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Fairy and *Elves* in Tolkien and Traditional Literature

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Abstract

Explores the linguistic heritage of the terms *elf* and *fairy*, and shows how Tolkien eventually adapted them for his own purposes. Discusses the indistinguishable nature of early folkloric references to elves and dwarves, and how Tolkien picked out the characteristics he wished to use for his elves to suit the purposes of his stories.

Additional Keywords

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Introduction

Many of the marvels of Tolkien's secondary world are, as expected in a *legendarium* sprung from his longing for a body of legends dedicated to England, motifs drawn from English traditional fairy-tales, often reinterpreted under his particular vision of how they "should be." Thus there are, among many other wonderful things, magical bewildering woods, dragons like those of ancient legends, stout Dwarves (unlike the classical dwarfs!),[1] and specially Elves, the central characters of the mythological ages.

However, there is a persistent silence about "fairies" or "fays" (except in the earliest writings), which, judging by their name only, could be considered one of the principal elements in fairy-tales. Only in his earliest poems and in the *Book of Lost Tales* did fairies play an important part. But soon he abandoned terms such as *fairy* or *fay*, and chose to stick to its synonym *elf*. This fact has been attributed to four possible reasons (cf. Fimi 58-60): (a) unlike *fairy* or *fay*, which come from Old French, *elf* has an Old English origin more suitable for his project of a "mythology of England"; (b) in English literature the creatures of Fantasy had generally received an imprint of playfulness and prettiness both inconsistent with the serious and tragic characteristics of the tales, but this affected the popular fairies and fays to a larger extent than the more archaic elves; (c) the term *fairy* also became charged with sexual connotations that Tolkien would have preferred to avoid; and (d) after the Great War, fairies ceased to be a popular literary theme, and that could have discouraged Tolkien, too—although in many other points he radically detached himself from Modernist trends.

Thus Tolkien preferred to name the Elder Children of Ilúvatar by the Germanic word, and used the Old French terms sparingly, reserving them for

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[1] Tolkien used the "incorrect" plural *Dwarves* inadvertently, until the manuscript of *The Hobbit* was corrected for publication. But then he decided to maintain that heterodox spelling, in order to mark a distinction from the rather ridiculous dwarfs that populate folk-tales (*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* [*Letters*] 23).

specific contexts in which their original sense was suitable.[2] That fact, together with Tolkien's occasional commentaries about his dislike of the style of the *contes de feés* in that language (*Letters* 274), and his explicit regret of "Goblin Feet," a representative piece of Tolkien's early fairy-poetry (*The Book of Lost Tales, Part One* [*BLT1*] 32), might lead readers to underestimate the importance of the "fairy" element in his later work. The objective of this essay is to show that many typical characteristics of modern fairies were not simply avoided by Tolkien, but integrated into his Elves, albeit transformed or reinterpreted in order to keep the internal coherence of his mythology.

That transformed continuation was also applied to the term *fairy* itself, which was respected by Tolkien. That word is actually one of the first elements discussed by him in his essay *On Fairy-Stories*. In that essay he declared his interest on the word's meaning of "Otherworld beyond the five senses," and usually spelled it archaically as *Faerie*, *Faery* or *Fayery* to mark the difference (*On Fairy-Stories* [*OFS*] 85)—just like he preferred the spelling *Dwarves* rather than *Dwarfs*. But such special use is usually regarded as an exception; on the other hand, Tolkien's disdain for *fairy* as a synonym of *elf* is often argued, on the basis of its foreign, French origin and its fanciful connotations (see above, and also Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth* [*Road*] 56-7; Burns 23; Spangenberg 186). This apparent ambiguity in Tolkien's regard for that word can be explained by the greater antiquity of the abstract meaning, in contrast to its later, distorted application as a name for elvish creatures. However, such a straightforward opposition is a simplification of the literary facts about the word.

Etymology of *fairy*

As commented on above, Tolkien had a special interest in the original, abstract sense of *fairy*, so it is worth exploring in detail how that word entered and evolved in English language, although it is a complicated matter, since its

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[2] When Tolkien explained the use of *Elf* in his mythology, he emphasized that he chose the term because of its ancient sense. Cf. the commentary in Appendix F:

> *Elves* has been used to translate both *Quendi*, 'the speakers,' the High-elven name of all their kind, and *Eldar* […]. This old word was indeed the only one available, and was once fitted to apply to such memories of this people as Men preserved, or to the making of Men's minds not wholly dissimilar. But it has been diminished, and to many it may now suggest fancies either pretty or silly. (*The Lord of the Rings* [*LotR*] Appendix F.1111)

It may be assumed that Tolkien said that *elf* was the "only available" word meaning that it was not entirely satisfactory for its modern connotations, but any other one (like *fairy* or *fay*) would not be suitable at all. Hammond and Scull (8-9) provide further evidence of Tolkien's partial dissatisfaction with the word *Elf*.

earliest attestations are scanty, and a great part of its history would be explained by the unrecorded oral tradition, which is beyond our reach.

Fairy (in Middle English and archaically spelt in various forms, like *fairye, fayerye*, etc.) is a word adopted from the Old French *faerie, faierie*: an abstract noun meaning "magic, enchantment," with connotations of "deceit"; also "enchanting but false speech" (Godefroy 696). Likewise, its modern synonym *fay* can be traced back to Old French *faé, fayé, feé*, etc., past participle of the verb *faer, fayer*: "to enchant, bewitch," and also "to declare by an oracle" (695-6). These words denoted some kind of delusive, spoken magic, similar to the concept of *glamour* analyzed by Shippey (*Road* 51-2), which comes from a corruption of *grammarye* ("hidden knowledge, magic"), whence the modern word *grammar*. The latter gloss of *faer* also connects that verb to the notion of "fate," to which it is etymologically related. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* [*OED*], *fate* comes from the Latin verb *fārī*, "speak": its neuter past participle *fātum* "that which has been spoken," understood as "sentence or doom of the gods," was used as Greek μοῖρα, the lot or portion of a person, equivalent to the abstract conception of fate (Old English *wyrd*).

