside the possibility of wolf pits or traps giving the village its name. It offers "Wlfpeta" as one early spelling of the village, and suggests the derivation is from Ulfketel, Earl of East Anglia, who granted the church and manor of Wlfpeta to the Abbey of St Edmund in 1016. Although this narrative skirts away from the wolf pits, the board includes a summary of the green children's tale, referring to the harvest reapers being astonished to discover "a boy and a girl in a hole in the ground" (Overall 2023).

The village website also favours the Ulfketel explanation, unpacking the name derivation further:

> the most likely explanation is that it [the village name] came from the personal name of Ulfketel, which when translated means wolf (ulf) trap (ketel)). Ulfketel was a counsellor at the court of Aethelred the Unready (c.968 AD to 1016 AD). He was a famous warrior and is often referred to as the Earl of the Eastern Angles, so it would not be surprising to find a village named after him. (Woolpit 2023)

In St Mary's Church – St Mary of the Wolf-pits – a framed reproduction of a text hangs on the wall by the baptismal font. Alongside a translation of William's version of the green children's story is an extract from *A Breviary of Suffolk*: *Suffolk in the XVII Century* by Robert Reyce ([1618] 1902). This offers some further speculation about the village name which is worth giving in full:

> 'Woolpitt.' This place has by some been thought to be the Roman Sitomagus. Its extensive deposits of brick earth tend to support this view. The Romans were great brick-makers, and their excavations may account for the second syllable of the name. The first syllable has nothing to do with wool, in all likelihood; it may refer to wolves, but perhaps only records the name of a former proprietor, Ulf. (Reyce 1902: 267)

The geography of Woolpit gives us plenty of scope for further speculation about the green children's site of emergence. Warning Deep Water signs appear beside bodies of water just outside Woolpit. Visitors to the village can follow the Old Stowmarket Road, which draws parallel to Kiln Lane towards its end, the two ways now separated by the A14 highway. These lanes once connected areas of water and contained the expansive Woolpit brick and tile works. 'Swan Lake' washes against the village's industrial edges, flanked by a new housing estate with a tellingly named Clay Pit Close snaking through it. Across the road is the Brickfield Business Park. To the south and east, and stretching above the main road, is arable land.

This is a landscape of fields and excavations, of pits now full of water. The Ordinance Survey map of 1881-1893 (Map of Suffolk) shows the location of working and old clay and gravel pits here. Were these the pits the children emerged from? Were the claypits repurposed as wolf pits, by accident or design? Did Ulfketel get his name from trapping wolves here? Or is it enough that there were ancient pits here, on the edge of the village; so that in the time of the green children, a memory of these pits lingered in the village name, furnishing the tale with a suitably fantastical gateway through which to allow their sudden appearance? Given Reyce's speculation (Reyce 1902: 267) that the pits are Roman in origin, there may also be some collapsing of the Romulus and Remus legend into the story of green children, succoured not by a wolf, but by a place associated with wolves.

The smallest body of water on Kiln Lane is overhung with greenery. Like the fairyland glade of The Lady's Well, a site of healing water and disputed pilgrimage on the edge of the village, this pocket of edgeland is tangled and sun dappled. It's not hard to imagine the children emerging here, in the green half-light, staggering into the nearby fields and blinking in the sudden, brazen sunshine of August harvesttime.

Ultimately, does it matter if the wolf pits existed at the time of the green children's recorded appearance? The wolf pit as otherworldly portal has entered the realm of the story. Whether real or imagined, it serves a genuine purpose in enabling the physical emergence of the children. This emergence is miraculous – wonderous – but not impossible to fathom. The landscape is a potentially porous place, a site of ingress and egress, connecting that which lies above ground with that which is beneath and beyond. Our imagination can grasp the notion of these children emerging from an opening in the ground because our environment is – and has been, stretching back through written record and oral tradition – littered with sites of former extraction and excavation. We are accustomed to these liminal sites, whose original meaning and function may be lost or obscured over time: they are scars in the landscape still visible

enough to provide the fabric of story. Clay pits dug for Roman brickworks; forgotten smuggling tunnels and caches; collapsed barrows; sink holes. Just as standing stones and hill forts attract folktales and site-specific legends, these traces in the landscape of past use or purpose are rich for potential re-interpretation.

