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THE ETYMOLOGY AND MEANINGS OF *ELDRITCH*

The meanings of the early attestations of the Scots word *eldritch* are given in the *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* (hereafter *DOST*) as 'Belonging to, or resembling, the elves or similar beings' and 'Connected with, proceeding from, suggestive of, elves or supernatural beings; weird, strange, uncanny' (s.v. *Elriche*).[1] However, although *eldritch* has entered English usage more generally since C. S. Lewis appropriated it as a critical term, its etymology remains uncertain. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (hereafter *OED*), and later *DOST*, cautiously derived *eldritch* from Old English **ælf-rīce* ('elf' + 'dominion, sphere of influence'). In 1985, however, Martin Puhvel suggested in a brief note that the etymology is rather **æl-rīce~el-rīce*, the first element meaning 'foreign, strange; from elsewhere', and the whole therefore meaning 'other world'.[2] His case seems not to have been absorbed into scholarhip on Scottish literature, which has tentatively maintained the traditional association with *ælf*.[3] The purpose of the present note, then, is twofold. Firstly, I argue that Puhvel's idea is almost certainly correct, but not for the reasons which he suggested: Puhvel saw the lack of an *f* in the Older Scots forms of *eldritch* as an impediment to the etymology **ælf-rīce*, whereas in fact the loss of this *f* would be a regular sound change. The variant vowels to which *DOST*'s citations attest, however, do militate against **ælf-rīce* and in favour of **æl-rīce*. My second point is that the putative origin of *eldritch* in *ælf-* seems to have influenced the definitions of *eldritch* given both in *DOST* and in more recent scholarship: its connotations of elves and elvishness have in some circumstances been overplayed, and the more general meaning of 'otherworldly' is to be preferred.

The etymologising of the first element of *eldritch* as **ælf-* goes back to John Jamieson's *Dictionary of the Scottish Language* of 1846:

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[1] *DOST* (Chicago, Oxford, 1931–2002) and the *Scottish National Dictionary* (Edinburgh, 1931–76) are both now online—and freely accessible—at <http://www.dsl.ac.uk/dsl/index.html>.

[2] 'The Scottish Adjective *Eldritch*: A Proposed Etymology', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 86 (1985), 240–1.

[3] E.g. Priscilla Bawcutt, 'Elrich Fantasyis in Dunbar and Other Poets', in *Bryght Lanternis: Essays on the Language and Literature of Medieval and Renaissance Scotland*, ed. by J. Derrick McClure and Michael R. G. Spiller (Aberdeen, 1989), pp. 162–78, at pp. 162–3; John Conlee (ed.), *William Dunbar: The Complete Works* (Kalamazoo: Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2004), available at <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/dunint.htm>, note to text 65 (*The Golden Targe*), line 125.

> This term has most probably been formed from A.-S. Su.-G. *aelf*, genius, daemonium, and A.-S. *ric*, Su.-G. *rik*, rich; q. abounding in spirits; as primarily descriptive of a place supposed to be under the power of evil genii. It greatly confirms this etymon, that the term, as more generally used, conveys the idea of something preternatural.[4]

Jamieson's etymology of the second element is slightly problematic, and the *OED* (s.v. *eldritch*), and subsequently *DOST* (s.v. *Elriche*), gave instead the noun *rīce* (defined by Bosworth and Toller as 'power, authority, dominion, rule, empire, reign' and more rarely 'the people inhabiting a district, a nation'), implying an etymological meaning along the lines of 'fairy kingdom'.[5] This is plausible, and does not need to be discussed at length. Phonologically, the interpretation is unproblematic: one might compare the development of *bisceop-rīce* 'bishopric' to late Middle English *bishoprich* (the modern pronunciation showing the irregular failure of palatalisation, perhaps under Scandinavian influence).[6] Some spellings of *eldritch* also show irregular phonological developments—the various examples in -*sh* like *alrish* probably show analogical levelling with the adjectival suffix -*ish* < Old English -*isc*—but the -*ritch*-type forms are prevalent enough that these need not be considered a major obstacle to an etymology in -*rīce*. The development of **ælf-rīce* 'fairy kingdom' from noun to adjective would be slightly surprising, but could partly be due to analogy with the adjective *rīce* 'powerful, wealthy' (and its Norman French counterpart *riche*); it is at any rate paralleled by the (possibly later) development of *fairy* from 'the land or home of the fays' to 'of or pertaining to fairies' (*OED*, s.v. *fairy* §§A.1., B.1.).

