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“What about side by side with a friend?”

Dissecting the ‘Elves versus Dwarves’-trope, its mythological origins and application in a selection of contemporary High Fantasy universes.

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“What about side by side with a friend?“

Dissecting the ‘Elves versus Dwarves’-trope, its mythological origins and application in a selection of contemporary High Fantasy universes.

Erik Taubert*

2025-06-11

Abstract — Elves and dwarves have been staple characters in High Fantasy universes since their dynamics have been defined by J.R.R. Tolkien in his ‘Middle-earth’-universe. With origins in Anglo-Saxon and Norse mythology regarding etymology, gender and imagination, both elves and dwarves were likely based on the same or a similar concept. While these influences are apparent in all the analyzed fantasy universes, namely ‘Middle-earth’, ‘Warhammer’ and the Dungeons and Dragons setting: ‘Forgotten Realms’, they portray both races/species as inherently different. The purpose of this paper is the characterization of elves and dwarves, as well as an analysis of their relationship in the respective universes. With the trope being a medievalism and fantasy media actively influencing how the European Middle Ages are imagined, this paper also aims to explore the connection between fiction and the construction of history. Lastly, the dynamics of the trope, as well as its implementation in and impact on the genre of High Fantasy are discussed.

Keywords — Dwarves, Elves, Medievalism, Fantasy, Interdisciplinarity

1. Introduction

“Those were happier days, when there was still close friendship at times between folk of different race, even between Dwarves and Elves.”¹ This quote by *Gandalf the Grey* does not only portray the complex relationship between dwarves and elves in J.R.R. Tolkien's (1892–1973) Middle-earth universe, but it also solidifies the now common imagination of a deeply rooted dissonance between the two cultures. The ‘Elves versus Dwarves’ trope has since become a very prominent feature of High Fantasy in literature and contemporary pop culture.² It describes the animosity between an advanced, sophisticated and beautiful civilization – usually slender and tall elves, and an industrialized, mettlesome and isolated civilization – usually short and stout dwarves. The trope encompasses a variety of themes such as ‘Nature versus Industry’, ‘Beauty versus Functionality’, or ‘Brain versus Brawn’, but often also unlikely friendships or the unification against evil. While these aspects shall be discussed later, it is already apparent that the ‘Elves

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¹ See J.R.R. TOLKIEN, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, London 1977, 316.

² Trope: describes a recurring motive, theme or element in media, see Cambridge Dictionary, online via: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/de/worterbuch/englisch/trope> (27.03.2025); High Fantasy: Subgenre of fantasy, is usually set in an alternative world with coherent rules and often based on medieval European imagination while also containing magic and mythical beings. The story often revolves around an epic quest, as well as the growth and ennoblement of the protagonist, see Kelly CIPERA, *Defining the Genre. High Fantasy*, online via: <https://fandomania.com/defining-the-genre-high-fantasy/> (27.03.2025); Pop culture: music, TV, cinema, books, etc. that are popular and enjoyed by ordinary people, rather than experts or very educated people, see Cambridge Dictionary, online via: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/de/worterbuch/englisch/pop-culture> (29.03.2025).

versus Dwarves' trope is not only an influential, but also a quite versatile narrative construction within contemporary fantasy media.

With the genre of Fantasy encompassing both medieval themes and mythological elements, it presents a variety of medievalisms. While the term shall be explored in more detail later, it makes it possible to understand the influence of modern popular culture on the imagination of the European Middle Ages. The study of the 'Elves versus Dwarves' trope can thereby be understood as the study of the construction of the Middle Ages that encompasses the literary sources of the mythological figures but also their contemporary reception in video- and board games, literature and pop culture.³ It is important to note that this paper deals with the reception of the *European* Middle Ages, or rather, the creation of *a number of* European Middle Ages, as medievalisms create a highly subjective and personal version of the Middle Ages. While the period of the Middle Ages as we know it today has been constructed by European scholars of the 19th century, forming a tripartite chronology with Antiquity and the Modern period, this chronology is not coeval with historical developments in other regions around the globe.⁴ The notion that a reconstruction of the European Middle Ages “as they really were” in the context of medievalisms is possible, must subsequently be rejected altogether. A medievalism cannot precisely replicate medieval realities because our modern understanding of the past is inevitably filtered through incomplete evidence, interpretive frameworks, and present-day biases.⁵

This paper aims to gain a better understanding of the 'Elves versus Dwarves' trope by venturing into the mythological and folkloric origins of both elves and dwarves in search of aspects that indicate a relation between both beings, as well as comparing their characteristics and occurrences in literary sources. Then, a selection of High Fantasy universes shall be analyzed regarding their Elf-Dwarf relationship and the origins of the respected cultures, as well as causes for potential animosity and rapprochement. The scope of this paper led to the decision to look at the *Warhammer Fantasy*, *Dungeons and Dragons (D&D)* world setting: *Forgotten Realms* and the aforementioned Middle-earth by Tolkien, because they represent examples from literature, tabletop and computer games, as well as Pen-and-Paper games. Finally, this paper will explore the utilization of the 'Elves versus Dwarves' trope in world building, narration, and as an element of immersion within these universes.

³ See Nicolas HUSS, *Das Mittelalter und seine Rezeption: Medievalism*, online via: *Mittelalter Digital*, <https://mittelalter.digital/artikel/8764/medievalism>; Nils Holger PETERSEN, *Medievalism and Medieval Reception. A Terminological Question*, in: *Studies in Medievalism* 17 (2009), 36–44, here 36 f.

⁴ Further information regarding the time period between 500–1500 AD in other regions of the world, as well as the influence of the 'global turn' on Middle Age Studies can be found in: Geraldine HENG, *The Global Middle Ages. An Introduction*, Cambridge 2021; Adam JONES, *Afrika bis 1850*, Frankfurt am Main 2016; Thomas ERTLE / Klaus OSCEMA, *Medieval Studies after the Global Turn*, in: *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales: English Edition* (2022), 1–14, DOI: 10.1017/ahsse.2022, 11.

⁵ See HUSS, *Mittelalter*.

Several of the consulted works use the term ‘race’ as a way to describe the differences between dwarves and elves. With a lasting scholarly debate on racism in fantasy media, critique on the term voiced by Melissa J. Monson and Julia Vanessa Pauss, and recent changes in terminology in the 5th Edition of *D&D*, it is appropriate to reflect on the usage of the term or its alternatives in this paper.⁶ While the specific debates shall be explored when the respective universes are discussed in detail, it is necessary to be cautious of the connotations and problems that terms like ‘race’ hold. Especially regarding the distortion and misuse of mythological and fantasy works by neo-facist and neo-nazi groups, that, among other things, equate the unequivocal hierarchies and differences between people in fantasy media with the real world.⁷ This paper will employ the terms used in the original works when referring to them within the context of their respective universes and use “race/species” when referring to cross-genre phenomena, in the analysis of the trope and in the conclusion.