Sited story and haunting revision: "A Retelling"

Despite the many forms the story has taken over 800 years, and the parallels it facilitates, the place-boundedness of the green children's story remains. The green children of Woolpit remain present in the cultural and material fabric of the village: in its sign, its local histories, its shared stories of identity and its sited community performances. The green children may have gone global (and in some interpretations, interplanetary), and the treacherous wolf pit traps of our imagination may be intangible, but however far its tendrils may spread, the story remains rooted in Woolpit, its place of origin.

Daisy Johnson's "A Retelling" (2020) is a self-conscious narrative that explores the processes, responsibilities and fantastical consequences of retelling the green children's story. Johnson brings the act of revision back to the site itself by including a fictive – or perhaps autofictive – visit to Woolpit as both framing device and catalyst in her story. "A Retelling" follows an unnamed female protagonist, an alter ego for Johnson herself, and is written in close first person. The narrator, like Johnson, has been commissioned to write a version of the green children's tale for an audio broadcast. Hoping for inspiration from the story's source, she combines returning home to East Anglia to visit her family for Christmas with a research trip to Woolpit.

After a framing device linking beginning and ending, the story opens on the narrator's gloomy visit to Woolpit, with the family packed into the car, rain falling, and latent sibling quarrels threatening to resurface. Details of the green children's story, as we know it from William and Ralph's accounts, are dispensed with in rapid summaries during this early

section. The narrator describes the children's green-skinned appearance to her sister's boyfriend as they travel. He is a doctor, and in an act of creative interpretation, he immediately diagnoses the cause: "''Anaemia!" he says. "I'm certain.''" (Johnson 2020: 18).[10]

In a nod to disputes over the village name's etymology, the narrator's sister rejects her account of "Stone pits with stakes at the bottom, called 'wolfpits', sometimes with a rope so that mice and frogs could climb out again" (18). Her mother has a leaflet about The Lady's Well, and as the family trudge through the village in search of this site, the narrator fills them in on the story "as far as I can remember it" (18). Woolpit itself is underwhelming, described in tones of disappointment as a place of rain and mud with nowhere to dry out over a cup of tea (18-19). The first hints of weirdness are present in the carvings of the church, when the family "slop up and down the aisles in our wellies and waterproofs" (18) examining the monstrously merged animals of the pew ends – "dogs with the wings of birds, pigs with bodies that do not belong to them" (18) – and the alarming angels in the roof with their "mouths open and wailing" (18). The Lady's Well, difficult to locate after a traipse along the main road, is a spot for selfies, where the narrator dunks her hands and anoints her face, while the rest of the family splosh about in the shallow water, hoping for good fortune (20).

The difficulties with and possibilities of retelling weave through Johnson's story. After their family visit to Woolpit, "everyone comes down with flu" (20), which the narrator's sister blames on the water from The Lady's Well. Over a subdued Christmas, the whole family hunkering down with cold remedies instead of turkey and fizz, discussion of the green children's story continues. Approaches to retelling it become a parlour game with random dictionary words (21). All those present feel they have a stake in the story and how it should be told:

> Everyone in the family has an opinion about the story and I wonder if I've somehow ruined it by getting them involved, somehow broken the retelling so that it won't spin out right on the page. My sister thinks I should put a refugee slant on it, a story for our times, an allegory. (Johnson 2020: 21) [11]

After Christmas with her family, the narrator returns to the city to begin writing in earnest. From here, "A Retelling" develops into a consideration of the narrator's own otherness. She recalls a boyfriend who delighted in pointing out how different she seemed from the rest of her family:

> It was he who had put the thought in my head that I did not belong. All those times he told me I didn't look or act like my family, the small jabs and side glances. It was true. At dinner with my family I eyed their soft features, their rounded bodies and dewy eyes, their hairless limbs and secretive smiles, the way they laughed in the same way, the rolling walk they all shared. I was not like that but I couldn't find the words to ask or comment and I knew that even if I did, I wouldn't want to know what they had said. That they had found me, that they had adopted me, that I was an illegitimate love child. Or none of the above. (Johnson 2020: 29)

The narrator's sense of belonging is jeopardised by these suggestions, which she recalls while reflecting on, and attempting to retell, the green children's story. She gradually isolates herself, holing up in her flat, only emerging to buy essential food supplies. What appears to be the green girl, no longer green and now a wild-looking woman, moves wordlessly into the narrator's flat (25). Water motifs seep through the text – baths, rain, damp patches, steam – connecting to the water from The Lady's Well. The flat becomes damp and algae-tinted. Green patches appear on the narrator's arm where the skin dries and flakes away. A knock to her eye during a playful spat with her sister becomes inflamed and painful,

an apparent inversion of the holy water's eye-healing properties that eventually rights itself, giving way to a weird clear-sightedness towards the end of the story (34).

