

Brownie “house-spirit”: etymology

WILLIAM SAYERS

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *brownie* as “a benevolent spirit or goblin” and continues “of shaggy appearance, supposed to haunt old houses, *esp.* farmhouses, in Scotland, and sometimes to perform useful household work while the family were asleep.”¹ The earliest attestations are all Scottish: in Gavin Douglas’s translation of the *Aeneid*, Martin Martin’s *Description of the Western Isles of Scotland*, Walter Scott’s *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, followed three decades later by Charlotte Brontë’s contrast in *Jane Eyre* between two orders of being: “You talk of my being a fairy; but, I am sure, you are more like a brownie.”² Despite this north-British evidence, the dictionary is content with the following designation and etymology: “denominative < *BROWN* n., with somewhat of diminutive force.” In the absence of evident *comparanda* in other Germanic languages, the *OED* calls attention only to “the Old Norse *svartálfar* or dark elves of the Edda.” Joseph Wright’s *English Dialect Dictionary* strengthens the impression of a northern word and lists the alternative spellings *broonie* and *bruni*, which are also recorded in the *Dictionary of the Scottish Language*.³ Is this another instance of a taboo-inflected colour term being used to replace the zoonym, as in *bruin* for *bear*, itself a substitution for a suppressed Germanic term on the root seen in Greek *arktos* and Latin *ursus*? Or is the association with the colour brown and its designator in the nature of a folk etymology, what some linguists would call a de-opaquicisation (German *Deopakisierung*)?⁴ Whatever the case, characterisation by colour alone seems a bit odd for such a preternatural being, and suggests little – save perhaps for a telluric association – in the way of nature, function, or affinities.

In Old Norse, the *svartálfar* were not household spirits. The word for brown as a chromatic term was *brúnn*. But this word had a homonym, *brún*, “brow, edge”, seen in such topographical terms as *ffjalls-brún* and *heiðar-brún*, the brow of a fell or moor, *is-brún*, the edge of ice, even *lands-brún*, the land’s brow, the first sight of a mountain above the water when at sea.⁵ *Brún* was also the regular word for the eyebrow and supra-orbital brow ridge. The raising and lowering of the brows was associated in Old Norse with positive and negative moods. *Brún* also figures in a domestic compound, *brún-áss*, literally “brow beam”, a timber which ran along the tops of the walls of farmhouses, linking the corner posts and providing a seat for the cross-beams. Since other interior architecture carried deep symbolic significance (e.g., the pillars of the high seat which were even carried by Norwegian emigrants to new settlements in Iceland; the high seat and benches in the interior seating arrangements themselves; the main entry which provided ingress to outsiders; the main room or hall, where identity and news were exchanged for hospitality), it does not seem implausible that domestic tutelary spirits should have been associated with key structural units of the house, not the sill beams of the foundation but the set of four beams that assured the structure of the principal room. The etymological meaning of Germanic words for “hall”, e.g. Old Norse *hallr*, is “something raised”. But seeing the English brownie as heir to a putative Old Norse “wall-brow-ie” leaves a situation in which neither the sphere of dynamic operation, focus, nor function of the spirit is explicitly referenced.

In the absence of lexical or other documentary evidence, of any archaeological traces of domestic altars or the like, the presence of *brún* in a term for domestic tutelary spirits must remain highly speculative. Another line of inquiry, no less speculative, may also be entertained. Another near-homonym of *brún* “brow” was *bruni* “burning, heat, fire” (cf. English *burn*). This immediately moves the discussion to an area of the home much more implicated in domestic wellbeing, the hearth. But here, too, evidence is lacking. An analogy from a later age may assist in building an argument. With first written attestations in the late eighteenth century, Swedish *tomte* designated a supernatural being that saw to the fertility of domestic animals, the pasture and fields, and the general wellbeing of the house, farmyard, and human residents. The term is an abbreviation of such compounds as *tomte-gubbe*, *tomte-bisse*, *tomte-karl*, in which *tomte* designates the lot on which the farmhouse is erected and the second element is understood as “little old man”, with variant forms in, e.g., *-nisse* (< *Nikolaus*; cf. English *tom-cat*, *jack-rabbit*, *Old Nick*). In learned Swedish translations from Latin, *tomte* renders *lar* (pl. *lares*).⁶ More descriptive of function are Norwegian *gardbonde*, *tunvord* “farm-guard”. Countless variations occur in the various regions of Scandinavia. Rarer are forms with a discrete term for the helpful agent, as in Danish *husbuk*, in which *hus* “house” is completed by *buk* “supernatural being, he-goat”. These Nordic *lares* are thought to first have been exclusively benign, representatives of the spirits of ancestors and former residents of the farm, but under Christian pressure to abandon popular belief in the non-Christian supernatural, the *tomte* became moody, sometimes helpful, sometimes malicious, and then doing the devil’s work.