2. Sources, Methods and Previous Research

To understand why the research on fantasy tropes from a historical perspective is fruitful, it is necessary to understand how the historical period of the European Middle Ages – commonly dated between 500 and 1500 AD, and modern pop culture are connected. For this purpose, the term ‘medievalism’ is essential. Medievalisms encompass all engagement with the Middle Ages, both in scholarly research, as well as its construction, usage and imagination in popular media.⁸ While the term has no rigid definition, I am following the suggestions of Leslie Workman, Tom Shippey and Nils Holger Petersen, that medievalisms are the continued construction of *one* Middle Ages through the usage of medieval imagery, ideals and practices.⁹ Consequently, it is not only important to conduct research on archeological and historiographical sources but also to analyze the contemporary depiction of medieval themes in literature, cinema, games and other pop-cultural media. According to Racha Kirakosian, no differentiation between the fantasy genre

⁶ See Julia Vanessa PAUSS, “Straight outta Mordor”. Race as the Monstrous Other in Contemporary Fantasy Film, Salzburg 2018, 29–32, online via: <https://eplus.uni-salzburg.at/Abschlussarbeiten/download/pdf/5015215> (31.10.2024); Melissa J. MONSON, Race-Based Fantasy Realm. Essentialism in the World of Warcraft, in: Games and Culture 7/1 (2012), 48–71, here 50–54, 61, online via: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/1555412012440308> (31.10.2014).

⁷ See Tobias HOF, “Hobbits and Tigers”. Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism in Italy since the mid-70s, in: Johannes Dafinger / Moritz Florin, eds., A Transnational History of Right-Wing Terrorism. Political Violence and the Far Right in Eastern and Western Europe since 1900, London / New York 2022, 182–185, DOI:10.4324/9781003105251-14; Dimitra FIMI, Revisiting Race in Tolkien’s Legendarium. Constructing Cultures and Ideologies in an Imaginary World, online via: <https://dimitrafimi.org/2018/12/02/revisiting-race-in-tolkien-s-legendarium-constructing-cultures-and-ideologies-in-an-imaginary-world/> (27.03.2025).

⁸ See Elizabeth EMERY, Medievalism and the Middle Ages, in: Studies in Medievalism 17 (2009), 78; Tom SHIPPEY, Medievalisms and Why they Matter, in: Studies in Medievalism 17 (2009), 45–47; 49–54; PETERSEN, Medievalism, 36 f.

⁹ See *ibid.*, 36; SHIPPEY, Medievalisms, 45–47.

and other forms of post-production with medievalisms has to be made, because when compared, “[...] we can see parallels in the way that medievalist notions are perceived and utilized.”¹⁰

How popular media constructs *one* Middle Ages is especially observable in Pen & Paper-games like *Dungeons and Dragons*. A group commonly consists of three to five players that each create their own character along the respective campaign setting and rules and one *Dungeon Master* (DM), who embodies all Non-Player-Characters (NPC) and narrates the story. The plot is usually created around an unlikely group of adventurers that is tasked with the investigation of mysteries, the defence of a village, the rescue of damsels, the slaying of beasts or the hunt after treasure. This narrative alone uses typical medievalisms such as the ‘knight errant’¹¹ and the structure of Arthurian legends while the foes that the group encounters are usually dragons, evil wizards and bands of bandits.¹² But even when the DM wants to change things up by reversing stereotypes or implementing contemporary topics of racism or gender inequality and diversity in the story, the game would still construct medievalisms, as the aversion of expectations assumes their existence in the first place.

Following Nicolas Huss’s characterization of medievalisms, the depiction of elves and dwarves describes an ‘escapistical medievalism’ and to an extent also ‘neomedievalism’. As escapistical medievalisms are often used to create detailed scenarios that are built upon medieval themes, they are regularly used in Live-Action-Roleplay (LARP)¹³, video- and board games or reenactment. Neomedievalisms on the other hand describe the implementation of modern themes into medieval settings or the reworking of medieval themes according to modern issues and ideas.¹⁴ While the modification of historical facts and the introduction of new themes is not harmful in the context of a playful and creative interaction with medievalisms, the category of ‘identity related medievalisms’ describes the misuse of the European Middle Ages for political and ideological purposes.¹⁵ Notorious examples for the latter would be the alteration of medieval history and the abuse of fantasy literature by the Swedish and Italian far right to push racist and discriminatory agendas.¹⁶

¹⁰ RACHA KIRAKOSIAN, Fantasy Medievalism. On the Aesthetic of the Mythical, in: Hans Rudolf Velten / Joseph Imorde, eds., *Fantasy Aesthetics. Visualizing Myth and the Middle Ages 1880–2020*, Bielefeld 2024, 217–238, here 221.

¹¹ Knight errant: figure of medieval romantic literature, a knight who is in search of adventure and quests to prove their chivalry and courage, often in the name of a lady or lord, see Collins Dictionary, online via: <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/de/worterbuch/englisch/knight-errant> (27.03.2025).

¹² See JEREMY CRAWFORD / CHRISTOPHER PERKINS / JAMES WYATT, *Dungeon Master’s Guide*, Renton 2021, 70–81, online via: <https://anyflip.com/fsfu/qjsj> (19.03.2025).

¹³ LARP: Life-Action-Role-Play, players physically embody their characters and engage with other players in often large-scale events with fantasy settings, see Cambridge Dictionary, online via: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/de/worterbuch/englisch/larp> (27.03.2025).

¹⁴ See HUSS, *Mittelalter*.

¹⁵ See *ibid.*

¹⁶ See HOF, *Hobbits*, 182 f.; HUSS, *Mittelalter*.

As mentioned earlier, the definition of medievalisms is still debated and the research conducted on them is only growing. Ultimately, the work with High Fantasy and the ‘Elves versus Dwarves’ trope specifically, can be understood as the reception of the reception of medieval legends and myths. As elves and dwarves were, to an extent, a real part of the medieval worldview – judging from their presence in a variety of literary works over a long period of time (9th century – 13th century), we can now view the trope as being a real part of the contemporary reception of the Middle Ages through games, movies, literature and other forms of pop culture. Since this paper encompasses both historical medieval sources, as well as contemporary media, its methodological dimension ranges from literary approaches to discourse analysis, eventually aiming to gain a better understanding of the contemporary imagination of the European Middle Ages.

The mythological characters of elves and dwarves have been subject to extensive research. Especially the dwarves of Old Norse sagas, as well as those in Old French, Middle High German, and Celtic literature of the Late Medieval Period (early 13th century until early 16th century) have been analyzed and interpreted extensively. Regarding dwarves, Werner Schäfke’s research has been invaluable in order to gain a conclusive overview of their complex literary character.¹⁷ Additionally, I also used articles focusing on the gender and character of mythological dwarves.¹⁸ The most influential literature regarding the folkloristic origins of elves is Alaric Hall’s *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England*¹⁹, which not only gives deep insights into the current scientific debate surrounding the origins of the term ‘*ælf*’ but also compares the characteristics and appearance of the fabled creatures across a variety of source material. To be able to analyze the three fantasy universes selected for this study, a good understanding of the genre itself, as well as their respective worldbuilding and in-universe mechanics is required. Important work on these fundamental aspects has already been done by Melissa J. Monson, Benjamin J. Carpenter and Julia Vanessa Pauss,²⁰ whose works will be consulted on this topic. The main contribution of this

¹⁷ See Werner SCHÄFKE, Was ist eigentlich ein Zwerg. Eine Prototypensemantische Figurenanalyse der Dvergar in der Sagaliteratur, in: Mediaevistik. Internationale Zeitschrift für interdisziplinäre Mittelalterforschung 23 (2010), 197–299, online via: <https://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/plg/med/2010/00000023/00000001/art00006?crawler=true&mimetype=application/pdf> (31.10.2024); Werner SCHÄFKE, Dwarves, Trolls, Ogres and Giants, in: Albrecht Classen, ed., Handbook of Medieval Culture. Fundamental Aspects and Conditions of the European Middle Ages, Bd. 1, Berlin / Boston 2015, 347–383, online via: <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bergen-ebooks/reader.action?pq-origsite=primo&ppg=357&docID=1712977> (30.10.2024).

