

MELTING IN THE DAYLIGHT:

The Asrai's emergence in modern myth

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ABSTRACT: The Asrai is a nocturnal fairy popularly attributed to British folklore, most memorable for the fact that any exposure to sunlight will cause it to melt into water. Rather than developing from oral folk tradition, like most legendary creatures, the Asrai may have originated and evolved through literary sources, beginning with the poetry of the Scottish author Robert Buchanan in the 1870s. Since appearing in a folklore account of uncertain provenance in 1970, the Asrai has come into use as a fantasy creature with international spread, developing in a dialogue between print media and the Internet.

KEYWORDS: Asrai, fairies, mermaids, folklore

Introduction

The Asrai occasionally appears in lists of mythical creatures, usually serving to flesh out an idea of a legendary world populated by countless varieties of fairies. Folktales that circulate online can blend with older sources or evolve in new, independent directions (Hallerton, 2016), and the Asrai's appearances in modern fiction and Internet sources borrow and build upon each other. Specific details can differ, but the basic concept is that of a water fairy which perishes if exposed to daylight. Their fragile nature and vulnerability to humans reverse a common conception of fairies as unpredictable, perilous beings. Various sources attribute the legend to Wales, Scotland, Cheshire, Shropshire, or Cornwall, but there is little to indicate that it ever featured in folk belief. Its earliest known print appearances were in fiction: the poetry of Robert Williams Buchanan, a 19th century Scottish poet and playwright. It might have been lost to obscurity if not for the folktale collections of English writer Ruth Tongue a century later. Buchanan often took inspiration from Greek, Celtic and Scandinavian mythology, and Tongue's collections have been given as evidence that his two Asrai poems were loosely based on an English tradition. However, as will be explored in this article, it is more probable that Buchanan's poetry sparked any later legend, and that the Asrai was a literary creation.

Robert Buchanan

Scottish by descent, Robert Williams Buchanan was born in Lancashire in 1841 and raised in Glasgow. He pursued a writing career, moving to London in 1860. His poem 'The Asrai' was first published in April 1872 in *The Saint Pauls Magazine*. It describes the peaceful, quiet Asrai – primordial beings made of fire, water, and air – in contrast with passionate humans. Buchanan followed this three years later with 'The Changeling: A legend of the moonlight.'

In this longer narrative, one of the Asrai (introduced this time as lake-dwelling spirits made of dew, air, and moonlight) wishes for her baby to have a soul like humans, and so sends him to inhabit the body of a human infant who has just died. The changeling grows up among humans but is corrupted by their hedonistic society. Finally, he repents and becomes a monk. As he dies of old age, he leaves his human body and becomes an Asrai again. His mother, who has been secretly watching over him all this time, calls him home. However, he has successfully gained a soul and must move on to the afterlife, never to see her again (Buchanan, 1875, pp. 119-130).

The two Asrai poems reflect Buchanan's love of nature, his strict morals, and his interest in mysticism. With the Asrai's lack of immortal souls, there is a hint of the elemental beings from the writings of the Swiss philosopher Paracelsus. Buchanan might have read *Undine* (1811) or 'The Little Mermaid' (1837), both popular narratives about water spirits or mermaids entering the human world to win souls. It seems especially likely that Buchanan read 'The Little Mermaid' as he spoke Danish fluently and had met Hans Christian Andersen during a visit to Denmark (Jay, 1903, p. 101). Buchanan himself had adapted the related archetype of the fairy barred from salvation in his poem 'The Minister and the Elfin' (1865). 'The Changeling' questions the premise of these previous works that civilisation and Christianity are inherently superior to nature and paganism. Buchanan had a complicated relationship with Christianity and organised religion throughout his life, and in later years became far more negative towards them (Parisot, 2011). 'The Changeling' may be an early indication of this shift.

The 1870s were a tumultuous period for Buchanan. When he published 'The Asrai,' he had finally found recognition and financial success as a writer. (It seems that he was effectively editing *The Saint Pauls Magazine* himself at this point, based on how many of his poems appeared there (Murray, p. 157).) But he was also at the centre of a growing controversy, having recently written an article titled 'The Fleshly School of Poetry' which condemned other popular poetry as sensual and immoral. The poets he targeted included such names as Algernon Charles Swinburne and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. People quickly wrote rebuttals, and it became a public feud with long-lasting repercussions that tainted Buchanan's reputation and career (Murray, 1974, pp. 154-155).