Jamieson's interpretation of the first element of *eldritch* as *ælf*, however, is at first sight viable, and has been followed by the *OED* and *DOST*. Its development—contrary to Puhvel's assumption—would be phonologically regular. **Ælf-rīce* became **ælrīce* by the loss of

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[4] J. Jamieson, *A Dictionary of the Scottish Language in Which the Words are Explained in their Different Senses, Authorized by the Names of the Writers by Whom They are Used, of the Titles of the Works in Which They Occur, and Derived from their Originals* (Edinburgh, 1846), s.v. *elriche*.

[5] Jamieson seems to have interpreted the second element as an adjective (mistakenly citing it without the stem-vowel -*e*, as though it were a personal-name element), taking the compound to imply 'rich in elves'—thus his 'abounding in spirits'. Cf. Old English *ellen-rōf*, 'famed for strength'; Dieter Kastovsky, 'Semantics and Vocabulary', in *The Cambridge History of the English Language, Volume 1: The Beginnings to 1066*, ed. by Richard M. Hogg (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 290–408, at pp. 372–3. However, Old English *rice* does not, in compounds, seem to have meant 'rich in', rather meaning 'powerful, mighty, great'. J. Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (London, 1898), s.v. *rice*.

[6] *OED*, s.v. *bishopric*.

the middle consonant in groups of three, a development which admittedly occurred only sporadically in the common lexicon in Old English (in, for example, *seldcūþ > selcūþ*, 'strange', *eldcung > elcung* 'delay'), but which is particularly well attested in the phonetic environment of -*lf(r)*- in late Old English personal names etymologically beginning in *Ælf-* and *Wulf-* (such as *Ælnoð* for *Ælfnoð* and *Wulsie* for *Wulfsige*).[7] This form became **ælrice* through the shortening of vowels in obscured second elements of compounds (which was not a regular development, but was a common one), and then **elrice* by the Anglian development of *æ* from **alCi* to *e* (Northern Middle English *elf* deriving from Common Germanic **alβiz*).[8] The *d* of forms like *eldritch* is uncommon in our Older Scots attestations, and therefore unlikely to be relevant to the etymology of the word; it is doubtless to be interpreted as 'the inorganic *d* of Eng. sound, lend, thunder, gander, spindle, alder' which 'is not regularly found in Sc. but occurs sporadically esp. in s.Sc.'.[9] Moreover, in support of the **ælf*-etymology, Jamieson noted the unique form *elphrisch*, attested in Chapter 18.3 of Patrik Forbes's *An Exqvistite Commentarie vpon the Revelation of Saint Iohn*, first published in 1613, taking it to be a variant in which the *f* had survived.[10]

However, serious problems for the *ælf*-derivation are caused by the variant forms cited by *DOST*, among which are forms in *al-* such as *alrich(e)*, *alrish(e)* and *alreche*. These would seem not to have undergone the *i*-mutation of proto-Old English **alβi-* which produced Old English *ælf* and so Older Scots *elf*, instead requiring an Old English etymon **alf-*.[11] It appears that there is no convincing evidence for the failure of the development **alCi > *æ- > e-* elsewhere in Older Scots, nor for the lowering of *e* in this context.[12] Meanwhile, Forbes's form *elphrisch*

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[7] Richard M. Hogg, *A Grammar of Old English, Volume 1: Phonology* (Oxford, 1992), §§7.84–6; Fran Colman, *Money Talks: Reconstructing Old English*, Trends in Linguistics: Studies and Monographs, 56 (Berlin, 1992), pp. 201–3.

[8] Hogg, *A Grammar*, §6.29 on shortening, and §5.79.2a and K. Luick, *Historische Grammatik der englischen Sprache* (Leipzig, C.H., 1914–40), ɪ §366 on *æ > e*.

[9] *The Scottish National Dictionary*, s.v. *D* §3. Puhvel suggested that a folk-etymological connection with *eld* 'age' could also have been involved. This possibility cannot be denied, but the phonological explanation is sufficient.

[10] Patrik Forbes, *An Exqvistite Commentarie vpon the Revelation of Saint Iohn, Vvherein, both the Course of the Whole Booke, as also the more Abstruse and Hard Places thereof not heretofore Opened; are now at last cleerly and euidently explaned* (London: Hall, 1613), p. 188.

[11] On the phonological history of *ælf*, see further Alaric Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England: Matters of Belief, Health, Gender and Identity*, Anglo-Saxon Studies, 1 (Cambridge: Brewer, 2007), pp. 176–81.

