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Elves

The word *elf* comes from Common Germanic, the ancestor-language of English, German, and the Scandinavian languages. Our earliest solid evidence for beliefs about elves comes from the second half of the first millennium A.D., in texts written by Churchmen in Germanic languages. Narratives featuring elves as protagonists are few, however, until the early modern period: in medieval texts elves most often appear in passing, often as potential causes of illness in prayers and medical texts. Even in the rich traditional poetry of medieval Iceland, elves mostly appear fleetingly, in poetic formulas as companions of the *Æsir* (the pagan gods), or in metaphors for male warriors.

Throughout recorded history, elves have often been linked with the **demons** of Judaeo-Christian-Mediterranean tradition (alongside the similarly unpleasant figure of the *mare*, female supernatural beings who crush people in their sleep). The Old English poem *Beowulf* lists elves among the monstrous races springing from Cain's murder of Abel; the late thirteenth-century *South English Legendary* explains elves as angels that sided neither with Lucifer (see **Devil, The**) nor with God, and were banished by God to earth rather than hell; while in the late fourteenth-century *Wife of Bath's Tale*, Geoffrey Chaucer equates male elves with **incubi**. Seeking traditions uninfluenced by Christianity, nineteenth-century scholars looked to the *Prose Edda*, an early-thirteenth-century mythography by the Icelander Snorri Sturluson. Snorri wrote of *ljósálfar* ("light elves") living in the heavens and *dökkálfar* ("dark elves") living under the earth, and scholars interpreted these as evidence for elves as pre-

Christian deities of the sun, fertility, and/or death. However, it is clear that Snorri's elves are at least partly based on angels and demons and need not reflect pre-Christian traditions.

During the early modern period, confessions to dealing with elves were often taken in Scottish witchcraft trials as evidence of dealings with the Devil, and efforts to fit elves into Christian world-views sometimes led to theological treatises, as in the Icelandic *Tiðfordrif* (1644) by Jón Guðmundsson lærði and, in Scotland, Robert Kirk's *Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies* (1691).

However, in Britain and Scandinavia, there is extensive evidence for alternative traditions in which elves were essentially people, a distinct ethnic group living alongside human communities, similar to the *fatae* ("fates") mentioned in some medieval Latin texts, French *fées* ("fairies," a term derived from *fatae*), and the Irish *áes síde*. This may represent a pre-Christian tradition general to western European cultures. The earliest hint of elves' human-like character comes in personal names: the word *elf* is used in names (e.g. the Gothic *Alboin*, etymologically "elf-friend") where words for monsters are not. In Old English, the plural *ælfe* ("elves") is grammatically an ethnonym. In the second half of the twentieth century, most scholars imagined that elves in the Anglo-Saxon tradition were small, invisible, demonic beings, causing illness with arrows (which the scholars, but not the texts, labelled "elf-shot"). But there is no actual evidence for any of this, and it is more likely that Anglo-Saxon elves were like people. Certainly, elves appear as human-like neighbors in early modern Scottish evidence and in nineteenth-century Scandinavian folklore (where they also appear under names such as the Icelandic *huldufólk*—"hidden people"). Indeed, stories told about elves in nineteenth-century Denmark were later transferred to other ethnic groups such as Greenlanders and Turkish immigrants.

Where elves appear in narratives, they often threaten people, either by causing illness or by seduction/sexual aggression—but out of personal motivation rather than because of a