There is little information about the writing of 'The Asrai,' but some about 'The Changeling.' The sequel poem came about when Robert Edward Francillon was assigned to write the novella that comprised the Christmas edition of *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1875. He received instructions to commission a poem by Buchanan, another frequent contributor; the poem was meant to play an 'essential' part in the novella. Francillon had never interacted with Buchanan but was part of Swinburne and Rossetti's circle and had gained a bad impression of him from the 'Fleshly School' debacle. He reluctantly wrote to Buchanan, then living in Connaught, Ireland. Francillon had a specific folklore inspiration in mind:

as the scene was to be laid in Merionethshire, he might find inspiration in the legend of the Fairy city at the bottom of the Lake of Bala. That would have suited me very well indeed. (Francillon, 1913, p. 223).

He was pleasantly surprised by Buchanan's friendly response:

MY DEAR SIR, I am obliged to you for your kind letter concerning the 'Legend.' I see no difficulty just now – if any occurs to me afterwards you shall know – of incorporating in it the elements you suggest; and the Bala Lake Tradition, too,

might be utilised. But, in truth, I have hardly yet had leisure to shape the plan definitely. When I do so I will follow your views as far as I can (Francillon, 1913, p. 223).

It is unclear what legend Francillon meant, but the most familiar story of Lake Bala is that an ancient city lies at the bottom of the lake ever since being flooded as punishment for some transgression. This worldwide tale type has been applied to many lakes in Wales (North, 1957). The Bala Lake version is not usually connected to fairies; Francillon could have heard some oral account, or this might be an example of a Victorian writer romanticising and prettifying a folk story. Sir Edward George Bulwer Lytton's poem 'King Arthur' (1848/9) places a nocturnal fairy encounter at Lake Bala, although it is unclear whether this was based on folklore or imagination (Simpson, 1997, p. 129). The area was also associated with the mythical figures of Tegid Foel and Ceridwen. There are myriad Welsh legends of lakes and fairies, and it would be easy to get lost in hunting for Francillon's inspirations. But as far as Buchanan, this line of questioning is irrelevant.

'The Changeling' arrived late, after Francillon had already done extensive on-site research in Merionethshire and written most of the novella, entitled *Streaked with Gold*. The poem did not mention Lake Bala or Wales and was so disconnected that Francillon was forced to work it in as a dream sequence. As Francillon stated, Buchanan "had evidently forgotten all my requirements and suggestions, and had written 'The Changeling' *à propos* of nothing but his own inspiration" (Francillon, 1913, p. 226). He wrote similarly elsewhere that "a microscope was wanted for the discovery of an infinitesimal phantom of an allusion to the 'Fair Folk' who inhabit the depths of the Lake of Bala" (Jay, 1903, p. 199). Despite all of this, Francillon ultimately expressed a better impression of Buchanan and an appreciation for the poem.

It seems telling that Francillon did not recognise the Asrai. But then what was Buchanan's inspiration? He could have already written the first poem in 1872 as an adaptation of some British legend of which Francillon was unaware. Alternately, he may have created the name himself and changed a few details – such as transplanting them to an underwater home – to make them fit with Francillon's suggestions. This option would fit with Buchanan's repertoire as an imaginative and prolific author. It is entirely credible that he could have invented the Asrai's name. There is a third, faint possibility. Buchanan studied various languages including French, German, Latin, and Greek. He was unusually fluent in Danish for an Englishman of his time and at one point worked in Denmark as a newspaper correspondent. He took an interest in Scandinavian culture, as seen in his translations of ballads. The words *asrai*, *asraj*, and other constructions appear in the Uralic language family, which spans from Scandinavia to Siberia. *Asrai* means 'devil' in Lule Sámi, which is spoken in Sweden and northern Norway (Wiklund, 1890, p. 3). In Russia, the Mansi *asrai* may be associated with water demons, and one theory links it via Turkish to 'Azrael,' the name of the angel of death (Karjalainen, 1918, p. 381). Might the Asrai's name be rooted in Sámi language? There are other languages with similar words, but the Uralic terms are unique in having a comparable meaning and a location that demonstrably interested Buchanan. However, the only contemporary account – Francillon's – suggests that Buchanan worked from his own imagination. Only decades later would the concept that the Asrai were from folklore come to attention, and this approach was specifically focused on the Welsh border.

