The Dispossessed House-Spirit: The Etymology of *goblin* and Some Thoughts on its Early History

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The erosion of belief in supernatural beings in our secular age has resulted in imps, pookas, elves, fairies, brownies, nixes, melusines, leprechauns, boggarts, hobgoblins, little people, and their ilk losing their distinct ontological contours, the affect of their names, and the sense of their functions and habitats. We have also lost their individual histories as uncanny beings, at home in a dimension that we call the supernatural but that the inhabitants of early northwestern Europe might have conceived of as an other, pluralistic, and often veiled nature. In the case of the goblin, the definition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* is both illuminating and inconclusive:

> A small, ugly, gnome-like creature of folklore, fairy tales, and fantasy fiction; in early use considered as malevolent or demonic, in later use often as merely mischievous. Sometimes more generally: any imaginary being invoked to frighten children.[1]

While the dictionary suggests a historical development toward marginalisation and trivialisation, in synchronic terms it is the very fact that we cannot know the inner life of these Others, cannot know their motives for interaction with humans, so that they remain unpredictable, rather than simply inconsistent. While what from our perspective might be called function may seem to change, the impenetrability of the goblin mind, save for the recognition of a general malevolence, which may relate to the violation of habitat or some more fundamental distaste for the Big Ones, is a basic barrier to our understanding. Hence the need to propitiate, to avoid giving offence, or to placate.

As for the name *goblin*, the *OED* summarises the received opinion on its origin:

> Apparently < Old French *gobelin* (late 12th cent. in an isolated attestation; subsequently in Middle French (*a*1506 as *gobellin*); French *gobelin*, apparently ultimately < ancient Greek κόβαλος rogue, knave, κόβαλοι (plural) mischievous sprites invoked by rogues, probably via an unattested post-classical Latin form; the suffix is probably either Old French -*in* or its etymon classical Latin –*īnus* –ine suffix[1]. Compare later (apparently < Greek) post-classical Latin *cobalus*, *covalus*, kind of demon (16th cent.).

Three instances of "apparently", two of "probably", and one "unattested". But the apparent may be deceptive. If the Greek and Latin antecedents of *goblin* designated a malevolent spirit, how are we to account for the subsequent melioration, from maleficence to mischief – unless waning belief in the spirit also weakened its powers and sweetened its mood?

In the following, a radically different origin is proposed for *goblin*, whose history will be seen to have been marked not only by melioration but by an earlier pejoration. In glosses on Prudentius and other works for the Latin words *lares* and *penates* (household deities), early

British scholars used the Old English term *cofgudas*, in which the first element represents OE *cofa* "room, chamber, often bedroom" and the second *god* "god".[2] But these glosses do not necessarily reflect regular Old English usage. In particular, the element *god* is surely intended to be understood as "pagan deity" and thus to discredit this particular belief. Another, unattested form may have been the more common term in Old English speech. If this were identifiable, we might concur with Alaric Hall, who wrote in his study of elves in Anglo-Saxon belief, "By reconstructing the semantics of the word, we can reconstruct the ontological category."[3]

In modern German, *kobold* is a regular term for a goblin or similar demon, albeit also with the slight attenuation met in English names for spirits, i.e., as having both good and bad sides. The first element of the designation is drawn from Old High German *kuba* "room, chamber", cognate with OE *cofa* with the same meaning. The second element of the name originates in OHG *walt* "lord", here in the sense of "protector".[4] The original *kobold* was then "Protector of the Bedchamber" or at least of an interior room in a simple dwelling. The equivalent but unattested OE form may be reconstructed as *cofweald*. It is proposed that this concept was also reflected in the vocabulary of Old Low Franconian, a Germanic dialect between Old High German and Old Dutch, as *kubawald*. As a consequence of the language diffusion that accompanied the invasion of the Franks in the late fifth century, this form entered the Gallo-Romance linguistic domain. With the retreat in currency of the Frankish language in the future France, the discrete senses of the elements of the compound, "room" and "protector", would have been lost. The regular phonological adaptation into Gallo-Romance, comprising the attenuation of the /w/ and possible vocalisation of the /l/ after a vowel and before a consonant, would have been *kubawald* > *gobot* or *goblot*.[5] This form was perhaps perceived as having a Gallo-Romance diminutive suffix, in place of which a bridging consonant /l/ and Gallo-Romance diminutive – *in* could have been added, in the interest of dissimilation vis-à-vis the word *gobelet*. Concurrently, the acclimatised import, now just another name, was exposed to the influence, both phonological and ideological, of medieval Latin *cobalus* "demon, evil spirit".[6] The originally Frankish term may even have been completely displaced in a development *cobalus* > *gobel* + -*in*, while some of its semantics persisted. There may have been no cultural function available in the Gallo-Romance lands for such a house spirit.[7] Later French dialect reflexes of *gobelin* show different shades of meaning for goblin-like beings,[8] but the most intriguing, for present purposes, is the Picard (northern French) form *goguelin* "a spirit that hides in the most remote rooms of a building" – suggesting the domestic spirit in the process of being evicted!