[12] See generally A. J. Aitken, *The Older Scots Vowels: A History of the Stressed Vowels of Older Scots from the Beginnings to the Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Caroline Macafee, The Scottish Text Society, 5th ser., 1 ([n.p.], 2002), esp. §§14.16–17; cf. *DOST*, s.vv. *Elde, Elder, Fell*, v. *DOST* does attests once to *malte* 'to melt' (s.v. *Melt*, v.¹ §3a) which might in theory be from the weak *mæltan*, but it more likely represents a variant inspired by a past tense root of the strong *meltan*, either from the past singular (Old English *mealt*) or the past participle (Old English *gemolten*, as in the variant Scots infinitive *molt*) by unrounding after a nasal (on which see Aitken, *The Older Scots Vowels*, §16.3). Forms like *wall* 'well, spring' < *wælle* show later *we- > wa-* (Aitken, *The Older Scots Vowels*, §14.17(6)).

cannot be considered significant, as it is unique and—even if it happens to be right—more likely to represent a folk-etymologisation than a survival. Such folk-etymologisations of *æl*-words as *ælf*-words are attested as early as the eleventh century;[13] Forbes's form specifically might reflect the fact that he was speaking of 'ghostly and Elphrish places full of Panike terror', the transparent etymological association of *ghostly* with *ghost* encouraging a parallel (but probably mistaken) identification of *elrich* with *elf*.

I can think of two possible arguments by which to save the **ælf-* etymology. One would be to suppose influence from Old Norse *alfr*, before the loss of the *f* in Old English **ælf-rīce* rendered its origins obscure. This would have created the variant **alf-rīce*. But although compounds including both Norse and English elements can be found in Older Scots, they are few and those which I have identified need not have been coined in the Old English period, while no simplex ***alf* seems to be attested in Scots.[14] Alternatively, *i*-stems (such as **alβi-*) seem sometimes in Old English to have lost their *-i* when the first element of a compound, so not undergoing *i*-mutation.[15] If *eldritch* is to be explained in this way, it goes back to a prehistoric Old English form **alβ(i)-rīkiz*. This would afford a remarkable contribution to our knowledge of the early Old English lexis, but is unconvincing, since the phenomenon is rare and because there is no reliable example of the failure of *i*-mutation in *ælf*-compounds in Old and Middle English.[16]

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[13] Hall, *Elves*, pp. 182–3.

[14] See *DOST*, s.v. *elf*. A search of the etymologies in the electronic *DOST* produces only the dubious parallels for **alf-rīce* of *Haly Kirk* and *Pillou-uair*; cf. G. T. Flom, *Scandinavian Influence on Southern Lowland Scotch: A Contribution to the Study of the Linguistic Relations of English and Scandinavian* (New York, 1900), 55 [*ragweed, ramfeezled*], 64 [*spaequean*].

[15] Hogg, *A Grammar*, §5.85.11.

[16] The possible exceptions are various personal names in <Alf-> for *Ælf-*, but these are comparatively rare and probably due to late and/or Latinate spelling; and the manuscript form *alfwalda* (ostensibly 'elf-ruler') in *Beowulf* line 1314, invariably emended by editors to *alw(e)alda* ('all-ruler'); see Hall, *Elves*, p. 69 n. 77. Middle English forms in *alf-* reflect the collapse of Old English *æ* and *a* (on which see Hogg, *A Grammar*, §5.215–16) in those Middle English dialects where the root vowel of proto-Old English **alCi* did not develop to *e-*.

These points lead us on to the real merits of Puhvel's suggestion that the first element of *eldritch* is the prefix *alja-, 'foreign, strange; from elsewhere',[17] implying an etymon meaning something along the lines of 'other world'. Unlike *alβi-, *alja- is well-attested to have produced *i*-mutation variants, with the *i*-mutated form *el-* appearing alongside the unaffected *æl-*. Both forms survived in northern Middle English as *el-* and *al-*.[18] This etymology would, therefore, explain the variation between forms like *alriche* and *elriche*, and offers an eminently suitable meaning for the etymon of *eldritch*. Admittedly, discounting later loans into English of *el-*'s Indo-European cognates, such as *alien* (< Latin *alienus* 'other'), *el-* is only attested otherwise in Scots in the grammar-word *ellis* ('else'), but the same can be said for Modern English generally: the old *el-*words were generally being lost from the lexicon or displaced by loans already in the Middle English period.[19] In *eldritch*, we have one of the last survivors of the prefix in English. Assuming that the forms of the prefix remained in free variation, it might have been coined at any point from proto-Germanic times to the cessation of production of *el-* compounds sometime in the Old English period.

This revised etymology need not affect how we understand the synchronic semantics of *eldritch* in Older Scots, nor is this the place for their full reassessment. That said, *DOST*, whose entry for *eldritch* I quoted at the beginning of this note, mentions elves prominently in its definition of *eldritch*; John and Winifred MacQueen, in their 1972 anthology, glossed it as 'frequented by fairies';[20] while as I show below, 'elvish' has been used to gloss *eldritch* in recent editions. But one wonders if this connection with elves owes as much to Jamieson's etymology as to attested Older Scots usage.