The collections of Ruth Tongue

In 1970, British storyteller Ruth Lyndall Tongue published her book *Forgotten Folk-Tales of the English Counties*. One story, from Cheshire and Shropshire, dealt with a little-known lake spirit: the Asrai, or Asrey. These are a long-lived race, visibly aging only when they surface in the moonlight once every hundred years, so that it takes many centuries for them to look even as old as human adolescents. They have green hair and webbed hands and feet. They are gentle and peaceful, but still to be respected – as seen from the tale of a fisherman who, out fishing on the lake one night, brought up an Asrai in his nets. The delicate fairy pleaded in an unintelligible language and tried to get free, but he decided to take her home to show to his children and sell for money. He reached shore as the sun rose, only to discover that the Asrai had melted into a puddle of water. Her touch on his arm, although initially cool, had left an icy mark that remained for the rest of his life (Tongue, 1970, pp. 24-26).

The existence of Tongue's collection frames Buchanan's Asrai poems as adaptations of a legend from the England-Wales border. Today, her version is far more well-known and influential than his. However, critics have cast doubts on the reliability of her work as a record of folklore. Tongue was a well-educated writer and storyteller with a background in drama who entered the field of folklore study when the prominent folklorist Katharine Mary Briggs discovered her as a source. Tongue eventually began publishing her own collections of tales and songs, all presented as traditional. She constructed much of her work from memory. As she once remarked regarding some lost notes, "I'll probably have to re-write it – it doesn't do any harm, it's good for the soul" (Patten, 2001, p. 212). Some of her stories are recognisable and attested in independent sources, but others are strikingly unfamiliar, and her body of work is characterised by a distinct authorial style, unique narratives, and vague sources. Folk musician Douglas Kennedy described Tongue's citations as "elusive, almost evasive" and remarked, in "re-creating these songs for our pleasure, I wonder does she know where the old country singers leave off and where she herself begins?" (Kennedy, 1968). In a harsher summation, researcher Jeremy Harte wrote, "It was part of Ruth's genius to produce stories that fitted the contemporary understanding of what folk tales should be." He also noted that Tongue sometimes consulted other folklore collections for inspiration (Harte, 2001, pp. 19-20). In one such case, Tongue implied that she personally collected the story 'The Croydon Devil claims his own' from an oral source, but John B. Smith found numerous indications that it was patterned on an older print publication and "shows every sign of being a retelling... down to small details of topography" (Smith, 2005, pp. 69-71). As one biography concluded, Ruth Tongue "should be regarded as a creative singer and storyteller reworking fragments of tradition, not as a reliable collector" (Simpson and Roud, 2003). I would argue that her reworked fragments came not only from tradition, but from works of fiction.

Tongue was telling 'The Asrai' as early as 1967 (Briggs, 1967/2002, p. 267). In *Forgotten Folk-Tales*, she included two variants of the story. The first is attributed to Cheshire, with its source given as "The Whitchurch Collection (Shropshire)". I have been unable to identify this collection. For the second, from "Cheshire, Shropshire or the North-West," Tongue cites her own "recollections of an account in local papers published between 1875 and 1912" (1970, pp. 24-26).¹ As published, this gives the impression that Tongue is recounting stories from two different sources, but they are so similar in structure, style, and details that the reader must wonder why both were included. She also included some fragmentary mentions from

¹ A different set of dates, 1915-22, was given in *A Dictionary of British Folk-Tales*. This reprint misidentifies Robert Buchanan as Robert Graves (Briggs, 1971, pp. 177-178).

around the Welsh border, such as the name “Asrai nights” for full moon nights and a suggestion that the name was a local term for a newt or eel, perhaps referencing the Shropshire dialect word *askal* or *asker* (Jackson, 1879, p. 13). Another account mentions a man with a mysterious burn scar said to be the result of trying to capture an Asrai – a third version of the tale Tongue has just told twice. Altogether, her list of anecdotes implies a somewhat popular tale. She presented these in a way that indicates that she recorded them from oral sources, but some of them are confusing. For instance, Tongue – born in 1898 – could not possibly have collected information from “E. Jones” of Brown Moss, Whitchurch in 1899.²