¹⁸ See Ugnius MIKUČIONIS, Dwarfs’ Family Relations and Female Dwarfs in some Medieval Nordic Sources, in: Scandia. Journal of Medieval Norse Studies 3 (2020), 139–169, online via: <https://bora.uib.no/bora-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2764224/53664-Article%2BText-145435-1-10-2020090.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y#:~:text=In%20her%20book%20Prolonged%20Echoes,168> (30.10.2024); Sean MOCK, Against a Dwarf. The Medieval Motif of the Antagonistic Dwarf and its Role in Contemporary Literature and Film, in: Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies 14/2 (2020), 155–170, online via: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/754525/pdf> (31.10.2024).

¹⁹ Alaric HALL, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England. Matters of Belief, Health, Gender and Identity*, Woodbridge 2007.

²⁰ See PAUSS, “Straight outta Mordor”; Benjamin J. CARPENTER, “Monstrous Adventures”. The Racecraft of the Dungeons and Dragons Imaginary, in: The Howard Journal of Communications 35/1 (2024), 15–32, online via:

paper lies in the analysis of the origin and developing relations between the two species, for which a range of primary texts was consulted, among them J.R.R. Tolkien's published works (1937–1977), the official *Dungeons and Dragons: Player's Handbook* (2021), but also forums and wikis (Forgotten Realms Wiki, Warhammer Wiki, Tolkien Gateway).

The extensive body of literature on *Warhammer Fantasy* and *Forgotten Realms* lore necessitated consultation of wikis; it is, however, especially necessary to be cautious and critical towards wiki- and forum entries.

3. Mythological Origins

This chapter shall give a general overview of the mythological origins of both dwarves and elves by looking at their universal characteristics and appearances, as well as potential ties between both races/species. Even though similar beings can be found in many other literary traditions and cultures, the focus of this paper will be on Scandinavian sources from the 13th century and Anglo-Saxon sources from the 7th till 11th century. Most important among these are the skaldic and eddic verses, Norse Sagas, Middle High German fairytale-like epics and Old English medical charms.

3.1 Old Norse / Germanic

Our modern understanding of dwarves and elves as dichotomic creatures of myth and fantasy has little basis in their literary origins, but some characteristics and stereotypes can be found in the medieval sources. Dwarves are a common figure of Germanic Mythology and present in fairy tales, sagas and folklore, but their role and attributes in the stories differ quite drastically. Elves, on the other hand, are quite rarer and remain more mysterious. In search of the origins of dwarves and elves, we shall first explore Germanic *álfr* and *dverger* by looking at the Norse sagas and the Eddur. It is important to note, that both collections of writings contain contradictory and inconsistent depictions of elves and dwarves because they do not represent a coherent Mythology.

In the *Gylfaginning*, the de facto prologue of the *Prose Edda* (1220–1225 AD), *ljósálfar* and *dökkálfar*, as subgroups of *álfr* (commonly equated with elves), are introduced.²¹ The *ljósálfar* ('light-álfr') are described as “*eru fegri en sól sýnum*” (“more beautiful than the sun in appearance”²²), while the *dökkálfar* ('dark-álfr') are “*eru svartari en bik.*” (“blacker than pitch.”²³). These short descriptions and the fact that the *ljósálfar* live in the heavenly *Álfheim*, while the *dökkálfar* dwell underground, does remind of the bilateral depiction of elves and

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10646175.2023.2238194?scroll=top&needAccess=true> (30.10.2024); MONSON, Race-Based Realm.

²¹ See Snorri STURLUSON, *Edda*, ed. by Ivar Mortensson-Egnund / Erik Eggen, Oslo 2017, 291.

²² HALL, *Elves*, 24; STURLUSON, *Edda*, 291.

²³ *Ibid.*.

dwarves in modern High Fantasy. Even though interpretations vary, most scholars equate the *dökkalfar* as well as the *svartálfar* (‘black-álf’), that are almost exclusively mentioned in the *Prose Edda*, with the *dverger* (dwarves) of the Sagas.²⁴

The blurry line and presumably close relation between elves and dwarves in Norse Mythology is apparent and will be a recurring phenomenon in the further work with the source material. A significant difference between both mythological beings can, however, be found in the frequency of their appearance and the roles they occupy in the sagas. While the *álfar* are usually accompanying the gods, especially *Freyr* who is portrayed as the king of the *álfar* in the *Grimnismál*, they never really display agency.²⁵ Meanwhile *dverger* are a common character in many sagas, sometimes fulfilling the role of the ‘grateful dwarf’ or ‘skillful smith’ and are generally acting more ambiguous.²⁶ This lead Alaric Hall to assign both *álfar* and *dverger* the category of “supernatural beings” in the mythology. Nevertheless, he puts the former along the *æsir* (Gods) in the group of “humanlike”, while the *dverger* are “monstrous”, just like the *jǫtnar* (Ice Giants).²⁷ This categorisation illustrates that *álfar* are generally attributed positive characteristics, even being possibly used as kennings²⁸ denoting the sun, supernatural warriors, or friendliness towards humans.²⁹ On the other hand, *dverger* appear both as helpful smiths and craftsmen like the brothers *Brokkr* and *Sindri*, but also as wicked antagonists such as *Fjalar* and *Galar* in the *Skáldskaparmál*.³⁰ As mentioned earlier, elves do not appear in the sagas as acting figures. Alaric Hall does, however, propose an interpretation of the legendary smith *Vǫlundr*³¹ as an elf, based on the phrase “*vísí álfa*” (‘king of the *álfar*’ or ‘wise of the *álfar*’)³², that would allow some insight into a rare elven protagonist.³³

Nonetheless, this interpretation would further solidify the close connections between the concepts of *álfar* and *dverger*, as *Vǫlundr* displays many similarities to the dwarves in the sagas.³⁴

²⁴ See Ibid.

²⁵ *Grimnismál*: mythological poem that explains Norse Cosmology and Cosmogony, part of the Poetic Edda (late 10th century), see [Völuspá.org](https://www.voluspá.org), online via: <https://www.voluspá.org/grimnismal.htm> (01.05.2025); see HALL, *Elves*, 36, 47; Irina-Maria MANEA, *Elves & Dwarves in Norse Mythology*, online via: World History Encyclopedia, 2021, <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/1695/elves--dwarves-in-norse-mythology/> (29.10.2024).

