

Etymology of Mythical Creatures and Figures

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Abstract: this article explores the fascinating origins and linguistic roots of the names of various mythical creatures and figures from diverse cultures around the world. By delving into the etymology, the study reveals how these names reflect the cultural perceptions, attributes, and historical contexts of the entities they describe. The article begins with an analysis of well-known mythical creatures such as dragons, phoenixes, and werewolves. For instance, the term "dragon" is traced back to the Greek word "dragōn," meaning "serpent" or "giant sea fish," highlighting the creature's feared and awe-inspiring nature across cultures. Similarly, the phoenix, a symbol of rebirth and immortality, is examined through its Greek origins, where "phoenix" referred to a mythical bird associated with the sun.

Keywords Etymology, mythical creatures, linguistic roots, cultural perceptions, historical contexts, dragons, phoenixes, werewolves, gods, goddesses.

Introduction: Every culture has its own gaggle of monsters and beings residing in traditional tales. Versions of some creatures, such as the prolific fairy, populate stories across multiple cultures and countries. Others, meanwhile, are born to a single region. "Places get the monsters they deserve. It is that simple," Young says. "A hunter-gatherer community will have bogies connected to the chase. An agricultural community will have monsters on the edge of the village, near the fields. An industrial community will have horrors in abandoned factories, etc ... There is a vast range. What always amazes me is how they change not just from country to country, but from valley to valley."

Main part

Legendary beasts and beings continue to captivate us as stories of old receive contemporary updates in books, movies and on television. In the case of Amazon Prime Video's fantasy noir series *Carnival Row*, for example, viewers are introduced to a world in which fabled beings like faeries and fauns live as "immigrants" amongst humans in a war-torn land. In the show, these creatures are feared – and humans restrict their freedoms because of it.

The mythical creatures found in folklore do a lot of different jobs, says Simon Young, a British historian of folklore and co-editor/co-author of the book *Magical Folk: British and Irish Fairies, 500 AD to the Present*. "They uphold morality, enforce taboos, connect to divinity, warn against dangers and, most importantly, entertain," Young says. "If I had to sum it up, though, I'd say they teach us modesty. There are things that are bigger than us that we glimpse and things that we cannot even conceive: things that are, in any case, beyond our control. They are the unknown. The darkness under the stairs or off the path in the forest or in our neighbor's heart."

The term "fairy" (alternatively spelled "faerie" or "faery") entered the lexicon during the Middle Ages in Europe, different versions of the creature already existed in tales being passed down in regions around the world in both literature and oral traditions. Greek mythology had its nymphs. Irish folklore told of the leprechaun, an often grumpy, mischief-prone subtype of fairy. Look to

the Samoans and indigenous people of the Americas, and you'll find folk characters that bear resemblance to what was, or is, considered a fairy. Many times, fairies – also known as the fae, wee folk, good folk or people of peace – were defined as any mystical creature taking a humanoid appearance.

What do you think of when you imagine a fairy? The first image that likely springs to mind is of a diminutive, gossamer-winged sprite – often taking the form of a beautiful woman – who uses her magical pixie dust to perform benevolent deeds for humans. While this wholesome representation of fairies commonly populates children's storybooks in modern times, they actually have a darker and more sinister folkloric past. Some traditional stories from England, Ireland and Scotland, for example, depict these soulless, supernatural beings as wicked, temperamental entities that weren't above murder or kidnapping if you landed on their bad side. They're not always tiny, either. Depending on the region, fairies can be the size of a human, or even bigger.

Majority of the fairy legends of western Europe go, if you come across a fairy ring – distinguished by a circle of mushrooms in a field or forest – do not dare step inside. The ring is said to be created by dancing fairies, and entering it can lead to a number of dire consequences. For example, some myths warned that you'd die young. Other stories alleged you'd be forced to dance around the ring until you died of exhaustion or went mad. Fairy rings were also believed to be instant portals to the fairy realm, where if you ate or drank anything you'd be trapped for eternity. And although humans and fairies were allowed to marry, they could only do so only under certain conditions. If those conditions were not met, the marriage ended – and sometimes, the life of the human would, too.

If contemporary popular culture is to be believed, trolls are small, happy-go-lucky creatures with colorful hair who break into song and dance sporadically. Trolls' roots in Scandinavian folklore, however, tell a different story. In traditional mythology, these monstrous, somewhat humanoid beings were not so cheerful, and actually quite hostile. In these stories, they occupied castles, emerging only at night because exposure to sunlight meant either a horrifying death or a life forever suspended in stone. Certain landmarks in Norway are even said to have formed from a troll that got caught out in the sun.

Particular tales, these brutish creatures dwelled in the mountains and boasted overstated facial features that mirrored that of a stereotypical Neanderthal. Still, in different regional stories were trolls who made their homes deep in underground caves. These were described as being even uglier, with stubby limbs, fat bellies and slime-covered skin from all the time spent below the Earth's surface. There's some disagreement as to whether the trolls of lore were all bad. But they have been described as being perfect thieves, entering homes under a cloak of invisibility to steal food and cause other mischief.

If there's one in particular that strikes fear in the hearts of children, however, it's Grýla, the Icelandic troll woman said to terrorize families during the jolliest time of year – Christmas. Stories are told of Grýla descending from her frigid mountain lair every December to snatch up naughty boys and girls and devour them in a stew. Meanwhile, her mischievous sons, the 13 Yule Lads, started out with backstories of torment as well, but now enjoy a more pleasant reputation ... at least in comparison.

Today, trolls have pushed well beyond Norse mythology and Scandinavian folklore, and have become recurring characters in fantasy films, literature, role-playing games and yes, on toy store shelves. But as varied as their origin and evolution may be, the mythos we have created around trolls often touches on the same theme – a fear of those unlike ourselves.

In conclusion, the etymology of mythical creatures and figures provides a rich tapestry of linguistic history that mirrors the cultural and historical evolution of human societies. By uncovering the roots and transformations of these names, the article offers a deeper understanding of how myths are intertwined with language and how they continue to influence and reflect our collective imagination. The article also touches upon the broader linguistic patterns observed in

mythological nomenclature, such as the use of compound words and descriptive epithets that convey specific qualities of the mythical beings. These linguistic devices not only enhance the narrative but also aid in the oral transmission and memorability of the myths.

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