Classical mythology personified this abstract concept in the figure of the *fāta* (plural of *fātum*), the three divinities who determined the destiny of human beings (also known as *Parcæ*). *Fāta* remained in Romance languages as Italian *fata*, Provençal *fada* or Spanish *hada*, applied to lesser (and normally female) magical creatures. Due to the semantic coincidence with them, the most established etymology of French *fée*, cognate of English *fay*, makes it come from Latin *fāta*, as *née* ("born") from *nata*, *aimée* ("beloved") from *amata*, etc. (Grimm 410). And this has led to a commonly accepted direct descent from the Latin Fāta to the English fays and fairies, too. However, the case is not so simple, since most of the occurrences of Old French *fée* and Middle English *fay* or *fairy* are not aligned to that personified meaning, but to the adjectival and abstract notions cited above (Williams 463).

Godefroy's dictionary of Old French provides various examples for that language's usage of those words in poetry, which reveal how they could have become nouns referring to magical creatures. Expressions like "*feé dame*" or "*chevalier fayé*" (Godefroy 698) meant a lady or knight who were "enchanted," the participle of the verb *faer*; but when that verb fell out of popular use, they could be understood as a lady or a knight belonging to the class of beings called *feé, fayé*. And the same is true of the English terms, as evidenced by a couple of misleading quotations in the *OED*. The first attested usage of *fairy* in the dictionary (in its sense of "magical being") is a verse of John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* (late 14th century): "as he were a faierie". But Tolkien himself pointed out that it should be read "as he were *of* faierie," i.e. "as he were come of Faërie" (*OFS* 30-1). Likewise, the first quotation given for

fay is (from the same poem) "My wife Constance is fay," which after the previous explanations is readily understandable as "My wife Constance is 'enchanted,'" although the *OED* implies that it meant "is *a* fay." Such confusions are natural if we consider the word in the modern language, but they would not have occurred originally.

Fairies and Elves in Traditional Literature

The previous data show that the modern fanciful associations of fairies do not proceed from the Old French word, but they are the product of a subsequent development of English literary tradition, through the Middle and later Ages. However, when *fairy* still retained its original meaning, elves were already connected to it, as clearly shown in Chaucer's tale of the Wife of Bath (14th century). There *faerie* (in the abstract sense of "magic") occurs in complement with *elf*, used for the magical creatures; e.g. in the verses "Al was this lond fulfilled of *faerie*. / The *elf-quene*, with hire joly compagnie […]" (Chaucer 178). Soon both concepts would become mixed, and *fairy* (together with *fay*) would be used as a synonym of *elf*. Thus, to explain the literary history of *fairy* it is convenient to start with the older elves.

The English word *elf* represents a common Germanic mythological class of beings. It occurs in Old English texts as *ælf*, *ylf*, and *elf*, depending on the dialect (Hall 178). However, what that word "meant" in the Anglo-Saxon period or earlier is an obscure matter. The only narrative attestation of elves is the marginal allusion to *ylfe* in *Beowulf*, as one of the creatures descended from Cain. Old English texts show *ælf* or variants of it chiefly in compounds for personal or place-names, in glosses of Latin *nymphæ* and other mythological beings, and also in some words related to ailments, female beauty, or deceit, which will be discussed in more detail below.

Indirect evidence, and a comparison with the *álfar* of Old Norse tradition, imply that early Anglo-Saxons or their ancestors may have thought of *ælfe* as otherworldly non-monstrous, good-natured, beautiful, human-like beings, related to mankind similarly to heathen gods—Norse *æsir* or Anglo-Saxon *ēse* (Grimm 443, 448; Hall 31, 35, 66-7). But that evidence is often ambiguous, and its interpretation full of pitfalls. Thus, the account of *ylfe* in *Beowulf* as part of the kin of Cain, together with *eotenas*, *orcneas* and *gīgantas*, class them with diabolic, monstrous creatures like Grendel. Even in the Prose *Edda*, which is a fairly coherent standard of Old Norse belief, there is a well-known nomenclature problem involving the three classes of *álfar*: *ljósálfar*, *dökkálfar* and *svartálfar* (light-, dark- and black-elves, respectively), the latter being commonly accepted as a synonym of *dvergar* (dwarves), although *álfar* and *dvergar* were generally dissimilar creatures in ancient poetry (Grimm 443-449).

The gender of ancient elves is another puzzling matter: Old Norse literature, as well as the Old English morphology and usage of *ælf*, suggest that originally this word only denoted male beings (Hall 28, 87-8). However, some of the compounds with that word implied womanly beauty or deceit, like *ælfscīene* or *ælfscīnu*, related to the verb *scīnan* ("to shine"), and translated as "beautiful like an elf," but also comparable to the noun *scīn* ("a deceptive appearance, phantom"), present in words as *scīn-cræft* ("magic art"), *scīn-lāc* ("necromancy, sorcery"), *scinna* ("spectre"), etc. (Bosworth and Toller 15, 832-4). Moreover, the grammatically feminine form *ælfen, elfen* was used at least as often as the masculine *ælf*, so that its Middle English reflex, *elven*, became generally applied to both sexes (Kurath 72). And many of the Old English glosses of Latin mythological creatures that were formed with *ælf* actually referred to female creatures, and accordingly used the feminine *ælfen*, like *dūnelfen, feldelfen, muntælfen, sæælfenne, wæterælfenne* or *wuduelfen* (= Lat. *castălĭdes, hămādryas* or *moides, oreades, naiades, nymphæ* and *dryades*, respectively). This feminization of elves could be explained, like other conceptual changes, by the mediævalization of Europe, which brought Classical culture in contact with Germanic traditions. But many of these paradoxes may have been inherent in the old Teutonic belief.[3]