It is proposed that in the communities of Danish and Norwegian settlers that took up residence in the Danelaw and along the Scottish coasts, Old Norse *bruni* “burning, heat, fire” was combined with an agent noun of the type seen above (although not one derived from a Christian personal name). Two possibilities suggest themselves, one general and one specific. The former would be a term such as **brunavætr* “fire-, hearth-spirit” (cf. *landvætr* “land spirit”). The latter is suggested by a kenning in the poem *Ynglingatal*, an account of the legendary royal dynasty of Sweden, by the ninth-century Icelandic poet Þjóðólfr ór Hvini. While the kenning may be the poet’s original juxtaposition of two ideas and words, his compositional materials, both semantic and phonological, would have been wellknown. In this, the kenning functions like a metaphor. In the poem, Þjóðólfr refers to a legendary queen as *loga dis* “goddess of the fire” (< *logi* “flame”).⁷ This has been interpreted as a flattering comparison of the woman to Freyja, the divinity of the hearth and home as well as, more generally, of sexuality and procreation. Since the hearth is woman’s operative sphere, the evidence of the term suggests the possibility of Freyja’s *ancilla* being designated **brunadis*, “spirit of the fire”.⁸ Either of the two forms, *brunavætr* or *brunadis*, could have been abbreviated to **bruni/a* and, over time, aligned with the linguistic practices of the surrounding English-language community to yield *brownie*, widely understood – with a change of sex – as a small, male, brown-complexioned or -dressed guardian spirit. Here, it is appropriate to recall the Scottish pronunciation of *brownie* as reflected in the spellings *broonie* and *brunie*, although this may also be a consequence of the phonology of older Scots not having experienced raising in the Great Vowel Shift of English. Given the thoroughgoing suppression of references to supernatural beings in Old Norse literature, save when

they are relevant to plot, as in Egill Skallagrímsson's invocation of land spirits with a view to exiling King Eiríkr *blóðøx* and Queen Gunnhildr from Norway,⁹ the terminology for the supernatural, especially in the Norse domestic sphere, as distinct from ideas of individual fate (Norns, *fylgjur*), must surely be incomplete. Despite its speculative nature, this wider-ranging discussion should stimulate research that may move the topic beyond the simplistic explanation of *brownie* offered by the *OED*.

Notes

1. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd edn, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015, *OED Online*, s.v. *brownie*, n.¹, accessed December 18th, 2015; note the caveat: "This entry has not yet been fully updated (first published 1888)."
2. Martin Martin, *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland containing a full account of their situation: to which is added a brief description of the isles of Orkney and Schetland*, London, A. Bell, 1716, p. 391; Walter Scott, *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, 2 vols, London, Cadell and Davies, 1802, I, p. lxxxii; Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 3 vols, London, Smith, Elder, 1847, III, Chap. xi, p. 282.
3. Joseph Wright, *English Dialect Dictionary*, 6 vols, London and New York, H. Frowde, 1898-1905, I, p. 418, s.v. *brownie*; *Dictionary of the Scottish Language*, s.v. *broonie*. The definition is relevant to the later discussion: "A benevolent household sprite, usually shaggy and of peculiar shape, who haunted houses, particularly farm-houses, and, if the servants treated him well, performed many tasks of drudgery for them while they were asleep."
4. Christer Lindqvist, *Norn im keltischen Kontext*, Amsterdam, Brepols, 2015, p. 30.
5. Richard Cleasby, Gudbrand Vigfusson, and William A. Craigie, eds, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 2nd edn, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1957, s.v. *brún*.
6. Elof Hellquist, *Svensk etymologisk ordbok*, Lund, Gleerups, 1922, s.v. *tomte*.
7. Þjóðólfr ór Hvini, *Ynglingatal*, st. 9, in Finnur Jónsson, *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning*, 4 vols, København and Kristiania, Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1912-1915, B I, p. 7.
8. Folke Ström, "Diser," in *Kulturhistoriskt lexikon för nordisk medeltid*, Malmö, Allheim, 1976, III, cols 101-103; *logadís* = Freyja, col. 102.
9. Sigurður Nordal, ed., *Egils saga Skallgrímssonar*, Reykjavík, Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1933, Chap. 57.

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Cornell University
Ithaca, NY, USA