RICHARD CORBET
1582–1635

Richard Corbet spent his whole adult life in the Church of England, rising to the dignity of two bishoprics (Oxford in 1628, Norwich in 1632). But he never succumbed to the formality of his public positions, and the biographer and anecdote collector John Aubrey has preserved a number of tales, all merry and some indiscreet, of his pranks, retorts, and convivialities. Among others, there is an account of his exchanging the bishop’s cassock for the buff jerkin of a ballad singer, and selling out his stock of ballads at a tavern. His verses were published as Certain Elegant Poems, twelve years after his death.

A Proper New Ballad
ENTITLED THE FAIRIES’ FAREWELL, OR GOD-A-MERCY WILL
To be sung or whistled, to the tune of Meadow Brow by the learned; by the unlearned, to the tune of Fortune.

Farewell, rewards and fairies,
Good housewives now may say,
For now foul sluts in dairies
Do fare as well as they;¹
And though they sweep their hearths no less
Than maids were wont to do,
Yet who of late for cleanliness
Finds sixpence in her shoe?

Lament, lament, old abbeys,
The fairies lost command;
They did but change priests’ babies,
But some have changed your land;²
And all your children stolen from thence
Are now grown Puritans;
Who live as changelings ever since,
For love of your demesnes.

At morning and at evening both
You merry were and glad,
So little care of sleep or sloth
These pretty ladies had;
When Tom came home from labor,
Or Ciss to milking rose,
Then merrily went their tabor,
And nimbly went their toes.

¹. Fairies, it used to be thought, left rewards for good dairymaids and housewives, while they pinched, punished, and tormented the sluts.
². The fairies only slipped priests’ (illegitimate) babies into families; but some worse spirits have now slipped in an illegitimate England in place of the old, merry one.
Witness those rings and roundelays
Of theirs, which yet remain,
Were footed in Queen Mary's days
On many a grassy plain;³
But since of late Elizabeth,
And later James came in,
They never danced on any heath
As when the time had been.

By which we note the fairies
Were of the old profession,⁴
Their songs were *Ave Maries*,
Their dances were procession;
But now, alas, they all are dead,
Or gone beyond the seas,
Or further from religion fled,
Or else they take their ease.

A tell-tale in their company
They never could endure,
And whoso kept not secretly
Their mirth, was punished sure;
It was a just and Christian deed
To pinch such black and blue;
Oh, how the commonwealth doth need
Such justices as you!

Now they have left our quarters,
A register⁵ they have,
Who can preserve their charters,
A man both wise and grave;
A hundred of their merry pranks
By one that I could name
Are kept in store; con⁶ twenty thanks
To William for the same.

To William Chourne of Staffordshire⁷
Give land and praises due,
Who every meal can mend your cheer
With tales both old and true;
To William all give audience,
And pray you for his noddle,
For all the fairies' evidence
Were lost if it were addle.

3. The fairies were thought to dance in rounds or circles, which left marks in the turf; Queen Mary was the Catholic sovereign of England.
4. Of the Roman Catholic faith.
5. Keeper of records, registrar.
6. Grant.
7. Servant to Dr. Hutten, Corbet's father-in-law.