Thus, in the late Anglo-Saxon period *ælfe* belonged to an unclear class of perilous wights, and in that class they could be mixed with other native creatures like *dweorgas, entas, eotenas, niceras, þyrsas*, or *wuduwāsan*, as well as with creatures of Classic and other foreign mythologies. And this was an appropriate circumstance in which to adopt words like Old French *faerie, faé*, etc., in the abstract sense of "magic" or "enchanted" that has been discussed earlier. Therefore, the introduction of those terms in literature were not a direct consequence of the French "intrusion" into English, but rather of the evolution of English itself. In fact, the *OED* does not have attested usages of *fairy* or *fay* in the specific sense that could be confused with *elf* prior to mid-15th century (leaving aside Gower's misleading quotations), while other quotations go back to circa 1300, and English language should have been in contact with those words even since the late 11th century.

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[3] One of the main contributions of Allaric Hall's recent research on Anglo-Saxon elves is his interpretation of those creatures as male beings associated to the character and activities that were improper to men (seduction, delusive magic, prophecy, etc.), and thus representing the old Germanic moral notion of "gender reversal" (Hall 47, 95, 159). This idea is in the center of Hall's reasoning for many of the apparent contradictions in Anglo-Saxon elf-literature, like the matter of gender, but also the relation between elves and evil things like ailments or personal disgrace, which are explained not as a collective threat to humankind, but as an individual punishment for improper behavior, in the form of elvish influence (yielding to seduction, loss of vigor, delirium, etc.).

Unfortunately, the early usage of those words is somewhat obscure, too. The lack of literary quotations from the 12th and 13th centuries may be explained by the fact that the branch of literature that yielded the genre of fairy-tales did not emerge until the 14th-15th century (Zipes xii); earlier wonder tales, like the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf*, are exceptional treasures of literature. There are significant wonder tales written in England in the years that followed the Norman invasion, like Marie de France's *Lais* (although they were not "English" in language, but rather French, or Anglo-Norman at most). But even in those early fairy-tales, magical beings were seldom called by specific collective nouns, but referred to as "knights," "maidens," etc. (if they were human-like.)

The first "golden age" of English fairy-literature was the Elizabethan period. At the middle of the 16th century fairies were brought into literary prominence, as the equivalents of Latin *nymphæ* and *hamadryades* in the English translations of Ovid and Virgil (Latham 15), although they had already been glossed as translations of Latin mythological creatures before that time, continuing the *ælfen*-glosses commented on above. But after Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* and Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, poems and plays featuring fairies flourished in English literature, like Drayton's *Nymphidia* or Browne's *Britannia's Pastorals*, to name a couple of famous examples. That Elizabethan fairy-literature portrayed a very different kind of fays—pleasing, picturesque and small—which has since changed the popular view of those creatures in English tradition (Latham 10-1). The French "*Cabinet des Fées*" tradition brought by Perrault, Madame d'Aulnoy and others certainly had a strong influence on English literature, too, although some Elizabethan fairy-tales are older than they are.

Shakespearean literature was revived in the late 18th century, and Romantic folklorists of that time made an effort to recover and preserve fairy-tales. Thus the Victorian culture of the succeeding century, which influenced Tolkien's youth, was dominated by fairies in many aspects, specially in painting, theater, and Spiritualist literature (Fimi 28-34). Those Victorian fays added a more pictorial, delicate and ethereal layer to the small, pleasing Elizabethan ones, leading to the current view of these beings.

This is the literary background that Tolkien met when he engaged in writing about the magical creatures that dwelt in Middle-earth: people were mostly familiar with the butterfly-like fairies of Victorian literature, but a literary memory about them went back to the Renaissance, and during that long period people had written and believed in fairies or elves under manifold denominations and in very different, often contrasting forms, sometimes pleasing and sometimes dreadful. Scholarly knowledge also recalled that elves were one of the oldest notions, although English narrative literature hardly

reached that time when *fairy* did not exist yet. But what could be gathered from the remnants of Anglo-Saxon literature, and the better preserved Old Norse tradition, encouraged the Romantic thought of a loftier notion of Old Teutonic elves, buried under many layers of mixed traditions and confusing concepts.

That is the kind of philological problem that inspired Tolkien's imagination. The portrait of his Elves has been interpreted as a result of his characteristic compulsion for achieving the "inner consistency of reality," meaning that he would not accept that the word *elf* never had any clear and stable referent (Shippey, "Light-elves, Dark-elves and Others" 2). However, it is interesting to note that with that approach, Tolkien paradoxically departed from the actual style of ancient fairy-tales. As explained above, the tales of old that we know are generally vague and ambiguous about what the otherworld and its dwellers are like, and some folklorists hold that this was a common property of fairy-tales in older times, unlike modern novels (Harte 6). Tolkien's classification of Elves and other creatures, his detailed descriptions of their position in the world, their languages, social relations, way of thinking, etc., are similar to the kind of modern dictionaries of fairies composed after Katharine Briggs's encyclopedic works. And in fact this is one man's piece of niggling literary artwork, inspired by (but not strictly imitating) ancient literature, as well as more modern referents.

Tolkien's Elves in the Light of English Tradition

The Elves of Middle-earth are depicted using elements that Tolkien chose from literature as an artist, rather than a folklorist. For the artist, such elements need not to be restricted to a particular historical stage of language, but are selected depending on personal taste. A comparison between the Quendi and the definitions in the *OED* of *fairy*, *fay* and *elf* may be used as a basis to analyze Tolkien's different inspirations for this issue.