Although she was clearly well-versed in folk tradition, Tongue’s work often seems informed by print media. Scholars have pointed out the abundance of otherwise-unknown creatures in Tongue’s stories (Patten, 2001, p. 215). Often, when an unfamiliar fairy appeared in Tongue’s work, there was some older source mentioning at least the name. She frequently revealed that popular novels, poems and idioms were inspired by obscure legends which she was the first to collect (Harte, 2001, p. 20-21). In some cases, sources closer to the authors would seem to go against this. She hinted that William Wordsworth’s poem ‘The Danish Boy’ was based in legend (Tongue, 1965, p. 100), whereas Wordsworth himself called the poem “entirely a fancy” (Curtis, 1993, p. 12). She presented Beatrix Potter’s description of “oakmen” as evidence of a local tale (Tongue, 1970, pp. 16-18); Leslie Linder’s study of Potter’s work implies that the oakmen were a copyrightable concept (Linder, 1971, pp. 240-242). In the same way, Francillon’s comments on ‘The Changeling’ call the Asrai’s folkloric basis into question. If the Asrai were from an area near Wales, as Tongue maintains, then it seems more likely that Francillon would have recognised the name.

Tongue’s ‘Asrai’ does include many familiar motifs: the captured mermaid, the nocturnal fairy (not unlike trolls petrified by daylight), and the permanent mark after an encounter with Faery. Green hair is common in Tongue’s accounts of mermaids and sea-morgans (Tongue, 1970, pp. 28, 100).

Two sources mentioned in supplemental notes seem especially pertinent. The first is ‘The Changeling: A Legend of the Moonlight,’ with Buchanan’s poetry mentioned alongside Tongue’s version of the Asrai in multiple books by Katharine Briggs, Tongue’s mentor and frequent collaborator. Buchanan’s narrative is quite different from Tongue’s, but there are still numerous parallels. Not only is there an association with Wales due to the rest of the *Streaked with Gold* novel, but Buchanan’s Asrai are “[c]old... as the pale moonbeam.” They may be small; the changeling is mentioned as growing “to a mortal’s height” (1975 p. 123). They live beneath a lake, emerging only to see the moon:

*...But ever, by night,
When the moon arose with her gentle light,
The Asrai, hidden from human seeing,
Drank the moonlight that was their being* (Buchanan, 1875, pp. 120-121).

Buchanan explains that the Asrai existed before the sun, and when it first appeared, “[t]he pallid Asrai faded away!” (1975 p. 120). While it is not clear whether this is a literal melting as in Tongue’s story, the character of the Asrai mother does seem pained by both daylight

² When a reviewer questioned a similar citation in Tongue’s folk-song collection, *The Chime Child*, Tongue responded that there was an intermediate, unidentified source who told her both the song and the date (Tongue, 1968).

and firelight and only comes out in the dark. Finally, among the poem's themes, humans are established as flawed and greedy, unlike the gentle and pure Asrai. It is perhaps worth noting that Tongue dated one of her Asrai sources between 1875 and 1912; 'The Changeling' was first published in 1875.

The second source is a Scottish tale which Tongue mentions in comparison to 'The Asrai' in *Forgotten Folk-Tales* (1970, p. 26). This story comes from J. F. Campbell's collection and deals with a female kelpie, also called a Fuath or Vough:

One of John Bethune's forebears, who lived in Tubernan, laid a bet that he would seize the kelpie of Moulin na Fouah and bring her bound to the inn at Inveran. He procured a brown, right-sided, maned horse, and a brown black-muzzled dog; and, by the help of the latter, having secured the Vough, he tied her on the horse behind him, and galloped away. She was very fierce, but he kept her quiet by pinning her down with an awl and a needle. Crossing the burn at the further side of Loch Midgal, she became so restless that he stuck the shoemaker's and the tailor's weapons into her with great violence. She cried out, "Pierce me with the awl, but keep that slender hair-like slave (the needle) out of me." When he reached the clachan of Inveran, where his companions were anxiously waiting for him, he called to them to come out and see the Vough. Then they came out with lights, but as the light fell upon her she dropt off, and fell to earth like the remains of a fallen star – a small lump of jelly (Campbell, 1860, pp. 190-191).