The first attestation of Old French *gobelin* is in a vernacular history of the Fourth Crusade centred on the participation of Richard I, written by the Norman monk Ambroise in 1195.[9] He characterises a French nobleman, seen as a traitor, as a *gobelin*. The vernacular term in Latin guise, *gobelinus*, is also found in the *Historia ecclesiastica* of the English chronicler Orderic Vitalis from about 1140, in the context of a Saint Taurinus's expulsion of a demon from a temple dedicated to Diana.[10] No domestic spirits here! Aside from this scant evidence *gobelin* is unrepresented in Old French. It is not until the mid-fifteenth century that *gobelin*

appears in Middle French – clearly as a demonic spirit.[11] In comparable fashion, *gobelin* does not appear in extant records, literary and utilitarian, in Anglo-French.[12] More pointedly, it is not the subject of tales of little people or of vernacular discussions of demonology. It is then somewhat surprising, but is perhaps simply a product of the contingency of preserved written records, that *gobelin* is solidly attested in Middle English from about 1330 on.[13] This argues for wider use in Anglo-French than suggested by the lack of attested usage. ME examples point to the use of *gobelin* as, variously, a gloss on *incubus,* the purported parent of Merlin, as the name of a foreign demon, as Wycliff's translator's term to embody a Biblical plague. It is not until about 1500 that we find less threatening images of goblins, e.g., "In many partes of the sayd lande of Poytow [Poitou] haue ben shewed ... thinges the whiche somme called Gobelyns, the other ffayrees."[14] Whatever local use, the contours of conceptual categories have blurred, and goblins and other spirits now seem to be considered of a single race.

The questions to be asked at this juncture are whether continental French *gobelin* as a name was in any way associated in Britain with earlier, pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon belief in tutelary domestic spirits and, concurrently, whether there is any continuity in the conception of this spirit from pagan England to the present. Relevant, or even suggestive, evidence is fragmentary. We might expect to find that Joseph Wright's *English Dialect Dictionary*, from the turn of the last century, would offer a treasure of brief dialect statements and miniature narratives on goblins but the word is absent, save for a cross-reference to *gobbin* "a clownish country fellow".[15] According to Wright's editorial principles, this absence indicates that the word is used and spelled in English dialects as in mainstream English. Wright does have an entry for *cofe,* from OE *cofa* "room", the first element of our putative OE *cofweald* "protector of the chamber". To return to the *OED* commentary on etymology, it concludes with what would appear a recent editorial addition: "Goblins are often associated with the stealing of children and the stealing and hoarding of gold. They are frequently believed to live in *caves*, and are now often depicted as green-skinned" (my italics). Has the *cofweald* been defenestrated, referred from the world of culture indoors to that of nature outdoors? Another challenging bit of evidence is the compound *hob-goblin*, according to the *OED* "a mischievous, tricksy imp or sprite; another name for Puck or Robin Goodfellow; hence, a terrifying apparition, a bogy." The *OED* would have us believe that *hob* is a substitute for *Rob* and that the reference is to *Robin Goodfellow*, whose name, however, scarcely suggests malice toward humans as the dictionary's definition of *hobgoblin* states, unless apotropaic euphemism were at work. An alternative explanation of the term is to see *hob* as "the part of the casing in a fire-place having a surface level with the top of the grate" (*OED, s.v. hob, n.²*). Yet this technical term is attested only from the early sixteenth century and, despite its attractive interior domestic associations, cannot be firmly associated with early (already in retreat?) belief in tutelary spirits. To be noted in passing is that its etymology, too, is "obscure" (*OED*).