Fairy receives three archaic meanings, as (1) "the land or home of the fays," (2) "a collective term for the fays or inhabitants of fairyland," and (3) "enchantment, magic,"[4] before its first non-obsolete definition: "One of a class of supernatural beings of diminutive size, in popular belief supposed to possess magical powers and to have great influence for good or evil over the affairs of man." This definition is linked to *fay*, which in its own entry is just equated to *fairy* in this sense, and to *elf*, which is in its first definition very similar to *fairy*: "The name of a class of supernatural beings, in early Teutonic

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[4] These three definitions are also referred to in the entry *faerie, faery*. These are, as previously discussed, just alternative (archaic) spellings of *fairy*, although they have remained alive in English (to a great extent thanks to Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*), predominantly in the sense of "realm or world of the fays."

belief supposed to possess formidable magical powers, exercised variously for the benefit or the injury of mankind."

The main differences between these definitions are: the "diminutive size" of fairies is not mentioned in the definition of elves, and elves are said to belong to Teutonic belief (fairies are referred to the vaguer sense of "popular" belief). But the definition of *elf* goes further in a note that accounts for their "dwarfish form," a varied list of mischief that elves do to men, and the relation and differences between elves and fairies. The latter point mentions the different cultural origin of both words, which has been analyzed in full above; then it is explained that "the Romanic word denotes a being of less terrible and more playful character than the *elf* as originally conceived"; and that "in modern use *elf* chiefly, though not always, denotes a male *fairy*." Moreover, a second definition says that elves are sometimes distinguished as inferior servants of fairies, or as more malignant beings.

"Diminutive size"

The matter of the Teutonic origin of elves in contrast to fairies has already been discussed. The question of the diminutive size of fairies intrigued Tolkien greatly. He wrote about it:

> I have often thought that it would be interesting to try to find out how that has come to be so […]. Of old there were indeed some inhabitants of Faërie that were small (though hardly diminutive), but smallness was not characteristic of that people as a whole. The diminutive being, elf or fairy, is (I guess) in England largely a sophisticated product of literary fancy. […] I suspect that this flower-and-butterfly minuteness was also a product of "rationalisation," which transformed the glamour of Elfland into mere finesse […]. it was largely a literary business in which William Shakespeare and Michael Drayton played a part. (*OFS* 29)

There is nothing in the original concept of *fairy* that concerns the size of the creatures related to it, and the Anglo-Saxon evidence about *ælfe* does not either indicate that they were particularly small in their origin (Hall 67-8). But the notion of tiny mythological creatures can be traced back at least to the Greek πυγμαίος (pygmies), so there should be nothing strange *per se* in the image of small supernatural beings. In any event, it is probable that the particular idea of smallness as a feature of fairies was connected to the conflation of elves and dwarfs (Grimm 444; Hall 33). In fact there are scholars who have argued that the association between smallness and magic or subtler sense is a marked feature in the Germanic mythology (Grimm 518), and that the diminutive size of the fairy race belongs more specifically to Teutonic tradition (Latham 9). The dictionary definitions, on the other hand, only

highlight the "diminutive size" of fairies, not of elves, who are only said to be of "dwarfish form" in a secondary note.

The size of either elves and fairies is not, however, an established concept. According to the folklorist Jeremy Harte, the British islands can be roughly divided in three zones depending on how fairies are depicted in folk tales: the lowland zone in South and East England, where fairies are "said to be very small and rather charming"; the countryside of upland Britain, northwards until the Scottish Lowlands, and westwards including Wales, Devon, Cornwall, and the eastern half of Ireland, where "they are said to be the size of a young child or of someone stooped with age"; and then the Highlands, the Northern Isles and the west of Ireland, where they are "of human size and appearance." These varied sizes of fairies are related with their character: lowland small fairies "would do good to the industrious people" (although they are ready to mischief, too), while in the upland zone "people are most afraid of the fairies […] a proud and vengeful race" (Harte 39-41).

Tolkien's Elves, on the other hand, are man-sized, although there are variations of stature, too. In his secondary world, the height of a character is more than a merely physical attribute: it is a sign of power and majesty. Thus, the Valar often adopted figures taller than Men—yet not gigantic (Tolkien, *The Road Goes Ever On* 74; *Morgoth's Ring* [*MR*] 69); and Hobbits were made small "partly to exhibit the pettiness of man, plain unimaginative parochial man [… but also] the amazing and unexpected heroism of ordinary men 'at a pinch'" (*Letters* 158n). Elves were originally of similar stature and strength of body to Men (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* [*Sil.*] 116), but the Eldar (those Elves who went to the West) grew to a stature higher than their relatives who remained in Middle-earth, and the same happened to the Númenóreans, Kings among Men and "taller than the tallest of the sons of Middle-earth" (311). On the other hand, the Elves of Middle-earth dwindled as the world grew older and withered (46); but this did not happen to the same extent to Men, except to the Dúnedain, who dwindled abnormally due to the loss of their ancient land (*Unfinished Tales* 372). Thus, the Elves of hither lands were generally surpassed in size by Men, but the Eldar who had returned to Middle-earth were remarkably tall.

However, none of those descriptions account for "small," not to speak of "diminutive," Elves. Nonetheless, in the earliest tales, Tolkien's conception of the fading of Elves and the thriving of Men was slightly different. It was not related to the withering of Middle-earth, but, as it were, to some kind of existential "incompatibility" between both races. Elves and Men had originally been equal in size, too, but that size was smaller than the stature of today's Men, and Elves were now much smaller and thinner, because "they cannot live in air breathed by a number of Men equal to their own or greater; and ever as

Men wax more powerful and numerous so the fairies fade and grow small and tenuous, filmy and transparent" (*The Book of Lost Tales, Part Two* [*BLT2*] 283; read Christopher Tolkien's full discussion about the matter in 326-7). Thus, the Elves of Tol Eressëa in the *Book of Lost Tales* were small indeed, a notion that Tolkien would strongly regret later (*BLT1* 32). But their "fading" would be maintained as more than a metaphor. In the revision of the myths that Tolkien attempted after *The Lord of the Rings*, he wrote that the spirit (*fëa*) of the Elves progressively consumed their body (*hröa*), and thus they "faded," until they became a mere memory of their spirit (*MR* 219, 427). This physical waning was Tolkien's solution to reconcile the modern ideas of slender ghostlike elves with the true nature of the Eldar. It would explain why Men of later days perceived them as mere phantoms of their former might, and invented stories of invisible elves, or elves so tiny that they could not be seen.