Johnson's narrator begins to understand that with the act of retelling, she is taking something from the green girl, who "has come back to grasp the story bodily from my hands" (33). The strange woman does not sublimate or contain her potential wildness for the sake of conformity, a refusal apparent in her lack of concern for personal appearance and hygiene. Johnson's narrator gradually develops the same attitude. Returning with the woman to Woolpit, and the site of The Lady's Well, the narrator begins to believe that she is one of the green children too. The pair dig a hole, scooping through collapsing tunnels of animal burrows, numerous and "cave-like" (35). The narrator climbs into the hole. The woman does not join her but covers her with earth, as if returning the narrator to the otherworld of their mutual origin.

At the close of the story, circling back to its opening, the narrator waits underground, as if anticipating a re-emergence (36). Is the narrator a lost green child, a sibling to the green girl? A surrogate? A changeling? Are she and the woman aspects of the same character? Or is she, by extension, The Lady of the Well?

Johnson's narrator is left in the earth of Woolpit, a place where, in the story's bookended form, she began. There is a desire to return to the earth, or at least an acceptance that such a return is appropriate, rather than fearful, when the narrator appears to be buried alive. She is not a green girl, but perhaps she is, at least now, a Green Woman: a feminine incarnation of nature to answer the carved Green Man; a personification of nature's cycle of death and rebirth.[12] Johnson's retelling is feminist and domestic, with a protagonist at odds with her socially prescribed identity.

Isolation and listening for the nonhuman: "Green is the colour"

I cannot say where I first read about the Green Children of Woolpit. 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 UK lockdown. At this stage I had not read Daisy Johnson's "A Retelling", visited Woolpit, or researched variations of the tale, although I was familiar with translations of Ralph and William's accounts.

The strangeness and liminality of the pandemic period seemed, to me, to echo the twilight otherworld of the children's origins. By late 2020, lockdown had become a threshold space between pre- and post-Covid worlds, where people existed in separate bubbles, alienated from each other and the shared spaces of work, leisure and in many cases, home.

In Ralph's account of the tale, the green girl explains that when the children emerged from the underground cavern, they were struck senseless by the "by the brightness of the sun and the unusual warmth of the air" (Clark forthcoming: Appendix). The feel of sunshine and warmth was alien to them; they were so stunned by it they lay helpless on the ground. The girl goes on to state that they were "terrified by the noise of people coming towards them and tried to flee" (Appendix) but could not escape their capture by the Woolpit villagers.

The outside world – the space beyond the bubble – is overwhelming; the prospect of noisy crowds a terror to be fled. In William's version of the story, the children describe their dimly-lit otherworld as a place from which a brighter land can be glimpsed, but not reached:

> "…the sun does not rise among our people. Our land is scarcely illuminated by its rays; it gets only the amount of light that among you precedes sunrise or follows sunset. But one can see a bright land not far from ours, with a very broad river separating the two" (Appendix).

This alienation from a brighter place, a sunlit world of possibility, had a particular resonance in the long winter of a global pandemic. For me, the green children's story aligned itself not with the emergence of physical hunger at a time of abundant harvest, but a barely acknowledged longing for communality at a time of enforced separation. Alongside this, lockdown was a time of highly localised attention, where self and place became progressively entangled. This was something I grew increasingly aware of over an extended period of regular, neighbourhood walks. My retelling is therefore concerned with dislocation and isolation, born from the anxieties of the pandemic and the possibilities of a more localised, rooted existence, as presented by the limitations of lockdown. An extract from my process journal captures the formation of these thoughts:

> 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 climbers, 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. (Overall 2020)

I returned home from this walk and immediately drafted the story. The sense of isolation brought about by reduced social contact, and an amplified awareness of the nonhuman, brought me closer to the green girl's perspective. I wrote the story using a second person narrative with direct address: the piece speaks to the reader as the green girl, the

narrative explaining and directing their actions. Rather like Johnson's emerging Green Woman, my narrative considers the green girl as a creature of the landscape. In "Green is the colour" she is a genius loci made flesh, furtively haunting her place of origin, unable to return to her fully merged, nonhuman state.

Below is the text of the final version, as published in *Neon* magazine (Overall 2021).

