

"A Study of Antlered Fae and Their Mythological Cycle"

Wherein is discussed the physical and cultural distinction between similarly adorned Fae species, as well as extant examples of lore amongst the Antlered sub-species itself.

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INTRODUCTION

The Fae are a people that defy definition by their very nature: mercurial, unpredictable, inconstant, and with no individual seeming to look or act precisely like another (excepting so-called 'twin soul' creatures, or those affected by curses, etc). Doppelgangers are often considered by many an example of how a Fae may look and act like another, however this hardly qualifies as true repetition of physical conformity or behavior as, at its base, it is nothing more than a shallow mimicry for survival purposes.

Even with such examples, observation can firmly assert that they are indeed exceptions to the simple rule that Fae are more alike to chaos than to order.

And yet, among the chaos there are clans and coteries, families and blood bonds perhaps closer than any other relation. How does one begin to understand these apparently self-imposed designations? Particularly of those with similar physical presentation? An anthropological and mythological examination may begin to shed light on an answer, which is what I assay within these pages.

With the infinite diversity of the Fae people, I choose to narrow my examination to an easily physically distinguished sub-group: those Fae that sport antlers. Perhaps it is a natural fascination with wild adornment that easily draws an observer to these particular individuals, but their relative scarcity in comparison to other Fae sub-species also makes the examination of a greater percentage of their population an easier task. To wit, there are few enough of them that they are more remarkable and their appearance and behavior more likely to be documented due to that same scarcity.

Opponents to this approach may argue that a smaller observable sample is likely to distort anomalies disproportionately as compared to a large group with more data points. I, however, don't give a fig for that.

ON COMPARISON OF HORNS TO ANTLERS

As I have conducted my studies, there seems an inevitable comparison most unlearned folk draw between Horned and Antlered Fae. Further confusing the issue are those that equate one

horn-bearing being to another and include Demonkin in such discussions, however I have excluded such nonsense from this essay.

For a full examination of the distinctions between Horned Fae and Demonkin, please consult Ascendant Emelius Baerd's definitive work on the topic, "Infernal Blood and Faerie Fire", or "The Songs of Elder Squip", as recorded by the scrolls' namesake. Both of these excellent and informative pieces may be viewed in the public sections of the Great Dabrian Library.

Thus excluding Demonkin, how does one distinguish one set of ornamental head-growths from another among the Fae?

If we were to look to the Animal Kingdom for clues and guidance - erroneously, I say, as Fae do not classify merely as animal though they often bear many physical and behavioral traits of such - there is basic distinction between the material of horn and antler. Whereas horn-bearing bovid species display in their horns a bone core and keratin sheath, do not exhibit branching, and do not shed them within their lifetime, antler-bearing cervid species' crowns are composed entirely of newly-grown bone, of branching architecture, and with an annual shedding of the entire structure. Further, in most cervid species the expression of antlers is restricted to a single sex, whereas Antlered Fae are not limited by such biological dimorphism.

Continuing the argument that animal similarities should be discarded when making distinctions among Fae is the puzzling cycle (or lack thereof) to Antlered Fae shedding their adornments. I have not encountered or observed reliable information on the subject and have been rebuffed when posing such questions to Antlered Fae themselves, as if I have crossed a line of taboo. The degree of upset such inquiries have caused has ranged from mild indignation to outright assault, and such injuries have dissuaded me from persisting. Suffice to say that the Fae are not telling, and I have not been able to deduce anything by my own means. Complicating the issue is the consideration of Fae lifespan and origin, which confounds explanation to the point that many are considered immortal in regard to lifespan if not in physical invulnerability. There is the distinct possibility that Fae age cycles or their persistence through time defies comparison to mortal creatures that also bear antlers because they simply do not exist in the same type of time stream.

ON CULTURAL CONTRASTS BETWEEN ADORNED FAE SPECIES

Perhaps the best distinction between species of cranially ornamented Fae is made in terms of culture, as well as cultural representation and expectation by non-Fae of Fae peoples (such as with social prejudices and stereotypes). One would not, for example, mistake a Satyr or Faun for an Antlered Fae, despite the lack of a unifying subspecies name for the latter. But why is that? I propose two words:

Cultural Diversion.