In sum we have two possible Romance paths into English for the term, if not the concept, *goblin*: the French adaptation of the semi-learned Graeco-Latin *cobalus* "demon, spirit associated with antisocial behaviour" and the Germanic ancestry through Old Low Franconian in forms cognate with OHG *kubawald* "protector of the bedchamber". Perhaps there was also

an Old English *cofweald as suggested by written evidence for belief in *cofgudas,* lit. "room deities", *lares, penates*, whether or not this exact term were a popular designation or in part a Christian paraphrase, with which Old French and Latin forms came in contact. The cofweald would have been under threat from the first years of the Christian mission in Anglo-Saxon England in the seventh century. Given the phonological contours of the three words, *cofweald* would have been susceptible to influence from both Latin *cobalus* and French *gobelin*, although far earlier for the former than for the latter.

The best informed hypothesis would seem to be that the demonisation of tutelary spirits in Britain began with the first efforts to convert the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes to Christianity. Just how quickly the suppression of belief and its accompanying vocabulary may have occurred is difficult to recover. By way of comparative evidence, the Norse domestic spirits, *dísir,* were all female. An Old English protector of rooms can then have been evicted from the home to the wilderness, burdened with a derogatory foreign name, and had its sex changed (which might be reflected in the later interest in child abduction, in the nature of another reversal). An Old English protector of rooms can have been both evicted from the home to the wilderness and burdened with a derogatory foreign name. There the goblin survived but surely with an irreversible darkening of mood. The history of the German *Kobold* is more straightforward but leads to a similar end. Centuries later, the little people are still with us in one way or another, the ultimate diminution of such potentially helpful Others being relegation to tales for, and threats to, children, and to gardens as ornaments. This note from a philological perspective is intended to reinvigorate studies of British goblins, whose antecedents, if not necessarily their nomenclature, arguably lie with a greater Germanic world's conception of tutelary domestic spirits.[16]

Notes

1. *Oxford English Dictionary: OED Online*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020, *s.v. goblin;* https://www.oed.com/, consulted August 22nd, 2020.
2. Antonette di Paulo Healey, et al., eds, *Dictionary of Old English,* Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1986-, *s.vv. cofa, cofgudas*, citing Lowell Kindschi, *The Latin-Old English Glossaries in Plantin-Moretus MS. 32 and British Museum MS. Additional 32246*, Doctoral dissertation, Stanford University, 1955, No. 740, and H. D. Meritt, ed., *The Old English Prudentius Glosses at Boulogne-sur-Mer*, Stanford, Stanford University, 1959, No. 1055.
3. Alaric Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England: Matters of Belief, Health, Gender and Identity*, Woodbridge, Suffolk, and Rochester, New York, Boydell, 2007, p. 14.
4. Friedrich Kluge, ed., *An Etymological Dictionary of the German Language*, London, G. Bell, 1891, *s.v. kobold*; Gerhard Köbler, ed., *Althochdeutsches Wörterbuch*, 2014, *s.v. kuba*; https://www.koeblergerhard.de/ahdwbhin.html, consulted August 22nd, 2020.
5 . Édouard Bourciez, *Précis historique de phonétique française,* Paris, Klincksieck, 1958, paras. 131, 188-189.
6. J. F. Niemeyer, ed., *Mediae Latinitatis Lexicon Minus*, Leiden, Brill, 2001; R. E. Latham, et al., *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources,* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1975-2013. For the Greek origins of the word, see Hjalmar Frisk, ed., *Griechisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, Heidelberg, C. Winter, 1960-1972.

7. *Trésor de la langue française* (Paul Imbs, ed., Paris, Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1971-1994, *s.v. gobelin*) errs in ascribing the meaning "esprit domestique" to *gobelin*, although this is well suited to its putative Germanic antecedent.

8. Walther von Wartburg, et al., eds, *Französisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, Bonn, F. Klopp, and successive publishers, 1922-2002, Vol. 2, cols 820-821, *s.v. kobalos*. *Dictionnaire étymologique de l'ancien français,* eds Kurt Baldinger, Jean-Denis Gendron, and Georges Straka, Québec, Presses de l'Université Laval; Tübingen, Niemeyer; Paris, Klincksieck; Boston and Berlin, De Gruyter Akademie Forschung, 1974-, *s.v. gobelin*, supports the Greek derivation and rejects any association with German *kobold*, without, however, considering the origin of the latter in the conception of domestic spirits. Anglo-Saxon evidence is not adduced.