This story is a mythical explanation for star jelly, an unidentified gelatinous substance found on the ground. Other accounts also described kelpies whose bodies dissolved at death, whether into jellyfish-like goo or starch (Spence, 1999, p. 95; Gregor, 1881, p. 66). Campbell characterised the Fuath as humanoid water spirits, male or female, with "web-feet, yellow hair, green dresses, tails, manes, and no noses" (Campbell, 1860, p. 191), but earned his own share of criticism for amalgamating these traits from different stories (Campbell, 1902, 188-189). There are similar accounts elsewhere of captured fairies who vanish before they can be shown to others. A Dartmoor tale features a riverside encounter at dusk between a woman and a possibly malevolent pixy. She turned the tables by trapping him in a basket and taking him along with her. He began talking in an incomprehensible language, but eventually stopped; when she looked inside, she discovered the basket empty. The assumption is that the pixy escaped by shapeshifting (Crossing, 1890, pp. 50-52). In a French story, the fairy known as La Dame de la Font-Chancela would always appear by moonlight near a certain fountain. A lord seized her and tried to carry her off on his horse, but she vanished from his arms, leaving him with a frozen sensation that lasted over a year (Laisnel de la Salle, 1875, p. 188). All of these stories display motifs in common with Tongue's 'Asrai.' The fact that all three stories take place near water may be explained by the way that water was considered a liminal space. In these accounts, unlike some other captured-fairy stories, the fairy cannot be removed from its natural liminal existence. In some cases, the fairy's disappearance seems like an intentional escape, but the Fuath (and the Asrai) evidently die.

Tongue's account ultimately represents a synthesis of tradition, literature, and imagination. The plot of her Asrai story parallels Campbell's tale of the Fuath. The Asrai's name and characteristics, as well as the story's mood and themes and the unusual sympathy towards the fairy creature, evoke 'The Changeling: A Legend of the Moonlight.' The main point that the stories have in common is the water spirit who can be driven away or harmed by light. Other than Tongue's work, I have been unable to locate any first-hand records of folktales featuring the Asrai. It seems that the story may now circulate locally, as seen in the work of

storyteller Amy Douglas, who linked it to the lake of Ellesmere in Shropshire and indicated that there were oral accounts. However, she cited *Forgotten Folk-Tales* as a main source (Douglas, 2011, p. 182). In addition, this was decades after Tongue's work had achieved wide circulation and cannot establish anything about folk tradition prior to that.

Reference works and fairy bestiaries

The Asrai appears in numerous fairy dictionaries and folklore collections which draw on Tongue. In contrast, Buchanan's version of the Asrai has rarely been mentioned. Katharine Briggs reprinted Tongue's story in her *Dictionary of British Folktales* (1971, pp. 177-178) and listed the Asrai in her *Encyclopedia of Fairies* (1976, pp. 10-11), which has become a standard reference work. Brian Froud and Alan Lee's influential art book *Faeries* (1978), deeply inspired by Briggs' *Encyclopedia*, depicts the Asrai as a pale, slender woman. She appears to be suspended in a stream of water but has no obviously inhuman characteristics.

In Nancy Arrowsmith's cult classic *A Field Guide to the Little People*, the entry for Asrai is based on Tongue's description, but shows a few generalisations that subtly alter the story. Arrowsmith's Asrai are always female and stand two to four feet tall, never growing larger than children. Arrowsmith also mentions that "[o]nce a man has viewed their beauty, he tries to capture them" (1977, pp. 246-247). This is an oversimplification of Tongue's stories, in opposition to Tongue's description of the asrai as "beautiful *men and women*" (1970, p. 24 – my emphasis).

In *A Witch's Guide to Faery Folk* (1994), Neopagan author Edain McCoy gave the name as "Ashrays" or "Water Lovers" and attributed them to Scotland. In some ways, McCoy's Ashrays resemble the accounts already mentioned: they are ancient yet appear youthful, and will melt (into a "rainbow pool of water") if touched by sunlight. They are translucent and ghostlike, and there are both males and females. In a unique touch, McCoy suggests that they are morally ambiguous, perhaps dangerous, and that they live underwater due to a punishment for some long-ago misdeed (pp. 176-177). The novelties seem to be embellishments in McCoy's typical style; she frequently used her own loose interpretations of history and religion (Hautin-Mayer, 1998). It is true that Robert Buchanan was Scottish, although it is unclear how much McCoy might have drawn from him. Not long after its publication, entire sections of the *Witch's Guide* were circulated on various websites.³ This was perhaps the Asrai's introduction to Internet culture.