²⁶ See SCHÄFKE, *Dwarves*, 370 f.; MANEA, *Elves*.

²⁷ See HALL, *Elves*, 31–32.

²⁸ Kenning: Skaldic stylistic device, similar to a metaphor, e.g. “battle-sweat” for “blood” (Britannica, online via: <https://www.britannica.com/art/kenning> (27.03.2025)).

²⁹ See HALL, *Elves*, 28–30.

³⁰ *Skáldskaparmál*: second part of the *Prose Edda*, consists of a collection of scaldic verses, myths and instructions for skalds – Norse poet, see [Völuspá.org](https://www.voluspá.org), online via: <https://www.voluspá.org/proseedda.htm> (10.05.2025); see STURLUSON, *Edda*, 345–348.

³¹ ‘*Vǫlundr*’ or ‘*Wayland*’: legendary smith featured in the *Vǫlundrviða* who is captured by king *Níðudr*. His Hamstrings are cut and he is forced to work for the king. Later he escapes and takes gruesome revenge, see tvtropes, online via: <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Myth/WaylandTheSmith> (27.3.2025).

³² HALL, *Elves*, 41.

³³ See *ibid.*, 40–43.

³⁴ See MANEA, *Elves*.

Usually described as ugly, of small stature, and almost exclusively male, dwarves in the sagas often support the hero by crafting magical items and weapons or by aiding him in combat. They possess magical abilities like healing powers or shape shifting and can also act as wise advisors to the protagonist, revealing the weakness of their foes and warning them of dangers.³⁵ In contrast to the subterranean dwarves in the *Eddur*, the saga-dwarves are commonly found living in stones that are situated in forests, clearings or beside streams.³⁶ As already mentioned, they appear in various roles, in some stories they steal virgins and keep them in their dwellings or they help the protagonist in their quest after a dwarven child has been rescued from danger. The motif of the ‘extorted dwarf’ best portrays the complex nature of this literary character. Here, the dwarf is captured by the hero and reluctantly supports him from thereon, but only when he is rewarded in the end.³⁷ A famous example for the latter type is *Andwari*, the guardian of the Nibelung's treasure, who is defeated by *Sigurd* and subsequently serves him. With this short characterization we can already see how closely connected the concepts of dwarves and elves are, yet how different they are represented in Norse mythology.

3.2 Anglo Saxon

While Germanic mythology already introduced us to a concept that is quite similar to the modern dwarves of High Fantasy, some pivotal influences on the notion of the slender, beautiful elf have been drawn from Anglo Saxon, Welsh and Gaelic folklore. This short excursion will primarily look at a variety of Old English medical charms and medical treatises.

A close linguistic connection between the Germanic *álfr* and the Anglo Saxon *ælf* is apparent, but the overlapping nature of *dverger* and *álfr* is also reflected in some of the Anglo Saxon texts.³⁸ Generally, a distinction can be made between seductive and beautiful elves, probably influenced by Celtic mythology and mischievous and demonic *aelfe*, with roots in Germanic folklore.³⁹

The latter were said to cause sickness and disease, as described in several Old English medical charms, found in the *Lacnunga* (11th century) and some scholars even interpret them as dwarves.⁴⁰ This notion is especially underlined by a charm titled: “*wiþ dweorh*” (‘against a dwarf’), but generally both elves and dwarves, as well as devils are mentioned as the evildoers.⁴¹

³⁵ See SCHÄFKE, *Zwerg*, 207, 242–244, 256–258.

³⁶ See SCHÄFKE, *Dwarves*, 369.

³⁷ See *ibid.*, 371.

³⁸ See HALL, *Elves*, 66 f.

³⁹ See *ibid.*, 76.

⁴⁰ *Lacnunga*: collection of charms and remedies that aim to rid patients of pain and sickness, commonly believed to be caused by mythical creatures and spirits, see Emily KESLING, *Medical Texts in Anglo-Saxon Literary Culture*, Cambridge 2020.

⁴¹ See Sean MOCK, *Dwarf*, 159 f.

Throughout the Early Middle Ages (5th until 10th century), the imagination of *ælf*e underwent many changes, the most drastic regarding their gender. Following Germanic and Old High German traditions, the word *ælf*e, initially, exclusively described a male spirit, although they are also described to possess conventionally feminine attributes. This is illustrated by the use of *ælf*syne in relation to elves as a word to describe exceptional beauty and seductiveness, commonly used from the 9th century onwards. The casting of the elven magic, the *ælf*siden, is also linked to a seduction of sorts and usually not performed by males.⁴²

The following centuries saw a rise of female denotations to *ælf*e and by the 11th century it referred to both male and female spirits. The medical charm “*Wið færstice*” (late 10th century) describes *ælf*e as weapon bearing and violent women while the later South English Legendary (compiled 1270–85 AD) portrays them as seductive and beautiful female spirits.⁴³ This ultimately predominantly female depiction of *ælf*e stands in contrast to the continuous male denotation of the dwarf, a gender constellation that seems to also have influenced the genre of High Fantasy.

4. Elves and Dwarves in High Fantasy

The merging of historical events with mythological aspects has a long tradition, with *The Legend of King Arthur* (9th century), Snorri Sturluson's *Eddur* (13th century) and *The Song of the Nibelungs* (early 13th century) being some memorable examples. Fantasy media can be seen as a continuation of these mythological works as they too are based on historical events and imagination and continue to construct *one* European Middle Ages. Even though both elves and dwarves appear in a variety of mythological works, they usually don't interact with each other, while their relationship is a central motif of High Fantasy. With the following chapter, the usage of the historical origins of elves and dwarves in the world building of the selected fantasy universes shall be explored, as well as the construction of their relationship. The following pages aim to forge the link between the historical dimension of the mythological characters and the modern construction of the European Middle Ages as a time period of myth, magic and ‘the Other’.

After we have obtained a satisfactory understanding of the mythological origins of elves and dwarves, their description in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–55) and *The Silmarillion* (1977, posthumously), *Warhammer Fantasy* and the *Forgotten Realms* -setting of *Dungeons and Dragons* will be analyzed. The following chapter will, thereby, focus on the depiction of the relationship between both races/species, looking into the reasons for potential conflict and comparing them among each other to possibly highlight similar aspects of the trope.

4.1 Middle-earth Universe

⁴² See HALL, *Elves*, 90 f., 155–157.

⁴³ See *ibid.*, 89. 158 f.

As already mentioned, the usage of the term ‘race’ in this chapter is following Tolkien’s writings. While the term does not hold the same connotations as its German counterpart, it should still be problematized and used carefully.

In Tolkien’s Middle-earth, a divine hierarchy and a rather strict moral dualism exists that classifies elves as morally and naturally higher beings than men, dwarves and orcs. Further, while most scholars agree that Tolkien himself was not racist, medieval and Victorian racial stereotypes persist in his universe. Therefore, his works need to be assessed along their mythological and medieval influences and the contemporary *Zeitgeist*.⁴⁴

In contrast to their Germanic and Anglo Saxon origins, dwarves and elves are inherently separate races in the Middle-earth universe. This becomes especially clear by the fact that they were created by two different entities, resulting in general distrust and distance between them. While the elves of the fictional *Arda* were born out of the music composed by the almighty *Illúvatar* and therefore a direct result of his thought, the dwarves were secretly created by *Aulë* – a lesser being, without *Illúvatar*’s permission.⁴⁵ This ‘subcreation’ marks a violation of the natural order in Tolkien’s universe and is generally seen as an indication for the wish to possess and dominate, evident in flawed and evil characters like *Fëanor*, *Melkor* or *Sauron*.