By 'diversion' let it be assumed that we mean the parting of ways from a common root, as one might divert the flow of a river to create separate streams - the source remains, but such

tributaries can only be said to be alike in that they are all water from their parent body, yet possess their own unique courses and dangers and habitats.

Consider the Satyr or Faun (both terms are used here in order to respect the self-identification of different Fae to one term or the other). While found in similar settings to Antlered Fae both physical and cultural in nature, these Folk are often associated with (or passionately embrace) excess of all kinds, merriment, and debauchery to the extent that to mention their species in comparison is to imply the same of a given situation or personage. In vernacular, to be “satyr-like” is to be carefree in all ways, whether that is of carnal taboos, self-control, or of the consequences from the immediacy of a moment’s pleasure of any kind. Responsibility and consistency are traits that one would never attach to the cultural expectation placed on a Satyr or Faun (at least when speaking in generalities), despite the fact that individual personality and practice may largely defy such expectations entirely.

From the study of Antlered Fae one can trace their cultural origins to the parental waters of forest and heath shared with them by Satyrs and Fauns. So too can we associate them in lore with fecundity and elemental power, their adornment often used as a metaphor for such power and virility, regardless of gender. However among Antlered Fae we do not see painted the same cultural picture of overindulgence, but rather of stewardship.

There exists more than one legend, cautionary tale, or similar work of cultural memory that assigns the status of an Antlered Fae to that of a Guardian of a specific place or region (such as a wood or mountain peak), or of a particular time of year with an emphasis on the duality of Light and Dark. This, by extension, has often been associated with the duality of Life and Death, distinguishing the Antlered Fae from being mere woodland Pucks of a different stripe and placing them, I believe, in a more anthropologically and existentially significant role. Of this topic, I have only been able to gather the scantest clues, as it seems to be a closely guarded and likely ritualistic belief among these Fae.

[Examples of such culturally significant material is provided later in this work, with the generous cooperation of one Elder from among the Antlered Fae who deigned to speak to me on the subject, as well as allowed me to witness a topically relevant rite]

ON CULTURAL DISTINCTION BETWEEN VARIOUS ANTLERED FAE

In keeping with the overarching theme of chaos among various Fae peoples, upon cursory examination there appears to the casual observer no continuity among Antlered varieties save that they all bear some version of branching cranial adornment. Yet upon learning of significant cultural works, particularly of poetry, we begin to see a pattern of duality emerge.

While no formal division exists (that can easily be quantified), songs and chants passed down among Antlered Fae - and interestingly, shared with other Fae Folk indicating no exclusivity of lore - indicate a proclivity for self-identifying subdivision. For simplicity and clarity we shall call these Light-Aligned and Dark-Aligned camps. Of these two camps, the following themes and commonalities can be distilled:

Light-Aligned Antlered Fae appear to be associated with the seasons of Spring and Summer (more precisely, the span of time between Equinoxes), when the waxing of daylight hours overcomes the hours of darkness in the cycle of the sun. In keeping with this association, themes of growth, fertility, and abundance are often included in descriptions of these Fae, however not to the extent to be confused with Satyrs and Fauns on the scale of rampant excess. Perhaps ironically when compared to Puckish cousins, an Antlered Fae's role in society and the larger world is defined more as a shepherding of such forces rather than boundless origination of the same. And entirely unlike the typical mythos surrounding Satyrs and Fauns, Antlered Fae associated with this fecundity have been shown to take an active hand in pruning overgrowth or rectifying injury to a perceived balance, up to and including the point of violence. It is foolish, perhaps even dangerous, to assume that such Fae are by nature of their associations entirely kind, passive, or generous; one is weighed on their demonstrable merits, and on the Fae's own sense of judgement, at that.

Dark-Aligned Antlered Fae are of a predictable contrast, associated with the seasons of Fall and Winter (again, in specificity the span of time between Equinoxes), when nights are of greater length than daylight. As can be surmised, these leaner seasons are often associated with the waning and ending of life or completion of related cycles, and it follows that Dark-Aligned members of this group concern themselves with similar matters. While images and myths of grim reapers and malevolent hunters in shadowed forests easily spring to mind - and such associations are not unwarranted - they do not build a complete picture of the role these Fae often choose to assume. Virtues of mercy, temperance, and patient fortitude are held in high esteem alongside an unflinching ruthlessness at need. Unsubstantiated rumor suggests that some beings are as likely to seek Dark-Aligned Antlered Fae for the purpose of easing passages of all kinds as to plead for methods to prevent the same. An important caution to take to heart when dealing with such Fae: their priorities and perspectives on death do not often align with outside expectation.