malignant disposition towards humanity in general. Debate is ongoing as to whether the group of Norse gods labeled by Snorri Sturluson as *Vanir* are the same as the *álfar*; if so then the god Freyr may have been an elf. Otherwise, the earliest narrative that fairly certainly features an elf as a protagonist is the Old Norse poem *Völundarkviða* (“the poem of Völundr”), first attested in the later thirteenth century but probably older. Völundr lives outside the normal human community, but is abducted into it. He avenges his imprisonment by seducing and/or raping his abductor’s daughter before magically escaping. Elves are certainly viewed as seductive outsiders in the *South English Legendary* and the fourteenth-century Icelandic poem *Gullkársljóð*. This conception continues in ballads attested from the early modern period, most influentially the Scandinavian tradition known as “Sir Olaf and the Elves,” in which Sir Olaf rebuffs the advances of an elf-maid and, on granting her one kiss, is stabbed by her to the heart, subsequently dying. This story was popular among Romantic thinkers, inspiring Johann Gottfried Herder’s poem *Erlkönigs Tochter* (1778) and through it Goethe’s celebrated *Der Erlkönig* (1782). Most English-language equivalents of *Sir Olaf* feature a **mermaid** instead of an elf, but elves do appear in other ballads, for example *Tam Lin*. Folk-tales collected in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly in Scandinavia, continue the seduction narratives, though many other narratives also appear, including benevolent deeds by elves; the tale “midwife to the fairies,” in which people are brought temporarily into the elves’ world to deliver difficult births; and stories of changelings, in which elves abduct healthy human children, replacing them with old or malformed beings. Hints of most such narratives are present in medieval texts, but seldom do the narratives appear in full.

In European traditions, oral and literary, supernatural beings tended to diminish (in size and significance) from the sixteenth century onwards, reflecting a general reassessment of such traditions as superstitions and/or fantasies—a trend epitomized by Shakespeare’s *A*

Midsummer Night's Dream. By the nineteenth century in England, the word *elf* had largely been superseded by the French loan *fairy*, and was likewise being displaced in much of Scandinavia by terms/beings like the *nisse* (Denmark) and *tomte* (Sweden). Thus, the German folktale *Die Wichtelmänner* (where *Wichtel* means “little creature” and *Männer* “men”), first published by the Grimm brothers, was translated by Margaret Hunt in 1884 as “The Elves and the Shoemaker.” As American Christmas traditions crystallized in the nineteenth century, the 1823 poem “A Visit from St Nicholas” (widely known as “’Twas the Night before Christmas”) characterized St Nicholas himself as “a right jolly old elf” (line 45), but it was the little helpers that were later attributed to him to whom the name stuck. This development seems to have prompted the unfounded scholarly assumption that Anglo-Saxon elves were small, demonic sprites.

However, the term *elf* and its cognates were given a new lease of life by early twentieth-century fantasy writers, who made elves a stock genre feature. Leading figures here were Lord Dunsany in his 1924 *The King of Elfland's Daughter* and J. R. R. Tolkien, most importantly in his *The Lord of the Rings*, published in 1954–55. Both drew on nineteenth-century folklore and Romantic texts like Herder's *Erlkönigs Tochter*; Tolkien's work in particular also shows a deep indebtedness and sensitivity to medieval traditions. In these texts and much of the fantasy literature they inspired, elves are once more human-like in form and size, enjoying superior wisdom, immortality, and an aloofness from human affairs.

Translations of *The Lord of the Rings* into other Germanic languages in turn used *elf*'s old cognates. Drawing on Snorri Sturluson, Tolkien distinguished between “light elves” and “dark elves,” but attached no moral significance to the terms; however, many subsequent fantasy writers present a distinction between races of good and bad elves in these terms. In works where elves are the main characters, such as Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* (published posthumously in 1977) or Wendy and Richard Pini's comic book series *Elfquest*, published

from 1978 to 2007, elves exhibit a similar range of behavior to a human cast, distinguished largely by their superhuman physical powers. However, where narratives are more human-centered, elves sustain their role as powerful, sometimes threatening, outsiders. Later fantasy literature has continued to draw on a diverse range of earlier images of elves, as with J. K. Rowling's use of the *Wichtelmänner* as inspirations for her "house-elves" in the *Harry Potter* series (see **Harry Potter, Monsters In**).

Narratives indicate that elves have always had a role in constructing norms of sexual propriety, right up to Tolkien's Galadriel and the sexually liberated world of *Elfquest*. Older texts also suggest a role in probing gender norms more generally: male elves do not always seem to behave in very "manly" ways. This is arguably true of Völundr; Anglo-Saxon elves are associated with *siden*, apparently a kind of magic that, in its Norse guise as *seiðr*, was particularly opprobrious for men to perform; Chaucer's self-portrait in the prologue to the *Tale of Sir Thopas* characterizes him both as "elvish" and a cuddly "popet" ("doll"). Meanwhile, later narratives give elves a role in demarcating normal people's religious identity, and constructing threats to reproduction. **Alaric Hall**

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