

## Topic Page: [Elves](#)

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Definition: **elf** from *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

in Germanic mythology, a type of fairy. Usually represented as tiny people, elves are said to dwell in forests, in the sea, and in the air. Although they can be friendly to man, they are more frequently vengeful and mischievous.

Summary Article: **elves**

From *Chambers Dictionary of the Unexplained*

*A race of supernatural beings in Germanic and Norse folklore. In Britain, over the centuries, they came to be almost synonymous with the diminutive fairies of native British folklore, until J R R Tolkien's depiction of them in Lord of the Rings helped to restore a concept of them which was much closer to the original Germanic one.*

Elves were originally described in Germanic and Norse folklore as being semi-divine creatures, gods of nature and fertility, who were of human stature. The word 'elf' comes from Old Norse *alfr*, via Anglo-Saxon *ælf*. The Scandinavian elves were divided into light elves and dark elves, the light elves being benevolent and the dark elves, who were said to live underground, being malevolent; in this tradition, the dark elves appear to be synonymous with dwarfs. Scandinavian elf women are generally portrayed as being beautiful, but in some traditions they may have some deformity which gives away their true nature, such as a cow's tail or a hollow back. Elves are very quick to retaliate if offended or angered, and are credited with blighting livestock and causing nightmares, skin rashes or sudden paralysis; 'elf-stroke', the original and full form of the word 'stroke', shows how this affliction was once blamed on the malice of elves.

By the 8th century, stories about elves had started appearing in Britain, where they were initially portrayed much like their Germanic and Norse counterparts. The word was also sometimes applied to mischievous woodland spirits such as puck and Robin Goodfellow, and to small fairy boys. However, in England the word 'elf' gradually became interchangeable with the fairy of native British folklore, although in Scotland, the word 'elf' still tended to denote a being of human size. Shakespeare apparently made no distinction between elves and fairies, and his influence helped to distance elves further from their mythic origins, so that by the time of the English folk tales of the early modern period, they had been reduced to the status of small, mischievous nature spirits. However, the English philologist and writer J R R Tolkien did much to resurrect the concept of elves as a race of human-sized, semi-divine beings with his portrayal of them in his enormously successful *The Lord of the Rings* (3 volumes, 1954–5). See also fairies.

**APA**

Chicago

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MLA

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elves. (2007). In U. McGovern (Ed.), *Chambers Dictionary of the unexplained*. London, UK: Chambers Harrap. Retrieved from <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/elves>

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## APA

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## Harvard

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## MLA

"elves." *Chambers Dictionary of the Unexplained*, edited by Una McGovern, Chambers Harrap, 1st edition, 2007. *Credo Reference*, <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/elves>. Accessed 15 Oct. 2019.