Green is the colour

You cannot wait any longer. It is still light, but you are famished. There is a soft rain falling. You hear it through the earth, smell it in the soil. You pause at the tunnel's mouth, feeling the air for sound, for movement. Look out, through the fringes of root and leaf. It is still.

You edge forwards. Your brother clings to you, hooks himself under your arm.

Step out into the half-light, the green tunnel-light, the thick damp air of forest-light. Dusk. You narrow your eyes, squint into it.

Your brother gasps; sighs. Together you breathe hard, sucking it in, the cool thin air of outside: in and out, in and out. You sway a little, your lungs clearing out the bosky sludge of home, your head light with the shocking crispness of it. You laugh, giddy. He laughs. You pick a worm from his hair.

Look up, through the green lace of overhanging branches. The birds are sheltering, roosting close to the tree trunks. You come out, stand together in the clearing, stick out your tongues and drink.

Food. You have learned from the birds, those chattering, speckled ones, which berries are sweetest. There are still some left in the tangle of thicket, purple and squashy. When they are gone, what then? Before the berries you chewed the stems of feathery ground plants and,

as they pushed out from their thorny twigs, pale green leaves from the tall bushes beyond the clearing. They filled your mouth with bitter juices.

It is getting harder. It will be winter soon. Within the tunnel, the earth is warm, moss-lined and loamy. But the nights will lengthen; the frosts will come. There will be snow. You have seen a squirrel making its larder. You should do the same, but there is not enough to save for later. You are always hungry.

Your brother tugs your skirt. His wrist is bone-narrow. Yours too.

The rain glazes everything, leaves it slick. You stand listening to the dripping of leaves. Years from now, it will be this moment you come back to, wonder at: how you stood there, the two of you, unseen and unseeing, that very last time.

The man has a cudgel, a knife. Over one shoulder is a rope. A pair of rabbits hang from it, long downy feet first, heads swinging together, blood at their mouths. Their eyes are glassy. You think, for a moment, that this is what will become of you. You freeze, as you have seen such rabbits do when surprised. If you do not move, do not breathe, he may overlook you. Your brother grips and twists and writhes and you hold out your hand to him. He may bolt, reveal you, run for the tunnel and the man will follow. But he does not move. In the end, it just takes the man to turn his head and it is all over.

He looks at you both, looks beyond you. He says something you cannot understand, but you know from that knife, from that cudgel, that it is useless to argue. You cannot run now. You tell him that you are hungry. He frowns. He holds out his hand and you follow him: out to the forest edge, across fields, towards the village. It is darkening now, the moon rising. The man leads you to a house, through a doorway, into his world.

There is a fire, a woman, a child. The woman points at you, speaks rapidly. Her words are strange, all long vowels and akk-akk-akk. The child is plump and white and pink and

moist. Its mouth makes circles at you. The woman reaches for a light on a hook and brings it near you, holds it up to your face, makes you wince and recoil. She lets out a hissing noise, crosses herself. The man grabs at your wrist, rolls back your sleeve. In this room, in this strange light and heat, your skin seems greener than ever.

They try to feed you. Dishes of hot, pulpy matter, broken pieces of something moss-like and pale. It sickens you. Your brother cries. He crawls under the table. You join him there and, as the fire spits and the rain falls outside and the man and woman talk and argue low in their strange voices you huddle together and fall asleep.

In the morning they take you outside. There is a garden. You find some beans and strip the fat pods, stuffing your mouths. They watch you, muttering. Later, the woman shows you how to make the beans soft in a pot with water, over the fire. You eat them, blowing on each bean to cool it. She nods and smiles.

Days pass. Your brother will not eat. He dries out, bones shining through his green skin like the raised veins of a leaf. Brittle. He begs you with his eyes, but you cannot return. You have eaten their food now. You do not want to wither and waste and become another root in the tunnel, away from the light and air. You watch him die, the last of the green seeping away with him as your skin fades through ash to white to blush. His breath smells of earth. He will be happier there.

You learn to speak their words. You learn to make their bread. The woman makes you clothes, binds your hair, washes you with a wet cloth when you bleed.

The people of the village watch you, wary. Changeling, they call you. The women are mistrustful. The men are curious. As you grow, they measure you with their eyes. Some test you with their hands. They want to raise the green to your skin again. You disappoint them, your bruises blue-brown, your cries of pain or pleasure universal. After the first time, you go

back to the forest, longing for the tunnel. You call out for your brother, but your mouth is stopped, like the entrance to your old home, bound by ivy and leaf litter. The words of your first tongue are choked, forgotten, lost.

