**Unreal Fauna**

Troll is not the only Old Norse word that seems to have gone through a kind of semantic constriction during the late medieval and early modern periods. The Icelandic word for elves, álfar (sing. álfr), was both used by Jón Árnason and his contemporaries and also appears in numerous medieval sources, both poems and sagas. Since many instances of the term’s appearance are brief and provide little information about what the word might refer to, it has often been assumed that the medieval elves are akin to the elves found in Jón Árnason’s folktales, the same elves even, and that is indeed how they have commonly been interpreted.

However, if scholars approach the Old Norse creatures designated with this term without the prejudice that they must share a species with post-medieval creatures of the same name, it becomes more logical to interpret the evidence in such a way that the Old Norse álfr is a more unspecified term with a fairly broad significance, perhaps indicating “any cultic paranormal being on a lower rung than the actual Æsir, the high gods of Old Norse myth and legend” (thus including the fertility gods termed Vanir but also apparently covering a variety of other beings). Thus the Old Norse álfr is used to indicate not only a specific race or species or even category of elves but rather any kind of paranormal figure clearly superior to humans — somewhat similar to the way a modern anthropologist might use the term “god” (or “deity”) to mean “a god” rather than “God.” If we regard the term to be so broadly significant, then it comes as no surprise that elves in the sagas some-
times seem to be minor deities or cultic figures and perhaps are only rarely a distinct race or species, and neither would it then come as a surprise that an elf could be also a human, a dwarf, or a troll.  

Old Norse terms describing the paranormal may thus, on closer examination, fail to correspond well to their later usage. For example, while the primary modern Icelandic term for ghost, draugur (plur. draugar), is well-attested in Old Norse texts (draugr), it is far from dominant in the Middle Ages, and in fact, some infamous undead of the Sagas of Icelanders (Víg-Írpa of Laxdæla saga, Dórólfr twist-foot of Eyrbýggja saga and Glámr of Grettis saga, for example), are never referred to using this term in the respective sagas in which they appear. Some such figures are, however, described as trolls, such as Sóti the viking in Harðar saga ok Hólmverja, who is said to have been “mikit tröll í lífinu, en hálfu meira, síðan hann var dauðr” (a great troll in his lifetime, but twice as much so once he was dead). Although the Icelandic draug(u)r seems to have conveyed a similar significance during the Middle Ages as it has in post-medieval times, even that parallel remains ambiguous, in particular because this word, like many Old Icelandic words, appears also sometimes within a metaphorical setting in poetry.

To illustrate precisely how terminology from the Middle Ages is not as specific as scholars of the last two centuries have sometimes assumed an example from Örvar-Odds saga is informative. In this saga the eponymous hero’s primary antagonist, the master criminal Ögmundr Eyþjófsbani who haunts Oddr throughout the saga as if committed to the idea that there can be only one, is at one point said to be “it mesta tröll ok úvættir, er skapaz hefir í norðrhálfu heimsins” (the greatest troll and ogre that has emerged in the northern hemisphere). He studies witchcraft and illusions from an early age. It is also said that the Permians “blótuðu ... hann ok tryldu hann svá, at hann var engum mennzkum manni líkr” (worshipped him and trolled him
so that he became unlike any human being), and men believe that he should “eigi síðr kallaz andi en maðr” (rather be called a spirit than a human). The implication here is that in the beginning Ögmundr was human, but underwent some kind of ritual or at least procedure, referred to as trolling (“trylla”) but never more clearly explained, that seems to have shifted him from one state of being to another. There is no mention of him dying in the process, but some such transformation seems nevertheless to have taken place since the saga indicates that he cannot be considered a human any longer, and also that he cannot die. Ögmundr himself later admits that he has become inhuman, “nú em ek eigi síðr andi en maðr” (now I am no less a spirit than a man), and also states “ek væra dauðr ef ek hefði øðli til þess” (I would be dead if it were in my nature).

Ögmundr is said to be “svatr ok blár” (black and blue), a description used of many Icelandic ghosts, but he is never directly described using the words scholars commonly associate with ghosts in the sagas, although there is mention of “jötnar,” “fjandr,” and “troll” (giants, devils, and trolls) in the different versions of this saga. Even though Ögmundr is referred to as a spirit (“andi”) but not a ghost, there is strong evidence which suggests he should be counted amongst the undead. Something of a medieval Frankenstein creature, having been re-animated like a revenant, it is stated that Ögmundr can no longer die — perhaps precisely because he can no longer be counted among the living. It is left up to the audience of Örvar-Odds saga to choose how they would like to refer to Ögmundr: as a devil, demon, troll, spirit, or ghost or perhaps all of the above in chorus. Providing evidence of the common indeterminacy of medieval terminology, this example also demonstrates that, when it comes to the paranormal, the more difficult it becomes to classify or name a monster, the greater is the power that it might wield.

It was only during the eighteenth century that scholars began to interpret the paranormal figures of the Middle
Ages as constituting particular races, corresponding to non Indo-European neighbours of the Germanic people of the North, such as the Sami. The practice can be found, for example, in J.F. Neikter’s De gente antiqua Troll (published in 1793–1799) wherein the author firmly categorises trolls as an “old race.” Since then modern scholars have continued to deal with medieval terms such as álfr and troll as indicative of members of particular races or species, equivalent to words like horse, Caucasian, or Swede. However, such taxonomic practice is a largely a post-medieval invention, analogous to the way scientists have categorised the natural kingdom, even though medieval paranormal beings were not conceived of by people who used anything resembling modern zoological classification systems to comprehend this aspect of their reality. Thus imagining these terms to be indicative of particular species or races of otherworldly creatures is a post-enlightenment notion. Terms such as troll and álfr were indeed far more widely encompassing during the Middle Ages, denoting, in the case of troll, every kind of malevolent paranormal creature originating with magic as well as those who practice it, and, in the case of álfr, every kind of being, human or otherwise, believed to have suprahuman powers and thus worthy of a cult.

Nevertheless, notions of taxonomy did exist during the Middle Ages and medieval Icelandic sources yield some valiant medieval attempts to taxonomise otherworldly beings. One such attempt can be found in Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss wherein the narrator tries to explain the protagonist’s nature by tracing his genealogy to good-looking and large giants (risar) who mated with smaller but shifty and vicious trolls, but finally opting for his fosterage with unspecified mountain-dwellers (bergbúar) as the main causal explanation for Bárðr’s displacement from the human world to the otherworld of the mountains. However, at least according to the surviving textual evidence, the author of this saga was alone in his particular taxonomical
project which is not even entirely consistent within this single text.\textsuperscript{49}

By and large, the medieval terminology, when explored with intentions of specificity, tends to obfuscate more than enlighten: a dwarf may well be an elf (as seen in such dwarf names as Álfr and Gandalfr), a dwarf may be referred to as a troll or at least act like one,\textsuperscript{50} and the same figure may be characterised as a troll, a giant (\textit{jǫtunn or risi}), and even a man in the same source,\textsuperscript{51} leaving the task of specification and categorisation to modern scholars with only their nineteenth-century equipment in hand.\textsuperscript{52} Consequently, these paranormal beings remain steadfast in their refusal to submit to the precise categorisations anachronistically applied by nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars. Perhaps the enterprise was doomed from the beginning for the very reason that the essential nature of the occult is to remain beyond utter comprehension, its power wholly reliant upon the doubt and uncertainty that it arouses in those whose experience or encounter it, and subsequently in the stories such experiences or encounters inspire.