9. Ambroise, *L´Estoire de la guerre sainte*, ed. Catherine Croizy-Naquet, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2014, v. 8710.

10. Orderic Vitalis, *Historia ecclesiastica. The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, ed. Marjorie Chibnall, Oxford, Clarendon, 1968-1980, Bk. 5, Ch. 7.

11. *Dictionnaire du moyen français (1330-1500)*, *s.v. gobelin;* http://www.atilf.fr/dmf, consulted August 22nd, 2020.

12. William Rothwell, et al., eds, *Anglo-Norman Dictionary*, 2nd edn, London, Maney Publishing, 2001. Similarly absent from Frédéric Godefroy, *Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue française,* Paris, Vieweg, 1891-1902.

13. Hans Kurath et al., eds, *Middle English Dictionary,* Ann Arbor, Michigan, University of Michigan Press, 1952-2001, *s.v. gobelin*.

14. Jean d'Arras, *Melusine*, ed. Alexander Karley Donald, London, Early English Text Society, 1895, rpt 1973, p. 4.

15. Joseph Wright, ed., *English Dialect Dictionary,* London and New York, H. Frowde, 1898-1905, Vol. 2, pp. 666-667.

16. For this undertaking Hall's *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England*, which calls names the "media of belief" (p. 14), sets the bar very high. Recent studies of British domestic spirits and their malevolent cousins in these pages are J. B. Smith, "Robert Willan's Dobbies and Their Kin", *Tradition Today,* 4 (2014), 1-12; Simon Young, "Boggart Dialect Literature: a List of Boggart Works", 5 (2016), 1-19; and William Sayers, "*Brownie* 'House-Spirit': Etymology", 5 (2016), 70-73, and "Puck and the Bogymen: British Reflexes of Indo-European Conceptions of Fear and Flight", 8 (2019), 52-56.

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Editor's Note

Dr Sayers's article prompted me to revisit some of the folkloristic approaches to *goblin* and related terms. This led to the rechecking of George Laurence Gomme's *Handbook of Folklore*, published for the Folklore Society in 1890. One of the notable entries in Gomme's overview of what constitutes folklore includes *goblindom* as a generic term for all aspects of supernatural figures, with the exception of witches, which are separately listed under "Witchcraft" (p. 6, Section 1, "Superstitious Belief and Practice", item D). This early classification was used in a number of the Folklore Society's publications, and as a catchall for the whole field of

supernatural entities, many of which Gomme lists on pp. 30 and 31 of the *Handbook.* Consequently, the term *goblindom* was quite prominently deployed in instructions to folklorists collecting information in the field, so that it is the normal heading for any such references over a period of some forty years from the 1880s until the late 1920s.

When the *Handbook* was revised and expanded by Charlotte Sophia Burne (London, Sidgwick and Jackson, 1914), *goblindom* had been superseded in the classification by: "Superhuman Beings (Gods, Godlings, and Others)". Even so, *goblindom* was already quite firmly established not only in the Society's publications but also as an overall term for supernatural beings. Wirt Sikes's wideranging compendium *British Goblins: Welsh Folk-Lore, Fairy Mythology, Legends, and Traditions*, originally published in 1880 (London, Sampson Low) and reprinted several times up to the late twentieth century (East Ardsley, E.P. Publishing, 1973), focuses primarily on Welsh supernaturals, although the word *goblin* appears comparatively rarely in the book. Sikes also uses *goblin* as a generic term for all the supernatural entities he discusses. He says little about the origins of the word, and his brief suggestions regarding etymology simply reflect the limited etymological knowledge available at that time, referencing for example John Fiske's *Myths and Myth-Makers*, and Pughe's *Welsh Dictionary* of 1866.

Despite its quite substantial attestation in printed sources, the word *goblindom* seems to have escaped the attention of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which however lists *goblinry* and *goblinism*, along with other nineteenth century derivatives such as *goblinize*, *goblinish*, and *goblinesque* from the early twentieth century.