More recently, Rosalind Kerven's retelling of the Asrai story transformed the tone and implications. This version begins with a seductive, fish-tailed Asrai trying to tempt a man into the water with an offer of treasure. However, she flees when he curses in surprise. His attempt to find her again leads into a rendition of Tongue's fisherman story (Kerven, 2008, pp. 118-123). In her notes, Kerven clarifies that this is "actually a combination of two related Shropshire anecdotes" (p. 186). These two anecdotes are Tongue's Asrai story and 'The Child's Ercall Marmed', originally published in *Shropshire Folk-lore: A Sheaf of Gleanings* (Jackson & Burne, 1883, p. 78-79). Kerven encountered both stories in Briggs' *Dictionary of British Folk-Tales*, under the section dealing with fairies (1971, pp. 177-178, 202-203). Although the settings are similar, the details are at odds, sometimes awkwardly so. Kerven transforms Tongue's two-legged Asrai into a mermaid complete with fish tail. The Child's

³ Many of these websites are now defunct and only accessible through the Wayback Machine's archive, but the earliest examples I located were from 1996 and 1997.

Ercall mermaid is a predatory force akin to the classical siren, and it may have originally been the name of God rather than generic vulgarity that warded her off. Although there is an ominous sense around Asrai-haunted waters in Tongue's mythos, her Asrai are "gentle and good and very shy" (Tongue, 1970, p. 24). The Child's Ercall mermaid is quite talkative, requiring Kerven to insert an explanation on why the Asrai suddenly cannot communicate once captured. Her version, without the clarifying note on authorial changes, has since circulated on the Internet. This re-telling places the Asrai in the same category as water-dwelling bogeywomen like Jenny Greenteeth. As one scholar put it, "The most intriguing aspect of the asrai belief is the combination of predatory danger and vulnerability when caught" (Kruse, 2018).



Figure 1 - Closeup of treasure-bearing Asrai from Parkinson (2022)

Modern fiction and Internet usage

Today there is no central, standardised image of the Asrai. With numerous adaptations in existence for creators to draw from, it is diverging from its origins. It appears in books, art, music – a gothic metal band donned the name in 1987 (*History*, n.d.) – and many Internet posts and discussions. Asrai (with pronunciation given as “as-rye”) appear in the urban fantasy novel *One Salt Sea* as “tiny, silver-haired people who could have passed for children, if not for the decades . . . reflected in their eyes” (McGuire, 2011, pp. x, 176). There is a minor novelty in their magic of creating wards and sensing emotions. In an official profile created for *Dungeons and Dragons*, the Asrai are introduced as golden-haired faeries “no more than 4½ in height” (sic) who travel in a school and will nibble food on the surface “like minnows” (Hunt, 1993, p.97) They have a lifespan of nine years, after which they dissolve into water and split into several new Asrai. They travel in schools like fish, dancing in the water to hypnotise people or teaming up to carry prized pearls and other shiny objects. As in previous versions, they love moonlight and fear sunlight; they will die instantly if they leave the water (Hunt, 1993).

Illustrations vary, with Asrai depicted as humanoids, fish-tailed mermaids, winged fairies (Figure 2), or any number of combinations. One online artist characterised the Asrai as a

Allison: The Asrai's emergence in modern myth

jellyfish-like mermaid from the deep ocean which will “become a shapeless blob” if removed from the water. In a clever touch, their icy burning touch is explained as toxic tentacles (theSigmaFox, 2021). Another artist depicted the Asrai as a humanoid girl made of water, holding a parasol to protect herself from the sun (Reina MintChip, 2018).

However, the Asrai remains obscure, and these depictions tend to be scattered. On the roleplaying-based, encyclopedia-esque *Warriors of Myth* website, the Asrai page includes several image files. However, most of the file names are terms like “water fairy,” “naiad,” “mermaid,” or “nixie.” Several are difficult to trace to a source, possibly stemming from now-deleted webpages, but their labels indicate that they were not originally intended as depictions of Asrai (Fandom contributors, 2023). The webpage creators may have had difficulty finding appropriate images of the Asrai, which lacks an older body of illustrations.