As the dwarves awaken after the elves have come into being they are seen as a lesser and entirely different race. This does however not mean that the two cultures did not interact with each other. While friendship is particularly rare and mostly limited to individuals such as *Gimli* and *Legolas*, there are several accounts of trade and exchange, as well as military alliances throughout the *Legendarium*. Most prominently during the *Nirnaeth Arnoediad* (‘Battle of Unnumbered Tears’) when the forces of the elves were supported by the dwarves of *Belegost*, further, during the *War of the Ring* in the *Third Age* the dwarves of *Erebor* fought alongside Men and elves against *Sauron*.⁴⁶

The distant, yet not unfriendly relationship between the races was, however, abruptly devastated by the slaying of *Thingol*, the elven king of *Doriath* by the dwarves of *Nogrod*. And while the outcome of this event led to a war between the two races, it seemed, at first, to facilitate the forming of a closer connection between elves and dwarves. After king *Thingol* had attained one of the *Silmarils*, an immensely powerful and important heirloom crafted by *Fëanor*, he hired the skilled craftsmen of *Nogrod* to beset the *Nauglamír*, a fine necklace made by the dwarves, with the jewel. The union of a *Silmaril* and the *Nauglamír* produced not only an incredibly valuable and refined piece of art, but it also symbolized the joint craftsmanship of elves and dwarves. And while the *Silmarillion* attributes the murder of *Thingol* and the subsequent war to

⁴⁴ See FIMI, Race; Cornel ZUEGLER, Was Tolkien Really Racist?, The Conversation, online via: <https://theconversation.com/was-tolkien-really-racist-108227> (28.03.2025).

⁴⁵ See Christopher TOLKIEN, ed., *Das Silmarillion*, translated by Wolfgang Krege, 32nd edition, Stuttgart 2020, 60 f.

⁴⁶ See *ibid*, 301 f.

the greed and pride of the dwarves of *Nogrod*, *Thingol's* depiction is riddled with dishonesty and arrogance.⁴⁷ This is especially striking when we consider that the *Silmarillion* is framed as the historical account of the elves, which, therefore, features a distinctly elven perspective with a strong bias against the dwarves.⁴⁸ In the end, it is not possible to exclusively put the blame on either dwarves or elves, which underlines how distrust, failed communication, and personal wrongdoings poisoned the relationship between both races for generations. But just as the animosity between elves and dwarves stemmed from individual offenses, it was the individual relationship between two members of the Fellowship of the Ring that reconciled it.

The friendship between *Gimli* and *Legolas* is not only unique and important because they belong to different races, but also because they gradually dismantle the prejudices that have dictated the relationship between elves and dwarves over the course of their journey. Most notably, the fact that *Gimli* was allowed to enter *Lothlórien*, let alone see *Lady Galadriel* and receive a gift as valuable as a strand of her hair illustrates how much mutual respect and affection existed between them. Furthermore, both *Legolas* and *Gimli* are defending and respecting each other's culture, even traveling together after the events of the war to explore the natural wonders and cities of their people. Finally, the greatest symbol of their friendship but also that of their races is the joint departure of *Gimli* and *Legolas* to the undying lands, an honour that cannot be highlighted enough. Through the two characters, Tolkien translates an unlikely friendship into a broader reflection on issues of intercultural exchange and cooperation. Although both dwarves and elves are fundamentally good and both oppose the domination of *Melkor* and *Sauron*, they are usually not interested in the hardships and problems of the other, preferring to stick to themselves. The isolation, distrust and lack of cooperation between the races is the core motif of Tolkien's *Legendarium* and it's overcoming the prerequisite for the triumph of good, the 'eucatastrophe'. Therefore, the dissonance between elves and dwarves, as well as their reconciliation are important narrative tools.

4.2 Warhammer Fantasy

As the lore of the *Warhammer Fantasy* universe is notoriously extensive, this chapter can only refer to parts of it. For a better understanding of elves and dwarves, as well as some events and characters that will be mentioned it is, therefore, advised to refer to the respective Wiki-entries and published works for further information. With *Warhammer Fantasy* following Tolkien's worldbuilding in terms of defining elves and dwarves as different 'races', the same notions mentioned earlier apply here.

⁴⁷ See *ibid.*, 363–367.

⁴⁸ See Mitchell T. DENNIS / Kenton L. SENA, *Delving too Greedily. Analyzing Prejudice against Tolkien's Dwarves as Historical Bias*, in: *Mythlore* 41/2 (2023), 161–184, here 161 f.

The origins of dwarves and elves in the *Warhammer Fantasy* universe are infused with myth and legend but they were both created and brought to the world of *Mallus* by the *Old Ones*, a group of benevolent gods.⁴⁹ The elves are divided into three subgroups, *High Elves*, *Dark Elves*, and *Wood Elves*. While the latter are not hostile towards their kin, there is a long history of bloodshed between the *High Elves* of *Ulthuan* and the *Dark Elves* of *Naggaroth*. Meanwhile some of the *Dawi* (dwarves) have been corrupted into the cruel *Chaos Dwarves* that dwell in the *Dark Lands*. This variety of subgroups among both races complicates the analysis of the dwarf-elf relationship; the focus shall, thus, be on *High elves* and the *Dawi*, as they represent the most widespread notion of the two races.

During the incursions of *Chaos*, dwarves and elves met for the first time and fought off the approaching enemy in unison, establishing a friendly contact and exchanging great heirlooms. It was by their joint effort, that *Chaos* could be defeated and after their victory a time of flourishing trade and friendship between both cultures began.⁵⁰ Here we find the reappearing motif of a common enemy; even though there might be a feud between dwarves and elves, they would always ally against a common foe like *Chaos* in the *Warhammer* universe or the forces of *Melkor* and *Sauron* in Tolkien's *Legendarium*. Further similarities between the two can be found in the reasons for their estrangement, as it was caused by a lack of communication, ignorance of their mutual struggles and an abundance of pride. Unknown to the dwarves, the elves found themselves in a bloody civil war, resulting in the forming of *High Elves* and *Dark Elves* who continued to wage war amongst each other. In an attempt to weaken the economic and military power of the *High Elves*, a troop of *Dark Elves* attacked several dwarven caravans, slaughtering the merchants and stealing the trade goods. The dwarven king *Gotrek* sent an envoy to the *High Elves*, demanding an explanation and reparations for the offense, but in arrogance the *Phoenix King* of the *High Elves* denied any involvement and shaved off the beard of the ambassador. This humiliation led to the *War of the Beard* or *War of Vengeance* as the dwarves call it, resulting in great suffering and lasting animosity between both races.⁵¹ In contrast to the rapprochement of elves and dwarves in the Middle-earth universe, the humiliation and wounds that the war has brought upon both cultures were too great for any reconciliation and so both elves and dwarves allied with other races in their continuous fight against *Chaos*.⁵²

⁴⁹ See Mathias ELIASSON, *Warhammer Armies. Dwarfs* (8th Edition), n.d., 48–50, online via: https://downloads.ctfassets.net/d8f8o92s2xk2/28uH81r0NlnYtpAFFbfn3c/f8b8df75e38b73a065f8d5a8fc0f8595/Warhammer_-_Dwarfs_9th_Ed_v.1.4.pdf (30.10.2024); Warhammer Wiki, *Elves*, online via: <https://warhammerfantasy.fandom.com/wiki/Elves> (30.10.2024).