Curiously, there appears to be a collective emphasis by all Antlered Fae not to segregate themselves entirely into Light and Dark camps, but rather to honor the 'pole' to which each is drawn without relinquishing the grasp of their opposite, even if such a grasp is tenuous. The individuals to whom I spoke and raised the subject responded with grave concern and sorrow for one "lost" to the extreme of their affinity. As I am to understand it, a Dark-Aligned individual so consumed is often called "benighted" by their kin, whereas a Light-Aligned individual similarly gone astray is referred to as "sunstruck".

Though I cannot substantiate it with any eyewitness accounts - I suspect again due to unspoken taboo - I am lead to believe that benighted and sunstruck individuals, if presenting great enough imbalance (such as bringing intentional harm or excess), are likely to be culled by their own kind. While grim as this may sound, it is evidence that these Folk do not only espouse a litany of balance, but also rigorously practice and apply it to themselves.

SAMPLES OF ANTLERED FAE LORE

It has been my privilege in my study of Antlered Fae to make the acquaintance - dare I say earn the regard and friendship - of more than one impressive individual. From these hard-won relationships I have been able to learn some of the specific pieces of myth and lore that I share with you below. It is from these examples that the previous cultural observations and hypotheses have been drawn, therefore I include them here for your entertainment and enlightenment, as well as material exhibits for my conclusions.

First is a poem that, while not related in precisely the same way by each Antlered Fae I spoke to, has some localized iteration with an obviously common origin as to be deemed concurrent. It has been called by different names by those disparate Fae, of which I give a sampling:

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“The Lay of Seasons”

“Hunting Time”

“The Rise and Fall of the Crown”

[Note these translations also bear some light interpretation as well to bridge gaps in cultural understanding and provide better context. I have attempted to remain true to the spoken words where possible and practical.]

*Sing the turning of the Year,
Dip into the flow of the stream,
Breathe with the leaves as they dance,*

*Sayeth the Brilliant Sovereign:
Now is my time!
Bounty is come from the slumbering seed,
patiently cradled through its darkness.
The fruit of land and body rise from me,
And know the temperance of my touch.
My crown of bones is draped in moss,
And in its branches blossoms Infinity.*

*Sing the turning of the Year,
Tangle in root and vine,
Stoke the embers in the deep of night.*

*Sayeth the Dire Sovereign:
Now is my time!
An end is come, and seeds must fall
back to the darkness.
Hollow rattles body and soul as I pass,
And all know the peace of my touch.*

*My crown of bones glitters with frost,
And in its branches withers Eternity.*

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The second piece I would relate, of what I believe to be extreme cultural significance among Antlered Fae, was a ceremony (one might call it a ritual or rite) observed upon a Winter Solstice some years ago. I am still much indebted to the individuals who allowed me to witness it, in metaphorical as well as literal terms, as the cost of such spectatorship was steep and not in the mere mundane exchange of currency.

The best interpretation of the ceremony's title I can provide I would translate loosely as "The Remembered Shard". This appears to refer to the opposite nature of each Antlered Fae, and their retaining some portion of that opposite nature in order to be cognizant of its significance, and therefore less likely to abandon it to become entirely benighted or sunstruck.

[For efficiency (and to flatter myself, a bit of poetic simplicity that knits nicely in with the previous poem), I shall refer to the Dark-Alined Antlered Fae and Light-Aligned Antlered Fae indicated below simply as the Dark and the Light, respectively]

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Upon the Winter Solstice, two Antlered Fae of opposite nature gathered in a sacred space of their choosing - in this case, it was the heart of a small deciduous woodland with bare branches silhouetted against a sky torn by wind and streaked by high clouds, illuminated by a waxing moon and several small torches and lamps. The location was deeply personal, the choosing of which was not taken lightly and I am told accounted for personal histories and relationships. There may also have been some astronomical significance beyond the Solstice itself known only to the participants, as this was not immediately clear to observers such as myself.