Influence Over the Affairs of Man

Superstition often attributed a number of ailments, bad actions and misfortunes to fairies: carrying away children and adults, bewitching people with disease or blindness, blasting crops and cattle, etc. (Latham 34). On the other hand, fairies were also believed to bestow gifts and help industrious and generous people as a reward (Harte 63, 74).

Such superstitions go back to Anglo-Saxon elves, whence come Old English nouns as *ælf-ādl* ("elf-disease"), *ælfsiden* ("elf-influence," some type of delirium), *ælfsogoða* ("elf-sucking," a kind of diabolic possession), *ylfa gescot* ("elf-shot," an internal sharp pain), and the adjective *ylfig* ("affected by elves," i.e. mad, frantic) (cf. Bosworth and Toller 14-5, 589). Unlike later fairy-literature, the fragmentary Anglo-Saxon information about elves does not record complementary examples of their helpful agency. However, it is possible that those elf-threats were meant a punishment for transgressing individuals (Hall 116-7), and elves had the social function of discouraging improper behavior, too.

In Tolkien's tales Elves are not a matter of superstition, but heroes of the legends of the Elder Days. So their relation with Men was generally very different: they were teachers of lore and craft, and allies in the fight against the Dark Lord, although Elves and Men did not live close together, and most Men still thought of Elves as a mysterious race. In every Age Elves dwelt in hidden cities (Thangorodrim, Nargothrond, Gondolin, Rivendell, Caras Galadon, etc.), seemingly removed from the world, as did the Faerie in traditional stories. And Elves normally reacted with caution and distrust when Men intruded in their lands, but they did not usually do mischief to them.

Tolkien also devised coherent explanations for the superstitions of Men about Elves. Already in the Third Age, Men and Elves had become

estranged by the arts of the Enemy, and the former spoke of Elven places like Lórien with dread (*LotR* IV.5.664). And there is a more objective reason for Men to fear some Elves: the Unbodied or Houseless, who after losing their body (as commented on above), refused the summon of Mandos and wandered in the world, remaining in regret and self-pity, and "filled with bitterness, grievance and envy." These Houseless spirits are "unable to inhabit it [the world], haunting trees or springs or hidden places that once they knew. Not all of these are kindly or unstained by the Shadow" (*MR* 223-4). Nevertheless, in Tolkien's mythology there is no risk of physical danger from these beings; only of evil influence for the soul, coherent with the danger that Christians may expect from devil.

Generally, in traditional folk-tales, the larger the fairies are, the more dangerous they are to men, as commented on above. It is interesting to notice that in Tolkien's legends the relation would be the reverse, although this is simply by chance. The tallest and strongest Elves, the Eldar who thrived in the Blessed Lands, were more friendly to Men than the Dark Elves, and as the former were not deceived by the Shadow, they would rarely refuse the summon of Mandos and become Houseless spirits.

Male Elves and Female Fairies

The question of gender is a very interesting issue, too. The commentary in the *OED* implies that *elf* has a character more male than *fairy*. The fairies of folk-tales are, in fact, often female. In several cases this is doubtless related to the Roman tradition of the Fāta, as it is especially evident in the tales featuring trios of female figures (like the Parcæ), e.g. Basile's "Le tre fate" (Zipes 544-50), or Grimm's "Die drei Spinnerinnen" (628-9), in which the job of the fairy-women further reminds us of the weaving Moîrai (Greek equivalents to the Parcæ).

However, this kind of character is not alien to Germanic culture. As commented on above, the original notion of elves seems to have been predominantly male, but on the other hand there was a class of female supernatural beings, the Old Norse *dísir*, Old High German *itisī*, and Old English *idesa*, best known by the particular Old Norse traditions of *valkyrjur* and *nornir* (Grimm 401-2, 405, 417; Hall 22-3). The latter are specially significant in relation to the Fāta and fairies, since in Sturluson's Edda the three Norns were described in terms perfectly parallel to the Latin Parcæ. And as happened in Romance tradition, these divine beings became a "lower" magical race in folk-tale.

Norns and elves were different things, but they were concepts symmetrical in gender (Hall 29), and both classes could be merged. Some

norns descended from elves according to the Edda (Grimm 410),[5] and in England stories were told about the *weirdelves* (407), who are by their name a mixture of norns and elves. In fact, it has been noted above that the gender of elves is one of the ambiguous issues in Anglo-Saxon tradition, and this feature could come from old. Although the morphology of *elf* makes it a male word (Hall 176), its meaning may have had feminine connotations. It could be related to Latin *albus* ("white"), implying the original meaning of "a light-colored, white, good spirit," a notion characteristic of female beauty (44), and especially of female mythological beings, like the German goddess Berchta, whose name itself means "bright, white" (Grimm 272, 279-80), or the Irish *banshi*, in which *ban* ("white") and *ben*, *bean* ("woman") seem to be mixed (444). This underlying combination of concepts could be in fact the source of the adjectives *ælfsciēne*, *ælfscīnu*, commented on above (Hall 92).

The Elves (and characters of other races) in Tolkien's stories are more frequently male, but some of the key figures are Elven-women, such as Lúthien or Galadriel. There are also other Elven-wives like Idril Celebrindal and Arwen, who remain on a secondary plane, but are important on the mythological side, since they brought the blood of Elves to the line of the kings of Men. And there are even other characters as Melian or Goldberry, who are not Elves *strictu sensu* in Tolkien's secondary world, but from a literary view they clearly play the role of fairy-wives, too. Some of these characters, specially Melian and Galadriel, reflect the figure of the "Fairy Queen," typical in English tradition (Latham 104). They governed their particular realms of "Faerie," which were protected and embellished by their powerful influence: Melian created the "Girdle" that bewildered the strangers who entered Doriath, and Galadriel's Ring enhanced the magic of Lórien.