⁵⁰ See Warhammer Wiki, *Elves*; Warhammer Wiki, *Dwarfs*, online via: <https://warhammerfantasy.fandom.com/wiki/Dwarfs> (28.03.2025).

⁵¹ See ELIASSON, *Dwarfs*, 58–67; Warhammer Wiki, *Dwarfs*; Warhammer Wiki, *Elves*.

⁵² See Warhammer Wiki, *Races and Nations*, online via: https://neoencyclopedia.fandom.com/wiki/Races_and_nations_of_Warhammer_Fantasy (28.03.2025).

The character of the dwarves in the *Warhammer Fantasy* universe heavily revolves around greed and stubbornness, evident in the long bearing of grudges while the *High Elves* portray exceptional arrogance, pride and hubris.⁵³ This follows some notions that Tolkien already introduced, but compared to his works, the characteristics of both races are much more distinct and rigid, firmly reflecting the common perception of dwarves and elves in High Fantasy.

4.3 Dungeons and Dragons (Forgotten Realms)

With the revised 5th edition of *Dungeons and Dragons* (2024), some interesting changes in terminology were implemented: the shift from ‘race’ to ‘species’. The transition was explained by *Wizards of the Coast*, the Company behind *D&D*, in a post on *D&D Beyond* in 2022:

*“[...] we understand ‘race’ is a problematic term that has had prejudiced links between real world people and the fantasy peoples of D&D worlds. The usage of the term across D&D and other popular IP has evolved over time. Now it’s time for the next evolution.”*⁵⁴

Even though the new term and the change has been subject of extensive discussion in the community, it illuminates an increasing awareness of the significance of terminology and its impact on consumers and players.⁵⁵ This chapter will subsequently also use ‘species’ instead for ‘race’, although this new term is also bears its own problems.

Like the *Warhammer Fantasy* universe, the lore of *Forgotten Realms* features a variety of myths and explanations surrounding the origins of dwarves and elves. Many dwarves believe that their ancestors came from the core of the planet after being created by *Moradin*, the god of Forging.⁵⁶ This origin story displays resemblance to the creation of the dwarves in Tolkien's works and a similar myth is also featured in the belief system of the dwarves in *Warhammer Fantasy*.⁵⁷ This underlines the strongly materialistic dwarven culture and close connection between their craftsmanship and religious beliefs. Likewise, the elves recount a variety of legends regarding their creation. They believe that their superior ancestors were born from the blood that the deity *Corellon* had shed in a fight with the god *Gruumsh*.⁵⁸ The notion of noble and powerful ancestors that preceded a currently declining species is also found in the *Warhammer*- and *Middle-earth* universe and is especially typical for elves. The elves can be divided into a variety of subspecies

⁵³ See Warhammer Wiki, Dwarfs; Warhammer Wiki, Elves.

⁵⁴ DND Staff (2022): Moving On From 'Race' in the 2024 Core Rulebooks, Blog entry, *D&D Beyond* 1.12.2022, 16:03, <https://www.dndbeyond.com/posts/1393-moving-on-from-race-in-the-2024-core-rulebooks> (28.03.2025).

⁵⁵ See Sarah-Jane SIMPSON, *D&D Races Vs Species Controversy. What to Know About e5 Removing Races*, online via: Screen Rant, <https://screenrant.com/dungeons-dragons-5e-dnd-race-species-change/> (28.03.2025).

⁵⁶ See *Forgotten Realms Wiki*, Dwarf, online via: <https://forgottenrealms.fandom.com/wiki/Dwarf> (31.10.2024).

⁵⁷ See TOLKIEN, ed., *Silmarillion*, 60 f.; Warhammer Wiki, Dwarfs.

⁵⁸ See *Forgotten Realms Wiki*, Elf, online via: <https://forgottenrealms.fandom.com/wiki/Elf> (31.10.2024).

like *Sun Elves*, *Wood Elves*, or *Drow* that portray strong physiological and cultural differences. The same goes for the dwarves who spread all over the planet and became adapted to their respective regions, like the *Arctic Dwarves*, *Gold Dwarves*, *Shield Dwarves* or *Urdunnir*.⁵⁹ This allows the players to create a more individual and nuanced character that can defy the more rigid stereotypes that elves and dwarves traditionally inherit, while still following the in-universe societal conventions.

The lore of *Forgotten Realms* portrays the relationship between dwarves and elves as generally friendly. As their alignment is usually good, they can be found allying against common foes and engaged in many individual friendships like the one between *Bruenor Battlehammer* and *Drizzt Do'Urden*.⁶⁰ The exceptions to this are the *Drow* and *Duergar* who can both be seen as evil counterparts to their kin, similar to the *Dark Elves* and *Chaos Dwarves* of the *Warhammer Fantasy* universe. The cooperation and exchange between elves and dwarves are, however, sometimes strained by their contrasting characters. Dwarves tend to hold family and the communal good above their own personal gain, sometimes appearing cold and isolated to the elves, as well as stubborn and resentful. Meanwhile elves generally prioritize their individual benefit and, therefore, seem egoistic and irresponsible to the dwarves.⁶¹ While these contradictory attributes made the relationship between both species bumpy at times, leading to feuds and misunderstandings, their cooperation can be seen as generally peaceful, which starkly contrasts them from their counterparts in the *Middle-earth* and *Warhammer Fantasy* universes.⁶²

Ultimately it is the players or Dungeon Masters' decision how elves and dwarves interact in a D&D campaign, as the *Forgotten Realms* lore allows a creative interpretation of its accounts and makes animosity, friendship, forced cooperation and more into possible narrative devices.

5. How does the Trope work?

This following chapter will incorporate the different descriptions and imaginations of the relationship between dwarves and elves in mythology and High Fantasy universes to summarize common themes and analyze why the 'Elves versus Dwarves' trope is utilized in so many works of fiction. It shall further be explored, what elements and characteristics of the two races/species make them such fertile counterparts. Therefore, some central themes like the representation of gender and the relationship to nature shall be looked at in order to determine common features or contrasting attributes.

⁵⁹ See *Forgotten Realms Wiki*, Dwarf; *Forgotten Realms Wiki*, Elf.

⁶⁰ Alignment: describes the moral and ethical stance of a character or species (*D&D Alignments Explained & Character Examples*, The Shop of Many Things, 2023, online via: <https://www.theshopofmanythings.com/blogs/lessons-from-the-tabletop/dnd-alignments-explained-character-examples> (01.03.2025). See *Othya Wiki*, Bruenor Battlehammer, online via: https://othya.fandom.com/wiki/Bruenor_Battlehammer (31.10.2024).