The Light and Dark stood facing one another on a leaf-strewn knoll, at the base of which other Fae of many descriptions sat or stood to bear witness. These witnesses were not specifically invited, but seemed to be drawn to the place and the spectacle (it was not obvious if these spectators were required for the ritual or simply allowed to remain, like myself).

The Light and Dark bowed solemnly to one another, each with a hand laid upon their chest over their own heart. Then this same hand was extended out and placed on the chest of the opposite Fae, once again over the heart. Each greeted the other by a full, formal name [omitted from this account to respect the secrecy and gravity of such a Naming].

The Dark spoke first, addressing their companion:

"Now is my time, when all is chill and dim. The land sleeps, and life wanes. This is how it has been, and how it shall be."

After a moment to let the words sound and be surrounded again in quiet, the Dark continued:

“I see the Dark in you, my kin. Know that sorrow, and rest, and endings are a part of you, as they are a part of all things. My blessings are with you, though you may despair of them. Be content; I shall be with you always, that you may know peace.”

The Light seemed much relieved to hear these words, and smiled gently to their fellow and nodded to acknowledge the sentiment. Each participant took a long breath before the Light took their turn to speak:

“Now is not my time, but that time shall come again. I see the Light in you, my kin. Know that within the depths of your blessings, the Light shall rekindle you that you may endure. Light deepens all darkness; Darkness makes all light more brilliant.”

The Dark in turn seemed happy to hear this affirmation, and returned the smile they received earlier from their compatriot. Then both dropped their hands away from the others’ chest and instead joined both hands to the hands of the other in friendly support, posing questions in turn.

In a most sincere fashion, the Dark asked of the Light: “What burdens you and dims your spirit as we stand in my time?” and the Light provided their answer after some quiet reflection. [Again, for privacy, this answer has been omitted]

The Light then asked in turn: “What uplifts you and brightens your eyes as we look ahead to my time?” and the Dark also stood in quiet contemplation for a long moment before providing their answer. [Omitted as above]

A great burden seemed to have been lifted off each Fae’s countenance and bearing after this exchange, and as they broke their grasp on one another’s hands there was an exchange of small gifts. The Dark gave to the Light a particularly delicate bone of some kind, and the Light gave to the Dark a newly-made candle. As I understand, these gifts are meant to be crafted or harvested by the giver’s own hands - a gift of their stronger nature to reinforce the lesser aspect in their counterpart, and thus keep them from slipping too far into their particular affinity.

After each admired their gift, hands were once again touched to the opposite Fae’s chest over the heart (I suspect because embracing one another would have been complicated by their antlers!), which seemed to signal to the rest of the assembly the conclusion of the rite. There was no great fanfare or formal dismissal, but the crowd dispersed quietly as the Light and Dark stayed a while longer to simply enjoy the other’s company in a manner of old friends catching up on news. I was drawn away by some of the other departing Fae at that time; I am uncertain if there was some less public continuation of ceremony between Light and Dark afterward, and did not feel I had the standing or social grace to ask.

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Given the mirrored nature of the speech and the cyclical form of the Light/Dark relationship observed here and in other lore, one can easily surmise that such a ceremony observed on the Summer Solstice would lead with the Light speaking much as the Dark did here, with roles reversed. I aspire to witness the twin of this rite in the bright Summer sunshine, and shall record my impressions should that lucky day come to pass.

CONCLUSION

Mere physical appearance, while helpful to distinguish individual Fae, is lacking nuance when attempting to understand the cultural differences toward which such features may point. As with all Folk, assumptions based upon casual observation rarely yield a whole truth, or even truth whatsoever! It is the duty of every curious mind to patiently and politely inquire, that we may better understand the variety of the world in which, and Peoples among which, we find ourselves.

In the case of Antlered Fae, it is a sorely mistaken individual who assumes that all with such physical presentation are of the same nature, or that they share all culture and tendencies with their Horned relations, or to the same degrees. The shepherds of the turning of time are a rare and amazing subgroup worthy of recognition. It is my sincere hope that the fascinating things I have been allowed to glimpse are better appreciated, and perhaps now looked for with eager anticipation, among the populace. To mark their occurrence, to read their poetry and prose, and to build such relationships deepens our connections between diverse Peoples and allows us to appreciate the world around us in ways we may never before have considered.

~P. PQM