You have tried so hard to blend in that you have become them. Stay, then. Choose a man that pleases you. Have his children. Know that the green runs through them as it does through you, buried deep. Tell those who will listen tales of how you came to be here. Change the story a little with each telling. Do not tell them, your husband, your children, that you are just passing the time, waiting it out until you can once more lie beneath the sweet green knots of grass.

The green girl, all grown up

Looking again at the early sources, I can see how Ralph's version has fed into my own retelling of the green children's 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 does not conform to human norms, refuses 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, roughly forty miles south-east of Woolpit on the Suffolk coast, shares interesting parallels, as Ralph himself notes (Ralph [1207] 1875: 118). The green children emerge from the ground, the wild man from the sea, both entering the human world through an element in

the landscape that is beyond 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. 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 the green girl is no longer remarkable. Although she may still be alive when William writes his chronicle, he does not attempt to discover her whereabouts. Ralph hears stories of her immodesty from the de Calne household but is not moved to find out about her later life. No one keeps an account of what happens when the strange green girl is no longer girl, green or strange.

There is some appeal in the prospect that the green girl may have had children; that her descendants may have existed in East Anglia for many years; that they may still be among us. Such complete integration into the community feels like fitting closure for the green children, embracing and incorporating their otherness, but perhaps this is why William and Ralph's accounts neglect to include it. Once the rareness of the green children's appearance wears off, the wonder loses its shine. Despite the chroniclers' *admiriatio*, which leads them to reflect upon and reach for the meaning of this wonder tale, there is little narrative traction in providing a neat human resolution to it.

Otherness is also at play in the social differences of those given leave to reflect on and puzzle out the wonder tale as it happens. As Elizabeth Freeman points out, "the inspection and understanding of the wonderful seems to have been the preserve of the local elite" (Freeman 2000: 132). It is to the local knight that the green children are led for *admiratio*. As a writer, I am conscious of the fortunate position I find myself in when offering a re-interpretation and unpacking of this wonder tale on my own terms. Daisy Johnson seems to

be similarly aware of this, a form of ownership, when her narrator wrestles with the 'summoning' her retelling creates (Johnson 2020: 31;33). Perhaps my curiosity about what becomes of the green girl in later life – a curiosity reflected in Johnson's retelling – demonstrates not only a feminist, 21st century perspective, but a luxury of perspective otherwise denied the 12th century villagers of Woolpit.

Since writing "Green is the colour" I have visited Woolpit and, like Johnson and her narrator, explored the terrain of the green children's story. It is a quaint village, a rural English idyll of timber frame and thatch. There are houses decorated with pink stucco; chimneys like rolled brandy snaps and twisted barley sugar. There is a cosy tearoom serving homemade Victoria Sponge (open for my visit, if not for Johnson's narrator). The old lock-up in Green Lane is the size of a tool shed, suggesting this has been a place of small deviances rather than grand crimes. Echoes of the green children's medieval world ring through the fabric of this place. Johnson's inclusion of the carvings in St Mary's church is apt: the strange creatures I noted on my visit reminded me of the gothic pews of M. R. James's ghost story "The Stalls of Barchester" (James [1910] 1974), with effigies capable of shifting into animation beneath an unexpecting hand. What appear to be figures in Tudor clothing are scratched into the lintel of the church porch window, and there are visible graffiti dates from the 1600s. The torso of a stone woodwose (wild man of the woods), holding a club, is propped up on a deep windowsill that displays a scattering of other finds and relics: partially burned candles, weathered carvings, prehistoric flint tools. A worn Green Man peers out from the choir stall. Fragments of early stained glass contain a leaping deer and a man riding a pig. Despite the church pamphlet's rather vehement downplaying of The Lady's Well – "There is no hard evidence of any kind that the well was also the site of the chapel of our Lady of Woolpit or that it was a site of pilgrimage" (Woolpit History Group 2023) – this is a place that feels attuned to hosting weird happenings and wonder tales.

Why do we need stories like the Green Children of Woolpit? Why do we keep retelling them? As we have seen, the story has served as a wellspring for diverse theories and interpretations. The green children offer a neat 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. But perhaps stories like this can also serve to re-enchant us, to bring us back to fascination with place and landscape, and to remind us that, when we tame the green, and all otherness is gone, we risk finding ourselves at the end of wonder.