⁶¹ See *Forgotten Realms Wiki*, Dwarf.

⁶² See *ibid*.

When we look at most fantasy universes, we find that they portray “race-based societies” as described by Melissa J. Monson, which is recognizable by a variety of conditions. Firstly, the different races/species are biologically discrete and inherit a certain physiology, as well as characteristics and behavior that are somehow linked to their biology.⁶³ This can be observed in the physical description of dwarves as short and stout, displaying uncommon toughness and being inherently greedy and stubborn.⁶⁴ The same goes for elves who are almost exclusively depicted as slender and tall, possessing long beautiful hair and being wise, prideful and arrogant.⁶⁵ These characteristics are seen as inherently ‘dwarven’ or ‘elven’ and any deviation from these attributes marks a very unconventional character. Secondly, the “race-based society” of the High Fantasy universes involves either an institutionalized hierarchy of races/species, apparent in the Middle-earth universe or an implied hierarchy resonating in the generally more sophisticated culture and the origin story of elves in the *Warhammer Fantasy* – and *Forgotten Realms* universes.⁶⁶ Finally, the differences between the races/species are unalterable and profound as it is the case in Tolkien’s works and *Warhammer Fantasy*, while the *Forgotten Realms* universe transgresses these conventions partially by involving subspecies like *Half-Elves* or *Half-Orcs*.

As summarized by Melissa J. Monson, “[a]ll members of a particular race group are designed to share certain immutable qualities, including intellect, temperament, morality, strength and honor, thus making one member of a racialized group largely indistinguishable from another”⁶⁷. These are the underlying requirements for the construction of the ‘Elves versus Dwarves’ trope, as it refers to the relationship of two races/species but has the characteristics of personal correlations, as every individual represents their whole society.⁶⁸ On this basis, the behavior of the races/species towards each other set the stage for the quests and adventures of the protagonists of the story, providing conflict and challenges, as well as explanations for historical events in the universe. After defining the characteristics of the relation between dwarves and elves in the fantasy universes, we shall now take a deeper look into some common themes.

When picturing a dwarf, the majority will imagine them as a male warrior or smith, while the idea of elves often incorporates male and female individuals. These connotations of gender can even be traced back to the mythological origins of elves and dwarves and support the opposing nature of both races/species by expanding the trope to a ‘male versus female’ differentiation. Dwarves are almost exclusively described as male in the mythological works and in the seldom

⁶³ See MONSON, *Realm*, 50.

⁶⁴ See ELIASSON, *Dwarfs*, 11 f.; Jeremy CRAWFORD, *Players Handbook*, Renton 2021, 18 f., online via: <https://archive.org/details/dungeon-masters-guide/Player%27s%20Handbook/> (28.3.2025); TOLKIEN, ed., *Silmarillion*, 60 f.

⁶⁵ See ELIASSON, *High Elves*, 11 f., CRAWFORD, *Handbook*, 21–23.

⁶⁶ See MONSON, *Realm*, 50.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁶⁸ See MONSON, *Realm*, 54; PAUSS, *Mordor*, 31.

cases that female family members are mentioned, they never display any agency.⁶⁹ This is also true for the Middle-earth and *Warhammer Fantasy* universe, where female dwarves are mentioned, hinting towards a drastically smaller population compared to male dwarves.⁷⁰ The dwarven society is also strictly patriarchal and female members of the dwarven clans are hidden away in their dwellings. Further the notion of bearded dwarf women is commonly found, giving the few female individuals a male appearance.⁷¹ While dwarf women would not fight or bear arms in *Warhammer Fantasy* and the Middle-earth universe, they would occasionally do so in *Forgotten Realms*. Here the dwarven pantheon even features several female deities, like *Haela*, the goddess of luck and battle, *Sharindlar*, the goddess of healing and love and *Berronar*, goddess of home and family.⁷²

Meanwhile the *ælf*e of Anglo Saxon mythology are connected with traditionally female qualities like beauty and seductiveness and are even described as weapon bearing females in the Old English charm *Wið færstice* (late 10th century).⁷³ Some Middle English and older Scottish sources even mention Elf Queens, while any equivalent position for female dwarves is not described in the mythology.⁷⁴ The notion of elven queens is present in all the considered fantasy universes and they generally feature a variety of important female elven characters. In the Middle-earth legendarium the most notable of these are *Lady Galadriel*, the ruler of *Lothlórien*, *Nimloth*, the queen of *Doriath* and *Arwen*, queen of *Arnor* and *Gondor*. In the *Warhammer* universe the equivalent elven queens are *Ariel of Athel Loren* for the wood elves and *Alarielle the Radiant* of the High elves, while *Amlaruil Moonflower* is a renowned elven queen in the *Forgotten Realms* universe.⁷⁵ Finally, regarding the fighting role of female elves, we can find exclusive military units like the *Handmaidens of the Everqueen* and *Wardancers* of the *Wood elves* in *Warhammer Fantasy*, as well as individual characters like *Ayla* and *Sylvara* in *Forgotten Realms* that take active parts in fighting and are renowned among their people.⁷⁶ We can thereby see how female elves are presented as markedly more active than their female dwarven counterparts. While female elves play active roles in society and the military, dwarves appear to be almost exclusively male.

⁶⁹ See MIKUČIONIS, Dwarfs', 140.

⁷⁰ See Warhammer Wiki, Dwarf Womanfolk, online via: https://warhammerfantasy.fandom.com/wiki/Dwarf_Womanfolk (28.03.2025).

⁷¹ See Warhammer Wiki, Dwarf; Warhammer Wiki, Dwarf Womanfolk; Tolkien Gateway, Dwarf Women, online via: <https://tolkiengateway.net/wiki/Dwarf-women> (28.03.2025).

⁷² See Forgotten Realms Wiki, Morndinsamman, online via: <https://forgottenrealms.fandom.com/wiki/Morndinsamman> (31.10.2024).

⁷³ See HALL, *Elves*, 76, 89, 156–159.

⁷⁴ See *ibid*, 160.

⁷⁵ See ELIASSON, *Wood Elves*, 148; ELIASSON, *High Elves*, 186; *Forgotten Realms Wiki*, *Amlaruil Moonflower*, online via: https://forgottenrealms.fandom.com/wiki/Amlaruil_Moonflower (28.03.2025).

⁷⁶ See ELIASSON, *High Elves*, 170; ELIASSON, *Wood Elves*, 118; *Forgotten Realms Wiki*, *Sylvara*, online via: <https://forgottenrealms.fandom.com/wiki/Sylvara> (28.03.2025).