A few trends show that the Asrai is changing and developing in modern retellings. Some adjustments seem fairly minor, the result of repetition and miscommunication. The Wikipedia page for Asrai describes them as “standing 2–4 ft (0.61–1.22 m) tall, or may be depicted as tall and lithe” (Wikipedia, 2023). The phrasing juxtaposes Nancy Arrowsmith’s description with one reader’s interpretation of Froud’s and Lee’s illustration, which is the source cited. This has evidently spread, with one blog post describing the fairies as “either really short or really tall” (Reina MintChip, 2018) or, as in one fantasy novel featuring Asrai, “[s]ome were short, others tall. They were translucent with long, flowing green hair” (Peake, 2021).



Figure 2 - Ashray by LuisaDraws, October 2020

Other trends illustrate a deeper shift in the way that creators adapt the concept. The Asrai appears as a more dynamic figure, specifically turning the vulnerability of Tongue’s Asrai into a magical power of melting and re-forming. This theme appears in fantasy works such

as Louise Bradley's *Rebecca's Quest* (2001, p. 86), Anya Bast's *Midnight Enchantment* (2012), and *The Black Witch Chronicles* by Laurie Forest (2020). Forest's Asrai bear particular mention. They are human in size, with hair and skin in shifting blue shades like water. They display no apparent reactions to sunlight or moonlight; instead, in addition to their transforming ability, they have powers of hydrokinesis and weather manipulation. The most prominent Asrai character, Tierney, was raised in disguise among another race – a premise with some similarities to Buchanan's poem (Forest, 2020, 128-148). Hydrokinetic weather abilities are also attributed to the Asrai on the *Warriors of Myth* website, demonstrating that this characterisation is spreading.

A malevolent side of the Asrai, suggested by McCoy and Kerven, occasionally finds expression. A novel published online through the website Wattpad features the Asrai as a herd of hideous, skeletal mermaids who use beautiful song to entice men into their lake and river homes and devour them (Tophat, 2014). In the short horror story 'The Homecoming', the "ashray" is a bloblike creature composed of water, which the main character researches via a "Google search of Scottish legends." It absorbs its prey and takes on their forms to seductively lure even more victims. It lures the main character by disguising itself as his missing girlfriend, only to transform into a repulsive hag once it has him in its clutches (Braun, 2023). Both stories nod to the Asrai's aversion to sunlight, but otherwise, there is almost no continuity from older sources and the Asrai/Ashray bears more resemblance to a siren. In both works, it hides a disturbing true form behind a surface impression of beauty.

Conclusion

The point of this article is not to destroy the Asrai as a figure with folkloric 'legitimacy', but, rather, to better understand where stories like this come from and how they develop, especially in the era of the Internet where new writing and art can be posted in an instant and reach a worldwide audience as part of what the Russian Laboratory of Theoretical Linguistics (2014) has referred to as "media-lore". Ruth Tongue's collections have been used to identify Buchanan's poetry as adaptations of an oral English-Welsh legend, but at the same time, the existence of Buchanan's poems is a vital support for Tongue's narrative. She remains the first and ultimately the only source for a folk belief in the Asrai. The rare local account appears much later, after her work had been widely circulated and instilled into popular culture. Although there are folktales with similarities like the Kelpie of Moulin na Fouah, these arguably inspired Tongue. It seems more likely that Buchanan created the Asrai, considering his cowriter's reaction. His two relevant poems are romantic, colorful, and nontraditional, as seen in the depiction of changelings. The existence of a parallel word in Sámi raises possibilities for a different inspiration, but we will never know. At this point, the Asrai have entered modern folklore, if not mainstream consciousness. Like several of Tongue's stories, it has spread enough to be considered a folktale in its own right. There is blurring of the lines between the Asrai and the archetypes of mermaids and sirens. The Asrai's most unique attribute is perhaps not their reaction to sunlight, but the fact that the earliest narratives are so focused on their benevolence and their vulnerability to humans. This is strikingly at odds with many narratives of fairies and mermaids, who are typically ambiguous figures, sometimes helpful but more often malevolent. This dynamic is becoming diluted in modern works, with Asrai characters more likely to be powerful and even predatory, in line with the concept of fairies as dangerous beings. Future developments will depend on what writers and artists make of them.

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