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Notes

[1] Translations of Ralph's and William's accounts are provided by John Clark, who has generously shared these with me ahead of publication; see Clark (forthcoming).

[2] See for example Walter Map's accounts of apparitions (*aparicionibus*) in *De nugis curalium* (1193) and Gervase of Tilbury's wonders (*mirabilia*) in *Otia imperialia* (1211).

[3] As Ronald Hutton states, categorisation of these encounter narratives is problematic for the chroniclers when no suitable terminology exists "either in Christian cosmology or established

folk belief… [t]hey strove to find a language for the beings portrayed in the reports, as the range of terms available did not quite describe the kind of phenomenon being discussed" (Hutton 2014: 1139).

[4] Hutton (2014: 1138-9).

[5] See also John Clark's discussion of claims that beans are food of the dead and St Martin's Land connects to the feast of Martinmas (Clark 2006b): Clark is unconvinced by any connection between Martinmas, the world of the dead, or a medieval belief in St Martin's Land as "a fairy Otherworld", due to lack of corroborative evidence (208). Clark suggests that by focussing on the symbolism of beans, we overlook the motif of mortal food as dangerous to fairy folk, and notes that in Keightley's translation of Ralph, the children refuse "bread and other ordinary food", believing all foodstuffs "of this sort" inedible (211).

[6] Diverse origin theories have been revisited and reviewed extensively elsewhere and there is little purpose in repeating them here. John Clark has become an authority on the green children's many incarnations: at the time of writing, he is drawing together a catalogue of origin theories, retellings and creative works seeded by elements of the green children's story, stretching back to Francis Godwin's *The Man in the Moone* (Godwin [1638]1657): see Clark (2023) for a useful summary and bibliography.

[7] Campbell implies there is some insistence on proof and veracity here: the weight, or directness, of testimony is a reason for the story's inclusion by both chroniclers (Campbell 2016: 120-121).

[8] For a pithy summary of the story's vast and diverse influence on literature, see Clark (2006: 209).

[9] Familiarity with the area, or a brief study of toponomy with the assistance of OS maps, helps us to place the 'action' of the green children's story in a defined geographical radius, without recourse to sites beyond East Anglia. William's account records the green girl's

marriage "*apud Lennam*", expressed as "Lynne" by Stephenson (1861: 436) and "Lynn" by Clark (forthcoming: Appendix). Bishop's Lynn, renamed King's Lynn following the Reformation, is roughly 45 miles northwest of Woolpit in the neighbouring county of Norfolk. This is the furthest from Woolpit that the story strays. Ralph notes that the green children are taken to the home of Richard de Calne at Wykes: "*apud Wikes*" (Ralph [1207] 1875: 119). Wikes or Wykes Hall could be in the footings of Bardwell Hall (Historic Environment Record for Suffolk 2023: BAR 070), some 8 miles north of Woolpit. The hall is an imposing, impressive building on Low Road, on the south edge of Bardwell; medieval stone fragments are listed in the south end of the extant Elizabethan house (Historic England 1955). A route from Woolpit to here passes Wyken Vineyards, on Wyken Lane, suggesting a retention of the place-name in the immediate locale. A much later 'Wyken Hall' (Historic Environment Record for Suffolk 2023: BAR069) is recorded as a 16th century manor farmhouse) on Wyken Lane, between Bardwell and Walsham-le-Willows. A 'manor farm' is recorded to the east of Spring Lane, in the north of Bardwell village (Map of Suffolk 1881-93); the earlier first series OS map (Map of Suffolk 1837) unhelpfully places 'Bardwell Hall' in this area. Wherever Richard's manor house was, whether now built upon or ploughed in, there is plenty of evidence for 'Wikes' persisting in and around Bardwell, Suffolk.

[10] Johnson's doctor echoes the suggestion by Paul Harris that the children suffered from chlorosis or "green sickness", a form of anaemia (Harris 1998: 89).

[11] Larrington sourced the traditional tales for retelling in the original Audible series *Hag* (Audible 2019) and expresses some disappointment that Johnson's retelling boxes shy of "the migrant issue", choosing instead to "focus on alienation from and failure to assimilate within the norms of family life and modern middle-class aspirations" (Larrington 2023: 152-153).

[12] For discussions of the Green Man mythos in relation to the green children story, see Clark (2006b: 211-12); the adoption of Green Man symbolism into contemporary folk culture is

evident in twentieth century revival customs and the new folk activist movement, as personified in Ben Edge's artwork (2021).