Another interesting comparative aspect is the relationship between both races/species and nature. While elves are generally seen as closely connected to their surroundings, especially trees and flowers, dwarves are often assigned the role of destroyers and polluters. This industrialized picture of dwarves is, however, a notion of contemporary High Fantasy and not evident in the mythological material. Quite the opposite, dwarves in Germanic mythology live inside boulders and dwell in nature, in some cases turn into animals and generally avoid people and towns.⁷⁷ In Tolkien's work, the dwarves are often described from an elven perspective who tend to portray them as destructive and careless, but the dwarves appreciate nature as much as the elves do. They are just focused on a different sphere of nature than the elves are accustomed to. This becomes clear when *Gimli* talks about the beauty of the *Glittering Halls*, comparing them to blossoming trees and thereby pointing out the bias that elves often have in their judgment of the dwarven sense for nature and beauty.⁷⁸ The elves on the other hand are widely associated with nature, Alric Hall even proposes a connection between the Anglo Saxon *ælf*e and ancient greek nymphs and describes them as spirits of nature.⁷⁹ This notion is also present in Tolkien's elves, especially in the *Galadhrim* of *Lothlórien* who are closely connected to the *Mallorn* – the golden trees, as they build their houses in them and generally take extensive care of their homeland.⁸⁰

Often, elves are described through comparisons with plants and flowers and all the examined High Fantasy universes feature entire subspecies or groups of elves living in the woods like the *Silvan Elves* and *Galadhrim* in Middle-earth and the *Wood Elves* of the *Forgotten Realms* and *Warhammer Fantasy* settings, who also serve as guardians for the forests they live in. From this we can deduce that the motif of 'Nature versus Industry' is a core component of the 'Elves versus Dwarves' trope, although other motive such as 'Big versus Small', 'Brains versus Brawn' and 'Harmony versus Discipline' also play an important role.⁸¹

All of the discussed themes and motives make the trope a potent narrative device that saturates the setting of epic adventures by enriching the history of their fictional world and creating interesting dynamics between characters belonging to the two species/races. The trope can help to criticize problems of the real world like isolation, prejudices and communication issues, and thereby aim to teach the consumer of the respective media that understanding and cooperation lead to great deeds and the victory of good. Furthermore, the possibility of comedic

⁷⁷ See SCHÄFKE, Zwerg, 224.

⁷⁸ See DENNIS / SENA, Prejudice, 164.

⁷⁹ See HALL, Elves, 83–85.

⁸⁰ See Allison KERLEY, The Culture of Nature in Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings, Paper, Claremont 2015, 23, online via: https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1630&context=scripps_theses (30.10.2024).

⁸¹ See tvtropes, Elves versus Dwarves, online via: <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ElvesVersusDwarves#:~:text=Elves%20love%20trees%20and%20green,that%20have%20Elves%20and%20Dwarves> (31.10.2024).

content makes the relationship between dwarves and elves a great subject of jokes and entertainment, loosening up the often serious tone of High Fantasy.

In the case of D&D, the trope equips the Dungeon Master and the players with a variety of narrative options, possibly evoking a scrutinization of the concept and thereby constructing meaningful moments in the campaign. This does, however, not mean that future works of fantasy should mindlessly adopt this preexisting concept but rather orient their worldbuilding along the conventions, purposefully questioning and modifying them to develop the trope further. It could also be interesting to subvert the expectations of the consumer and reject the ‘Elves versus Dwarves’ trope completely. It does, however, have the advantage easing the introduction of new worlds because new players or readers would already be familiar with the dynamic between elven- and dwarven-like races/species.

6. Conclusion

The ‘Elves versus Dwarves’ trope is an almost indispensable feature of High Fantasy media and persists to influence our general understanding of the fictional species of elves and dwarves. After looking at the mythological origins of both entities we can summarize that their origin is most likely a shared concept in Old Norse and Old English mythology. Over the span of several centuries, the distinct characteristics of dwarves and elves have developed while they continued to be closely related, often fulfilling similar roles in the legends. Elves, on the other hand, are generally portrayed as benevolent creatures in mythology while dwarves fulfill more ambiguous roles and can even be antagonistic. Further, the gender connotated with the respective species changed drastically in case of the elves, who were at first predominantly described as male and while the idea of seductive and beautiful female elves became the norm much later, especially in later Anglo Saxon folklore. Meanwhile, dwarves are almost exclusively portrayed as being male.

The impact of these notions is apparent in many High Fantasy universes, influencing the physiological descriptions of the short and stout dwarves, as well as the idea of the slender and tall elves. While looking at both species in the Middle-earth-, *Warhammer Fantasy*- and *Forgotten Realms* universes, several similarities could be identified. Most prominently, the origins of the species and cause for their estrangement seem to follow cross-genre themes, but underlying motives of gender and the connection to nature were also present. While the respective fantasy universes took different approaches in the portrayal of subspecies and their differing cultures, these overarching themes generally remain present, although they bear more nuance and distinctiveness in regards to the elves. Characteristics like the inherent greed and stubbornness of dwarves and the arrogance and pride of elves became the norm for the construction of both races/species in the majority of High Fantasy universes and thereby also provide the underlying fuel for their entrenched conflict. The contradictory characters of dwarves and elves and their differing social norms make them great subjects for the trope and allow the reader or player to

pick a side in the conflict or work towards a reconciliation between the two. This makes the trope an ideal tool to problematize and critique real social and political conditions, because it highlights issues of isolation, prejudice and racism and demonstrates the effects of miscommunication and ignorance to the consumer of fantasy media.

It became clear that the ‘Elves versus Dwarves’ trope draws inspiration from the historical imagination of elves and dwarves, while the works of J.R.R. Tolkien laid the groundwork for how their relationship is imagined in High Fantasy. What makes fantasy media such an interesting topic for contemporary research is not only its abundant medievalisms and frequent usage of medieval themes, objects, names, customs and beliefs, but rather the way in which it creates a modern imagination of the European Middle Ages. By understanding how fantasy universes are created, we also understand how a historical period like the Middle Ages is created and which modern themes and ideas influence this picture. The issue of the popular construction of the Middle Ages as a mythical, unhygienic and uncultured time, in other words, as a “Dark Age”, can only be properly addressed with by an understanding of where these notions have their origins. By drawing a connection between the historical and fantastical world, a better understanding of the processes and influences involved in their creation in popular belief can be achieved. Ultimately, this will support us in working towards a more reflected idea of the European Middle Ages.

While Fantasy itself is a widely accessible genre that encourages creative confrontation with stereotypes, tropes and social problems, these notions are even more effective and interactive in Role-Playing-Games. While literature presents relatively rigid descriptions and often tries to leave rather scant room for interpretation, the construction of characters, relationships and whole worlds lies in the hands of DM’s and Players in games like D&D. This makes these games very potent tools for education, as they encourage a reflective approach on social issues and let the players embody a variety of characters. With these characters potentially suffering from social hierarchies, prejudice and stereotypes, empathy and open-mindedness are encouraged.

Tropes like ‘Elves versus Dwarves’ create great versatility, making it possible to incorporate comedy, tragedy and emotional relationships into the campaigns and stories. Because of the general familiarity with the dynamics of the trope, it can be used as an introductory device, building on the experience of the consumers of High Fantasy media. Nonetheless the ‘Elves versus Dwarves’ trope has the tendency to become predictable and boring and it should thereby be encouraged to challenge it by subverting expectations and defying the common characteristics of elves and dwarves to create a more versatile and interesting experience.

Appendix

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