They also had prophetic powers, like the Fāta and Norns who lie behind the classical female fairies: Melian foresaw that the Peace of Arda would not last when Melkor was still captive in Valinor (*Sil.* 100-1), as well as the arrival of Beren to Doriath and his great doom (167); Galadriel could reveal images of the future in her Mirror, and in her messages carried by Gandalf, she foretold the passing of the Grey Company, Aragorn's mission in the Paths of the Dead, and the longing that Legolas would feel at the sight of the sea (*LotR* III.5.491-2). Actually, foresight was not exclusive to female Elves, and even Men could foretell, since it was in most cases "only the deduction of the wise," a natural ability of the Incarnates's minds ("Ósanwe-kenta" 31-2). But it seems to have been more frequently practiced by women, and in fact Elves frequently

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[5] This could imply that norns were considered as *inferior* to elves, opposite to the relation that sometimes existed between fairies and elves in English, according to the *OED* (cf. *supra*).

received "names of foresight" (*apacenyê*) from their mothers in the hour of birth (*MR* 216). That kind of divination was, nevertheless, different from the prophecies of Fāta and Norns: the destiny that Elves (or Men) foretold was not a decision of the foreteller (as, say, "the princess shall pierce her hand with a spindle and die of the wound"). Some characters (Morgoth, Mîm, Isildur, etc.) seem to have the power to curse other beings or things, but the course of events is always subject to the free will of people.

As a side note, it is interesting to note how Tolkien used the feminine term *elven* in *Half-elven*, and with adjectival or attributive function in *Elvenking*, *Elven-smiths*, *elven-wise*, etc. There he was not, however, introducing a female feature, but imitating Middle English usage, which frequently employed the form *elven* (pl. *elvene*) in compounds like *elven(e) land*. The *OED* suggests that this could be the origin of the adjective *elfin*, first used in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. But Tolkien disliked the connotations of that adjective, and preferred the older form (Hammond and Scull 756).

An Insight in Tolkien's Nomenclature: Fays and Fairies in the Tales

Tolkien also made explicit mention of *fairies* and *fays* in his early writings, as has been noted in the introduction of this article. When Tolkien started to write the *Book of Lost Tales*, he still featured elves and fairies as similar concepts; and the contemporary Gnomish and Qenya Lexicons provide more specific information about them. "Fairy" was the original gloss of the Qenya word *inwe*, pl. *inwir*, from the root INI- ("small")[6], whence also *Inwinóre* ("Faëry") and *Inwe*, the name of "the ancient king of the fairies," equivalent to the later Ingwë of the Vanyar ("Qenyaqetsa" 42). This implies that Fairies or Inwir were the people of Inwe, but this was a broader notion than the later Vanyar, since in the *Lost Tales* Inwe ruled over all the Elves of Valinor or Eldar; thus "fairy" was used to translate *Elda*, too ("I·Lam na·Ngoldathon" 42).[7]

Other mythological names out of folk-tales were used in early stories, especially in the tale of "The Coming of the Valar" (*BLT1* 65-6). That tale introduces a list of the "lesser Vali" who came with the Valar: the *Mánir* and *Súruli* (glossed as "sylphs of the airs and of the winds," associated to Manwë and Varda), as well as the *Oarni*, *Falmaríni* and the "long-tressed" *Wingildi* ("the spirits of the foam and the surf of ocean," associated to Ossë and Ónen).

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[6] Such an etymology evidences Tolkien's early ideas about the diminutive size of these Elves, which has been discussed above.

[7] In the cited entry of the *Gnomish Lexicon*, the term *Egla* (Qenya *Elda*) or "fairy" is opposed to *Ilcorwaith, Ilkorindi*, etc. (the Elves who were not of Kôr), but also to *Goldoth* = Qenya *Noldoli* or "Gnomes." The position of the Noldoli in the classification of the Elves was ambiguous in the *Lost Tales*, since in some texts they were considered as part of the Eldar, but sometimes the Gnomes were treated as a distinct people (*BLT1* 50-1).

The *Qenya Lexicon* provides specific translations for *Oarni* and *Wingildi*, as "mer-children" and "nymphs," respectively; and akin to the former it mentions the *Oaritsi*, glossed as "mermaids" ("Qenyaqetsa" 70, 104). Finally, besides the spirits of the air and those of the sea, the *Lost Tales* also speak of the earthly sprites associated to Aulë and Yavanna: "the *Nermir* and the *Tavari*, *Nandini* and *Orossi*, brownies, fays, pixies, leprawns […]" (*BLT1* 66). But the English names of that list are not the translations of the preceding Qenya terms. The *Qenya Lexicon* again provides their exact meanings: the first three are "field-spirits," "dale-sprites" and "dryads,"[8] respectively; and the *Orossi* must come from the root ORO- related to hills and mountains ("Qenyaqetsa" 64, 66, 70, 90).

Tolkien wrote a list of "The Creatures of the Earth" closely related to that excerpt of the *Lost Tales*, where the spirits related to Air and Water are classified as "Children of the Gods," but the spirits of the Earth (Nermir, Tavari, Nandini and Orossi) are separately grouped as "Fays." This can be connected with the remark made in the *Lost Tales* about those creatures, that "must they not be confused with the Eldar." All in all, this shows that in that early conceptual stage, Tolkien considered that elves and fairies were about the same thing (fairies just a more specific term for a kindred of elves), but fays were a different kind of creatures, older and associated to the elements of the earth, and at the same time distinguished from the spirits of air and sea.

As commented on the translation of *Inwinóre*, Tolkien also used the term *Faëry* to refer to the land of the Elves in Valinor. And *Faëry*, *Fairyland* or the *Bay of Faërie* survived after the *Lost Tales*, although they were eventually replaced by *Elvenland* or the *Bay of Elvenhome* (*The Lays of Beleriand* [*LB*] 233; *The Shaping of Middle-earth* 155). But the term *fay* also lasted even longer in one very specific context: applied to Melian and Lúthien. In the *Lay of Leithian*, the title of one of the manuscripts reads "The Gest of Beren son of Barahir and Lúthien the Fay" (*LB* 153). Later on, in the *Quenta Silmarillion* that Tolkien wrote in mid-1930s, it is told that "Melian was a fay, of the race of the Valar" (*The Lost Road* [*LR*] 220), and in the more or less contemporary *Etymologies* Lúthien is described as a "bat-shaped fay" when she assumed the form of Thuringwethil

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[8] Oddly enough, the translations of *Tavari* ("dale-sprites") and *Nandini* ("dryads") seem to be switched. The former word (in the *Qenya Lexicon* written as *tavar* (*tavarni*)) is under the root TAVA ("beam"), related to trees and woods; and in the list of "The Creatures of the Earth" that is commented on later, the gloss of *tavāri* is "fay of the woods," like its Gnomish cognate *tavor* ("I·Lam na·Ngoldathon" 69). Therefore, the Latin dryad (Old English *wudu-ælfenne*) would fit better to it. On the other hand, *nandin* is in the *Qenya Lexicon* under NAŘA, whence *nan* ("woodland"), but in "The Creatures of the Earth" *nandini* is glossed "fay of the valleys," and in the Gnomish Lexicon *nandin* is "fay of the country" (59).

(393). Even in the late version of the *Lay of Leithian* that Tolkien recommened after completing *The Lord of the Rings,* the verses say that "there he [Thingol] saw her, fair and fay: / Ar-Melian, the Lady grey" (*LB* 347). The quotation from the *Quenta Silmarillion* denotes that *fay* was used in a sense similar to that of the natural spirits described in the *Lost Tales,* and transferred to her daughter Lúthien. But probably it was also maintained because the tale of Beren and Lúthien was the most "fairyish" one, and both Melian and Lúthien played the part of enchantresses in the story, wielders of *faerie* in its older sense. Especially meaningful is the way in which the word *fay* was used in the latest version of the *Lay of Leithan*, not as a noun but as an adjective, like it was originally in Old French and Middle English.

In the other cases Tolkien gradually ceased to use the term *fay* and *fairy* in favor of *elf*, although fairies still slipped in occasionally, like the "fairy wife" that was taken by one of Bilbo's Took ancestors, according to hobbit sayings (*Hobbit* 4). And as we will see next, they could have lasted even longer under a linguistic veil.

Related terms in Invented Languages

The words in the languages that Tolkien invented are often useful to gain insight into his literary inspiration. In this case, the name *Lúthien* itself is very significant. Its meaning changed through the years. First it meant "Man of Luthany," that is "friend," *Luthany* being "friendship," the Elvish name of England (*BLT2* 301). It was the name that Elves gave to Eriol/Ælfwine, but elsewhere it was applied to one of his sons, who was called *Helusion* in Qenya, and in Old English was *Hendwine* ("close friend") or *Hlúdwine* ("of the clear voice"), depending on the text ("Names and Required Alterations" 17-8). Then *Lúthien* was changed to refer to England itself, and finally became the true name of Tinúviel. The latest available philological explanation on *Lúthien* tells that it meant "daughter of flowers," from Sindarin *lúth* ("Words, Phrases and Passages in *The Lord of the Rings*" 161). But when Tolkien wrote the *Etymologies*, he made that name to mean "enchantress" in Doriathrin, coming from the root LUK- ("magic, enchantment"). The semantic content of that etymology is strikingly similar to that of *fay*, and what has been previously told indicates that such a relation could have been intentional.

That case is probably the closest relation between *fairy* or *fay* and Tolkien's languages, but perhaps not the only one. The eventual origin of those words from the Latin verb *fārī* ("speak") may be recalled in relation to the meaning of *Quendi* ("those who speak with voices"), from the root *quet-* which means "say, speak" (*Sil.* 45, 438), although this relation may well be fortuitous. Another intriguing case is found in the folk of Ingwë, who are to a great extent a continuation of the concept implied by the Inwir, commented on above. The

collective name of that kindred in later conceptual stages, *Vanyar*, means "the Fair," originally with the sense of "pale, light-colored" (referred to their hair and complexion), but also "beautiful" as a secondary implication (*The War of the Jewels* [*WJ*] 383). Now, the English word *fair* retains a similarity to *fairy* which is not insignificant at all; actually both words seem to have been part of a common lexical field when the latter was introduced into English, and the euphemistic name of "fair folk" often applied to fairies or like creatures (translating Welsh *tylwyth teg*), and also used by Tolkien to refer to the Elves, could have been favored by that similarity (Harte 33; Williams 460, 473). Thus, we could transfer this fact to the secondary world, and propose a tentative connection between the Quenya name *Vanyar* and our *Fairy*.

It may seem overbold to think that Tolkien would have simply accepted such an unetymological resemblance. He usually disallowed the guesses that critics and readers made on his nomenclature founded only in similarities, as his letter to "Mr. Rang" clearly shows (*Letters* 379-80). Nevertheless, most of the "guesses" that Tolkien criticized were about the sources of names in his invented languages, not about puns in their glosses or renditions in modern languages. He even refused some of these, as the connection between *hobbit* and *rabbit* claimed by some, inspired by the rhyme of the words and a couple of related puns in *The Hobbit*, which Tolkien explained as "merely an obvious insult, of no more etymological significance" (*Letters* 406). But in spite of his own objections, he sometimes assumed that kind of formal coincidence and even transferred it to the languages of the secondary world, as happened to the *hobbit-rabbit* pun itself (*The Peoples of Middle-earth* 49n).[9]

And there is still another case, better suited to the present discussion: the translation of *Noldor* as "Gnomes," which is parallel to the proposed correlation between *Vanyar* and "Fairies." *Gnome* is taken from French *gnome*, which itself derives from Latin *gnomus*, as used by Paracelsus to refer to earth-elemental creatures, representing Greek γηνόμος from γῆ ("earth"). Tolkien, however, associated *Noldo* to "gnome" with the sense of "wise," as if it came from Greek γνώμη ("thought, intelligence"), in spite of the *OED* rejection of that etymology (*BLT1* 43-4). Tolkien always knew that he was using a "false etymology," since in the very beginning he associated the meaning of *Noldo* to "gnome" with the sanctioned sense of "earth-dweller" ("Qenyaqetsa" 67). And although he progressively abandoned the usage of the term *Gnomes*, preferring the invented name *Noldo* (cf. note 2), he still liked that association of ideas, and

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[9] In the cited draft of the Appendices to *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien not only transferred the English rhyme of *hobbit* and *rabbit* to Westron *cūbuc* and *tapuc*, respectively, but even admitted that the faint suggestion of *rabbit* appealed to him when he invented the word *hobbit*, in spite of what he declared in his letters.

in the latest version that he wrote of the *Silmarillion* he told that Men called the people of Finrod *Nómin*, "the Wise" (*WJ* 217), a name that clearly recalls *gnome*. In this light, it is conceivable that Tolkien had not abandoned the early association between the people of Ingwë and fairies entirely, but transformed it to mean that elves are often called "fairies," because some of them were originally "the Fair," and that name was contaminated by other etymologies, just as happened with the "Gnomes."

On the other hand, in a less tentative analysis, the name *Vanyar* may be related with the etymology of *elf*. Tolkien was obviously aware that elves were traditionally believed to be fair (beautiful) creatures, but moreover he should have known that the word *elf* itself was thought to originally mean "fair" in the sense of "light colored, white," as commented on above. Thus, it is possible that the name of the first kindred of Elves had been inspired by that idea. This theory is further supported by the generic name by which Men referred to Elves in Adûnaic: *Nimîr*, which stands for "the Beautiful" (*WJ* 386), but literally meant "the Shining Ones," from the verb NIMIR "shine" (*Sauron Defeated* 358, 416).[10] It is told that they were so named because "they were exceeding fair to look upon, and fair were all the works of their tongues and hands." But all those Adûnaic words seem to be clearly connected to the Sindarin term *nim* ("white"), occurring in names like *Nimloth* ("White Flower"), *Ered Nimrais* ("White Mountains"), etc. (*Sil.* 438). This means that the pattern of a noun that etymologically means "white, light-colored," but is used to mean "beautiful" or to refer to fair beings, is not only common to *Vanyar* and the hypothetical history of the word *elf*, but also to the history of *Nimîr*, the generic Adûnaic name for Elves.

That coincidence could have been intentional, too, in order to account for a fictional explanation of how *elf* came into existence in the languages of Men, and the origin of its intriguing etymology.

Conclusion

The etymological and literary evidence gathered here about fairies and elves, and the analysis of related elements in Tolkien's nomenclature, are helpful to clarify some misunderstandings or simplified interpretations about the nature of Elves in his mythology.

Thus, the French origin of *fairy* or *fay* is often mentioned as a reason for Tolkien having disliked it, as if it were one of the "polysyllabic barbarities [of the Norman Conquest] which ousted the more honest if humbler native [English] words" (Carpenter 40). However, those words did not enter English

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[10] Those references show different forms of the Adûnaic name for the Elves. It was originally *Nimrî*, later changed to *Nimir*, and eventually *Nimîr*.

language as a Norman replacement of Anglo-Saxon *ælf* or a perversion of the Germanic concept, but as a complementary abstract noun or adjective, that appropriately described things related to elves as they were conceived in English tradition. Their evolution as synonyms of *elf* is actually a feature of English language, in which manifold names for elvish creatures proliferated at the end of the Middle Ages. Tolkien himself commented on that original meaning in his essay *On Fairy-Stories*, and his good opinion on such *Faery* is generally acknowledged as an exception.

Now, although Renaissance and Modern literature has favored less serious versions of elves, and the term *fairy* has been ever more used, there is no cause-effect relationship between both facts. Actually, many of the typical "debased" characteristics of fairies (diminutive size or invisibility, charming or mischievous character, femininity) may be traced back to Anglo-Saxon *ælfe* and old Germanic tradition. Therefore, the opposition implied in the *OED* between Teutonic elves and smaller, more playful and feminine fairies, is unetymological, a consequence of its literary usage.

Moreover, Tolkien did apply some of those characteristics to the Elves of his *legendarium*, and he used fairy-related terminology in the stories, or even implied it within his invented languages. He would eventually abandon most "fairy-nomenclature," but that was not an abrupt change. Instead, some of the early usages of *fay* and *fairy*, say their application to the "lesser Vali" and to the people of Inwe, respectively, were subtly transformed so that the former and their descendants continued to deserve some of the meanings of those words, and perhaps the latter might still receive the epithet of "fairies" as a consequence of linguistic distortion, just like the translation of the Mannish name for the people of Finwë remained as "gnomes".

The obvious slant of Tolkien's mythology towards Germanic motifs and language can be easily over-magnified, but the cultural background he drew on was a broader view of English literature. The elements that he disapproved of, like the popular type of fairies, were not just neglected, but cleverly transformed or reinterpreted, in order to achieve a satisfactory framework for them in the secondary world.
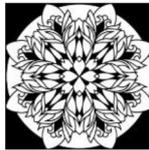
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