Eldritch does occur several times in collocation with *elf* and *faerie*. Forbes's form *elphrisch* is particularly suggestive, as it shows that Forbes etymologised *eldritch* to contain *elf*, and this is consistent with the fact that he used it of 'desolate and foreleited places ... full of foule spirits': he may have equated these *foule spirits* with *elvis*. *DOST* cited the form

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[17] *Dictionary of Old English* (Toronto, 1988–), s.v. *el-*; cf. Joseph B. Voyles, *Early Germanic Grammar: Pre-, Proto-, and Post-Germanic Languages* (San Diego, 1992), §7.1.3.
[18] See the words cited in the *Dictionary of Old English*, s.v. *el-*; the *Middle English Dictionary* (Ann Arbor, 1952–2001), s.vv. *alþeodene, alþeodī, alþeodisc, al-wight, elles, el-lendish, el-reordī*.
[19] Puhvel, 'The Scottish Adjective *Eldritch*', p. 241, was wrong, however, to suggest that *el-* is 'last recorded in [the] early thirteenth century'.
[20] *A Choice of Scottish Verse, 1470–1570* (London, 1972), p. 211.

elvasche not only as an attestation of *elrische* but as the sole Older Scots attestation of *elvish*; the latter identification is surely etymologically the correct one, but this doubling may accurately reflect a collapse in the words' forms and meanings (s.v. *Elvasche*).

On the other hand, clearer evidence for an association of *eldritch* with elves is thin on the ground. *Eldritch* frequently occurs in collocation with *elf,* but that does not mean that for most speakers *eldritch* primarily meant 'Belonging to, or resembling, the elves or similar beings' or 'Connected with, proceeding from, suggestive of, elves'—any more than the frequent collocation in present-day English of *tragic* and *accident* demands that we give *tragic* a primary meaning 'connected with accidents', or that we take the collocation of *ulterior* with *motive* as evidence that *ulterior* means 'connected with motives'. Thus *DOST* cited Flavius's invocation of 'alrisch king and queen of farie' in line 970 (stanza 122) of the sixteenth-century *Philotus* as an example of the sense 'belonging to, or resembling, the elves or similar beings', Jack and Rozendaal recently glossing *alrisch* here with 'elvish'.[21] Whether it describes both the king and the queen here or only the king, *alrisch* is associated with *of farie*, making 'connected with elves' an ostensibly likely reading. But this interpretation is unsatisfactory for the occurrence of *alrisch* eighteen lines later (in stanza 124), also cited by *DOST*, which mentions an 'alrische elfe'. Though comically superstitious, Flavius's invocation is not so poorly-wrought as to include tautologies like *elvish elf.* It prefers rather adjectives which bring out a principle characteristic of each noun which they describe: 'Saviour sweit', 'hellische furies', 'fyrie dragon' (lines 961, 979, 989).

Likewise, Parkinson, editing Gavin Douglas's *The Palis of Honoure*, saw the poet's description of himself as 'maist lyk ane elrych grume' in line 299 to allude to the Host's observation in line 13 of *The Prologue to Sir Thopas* that Chaucer 'semeth eluyssh by his contenaunce' ('seems from his expression to be *elvish*'). If so, then Douglas's *elrych* parallels Chaucer's *elvish*—and indeed Parkinson glossed it with *elvish*.[22] But although Green, focusing on other attestations of *elvish* in Chaucer's work, has recently argued that we should understand *elvish* to mean 'having the character of elves', there remains reason to think that Chaucer drew in *The Prologue to Sir Thopas* on meanings which had developed beyond this etymological association, along the lines of 'abstracted,

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[21] *The Mercat Anthology of Early Scottish Literature 1375–1707*, rev. edn. by R. D. S. Jack and P. A. T. Rozendaal (Edinburgh, 2000), p. 420.

[22] Gavin Douglas, *The Palis of Honoure*, ed. by David Parkinson (Kalamazoo, MI, 2002), pp. 24 and 86, also available online at <http://www.lib.rochster.edu/camelot/teams/parkinso.htm>; *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn by Larry D. Benson (Boston, 1987), p. 213.

preoccupied with otherworldly concerns'.[23] It may be these meanings which Douglas's usage reflects. We might do better, then, to understand *eldritch* in the etymological sense which I have proposed, of 'otherworldly'—which is congruent with the definition in the *Scottish National Dictionary*: 'weird, ghostly, uncanny, unearthly, hideous, esp. of sound; often applied to persons, things and places, usually to denote some connection with the supernatural'.

Eldritch is unlikely etymologically to contain *elf-*, but **alja-*, 'foreign, strange', deriving from Old English **æl-rīce~el-rīce*. The etymological meaning 'otherworldly' would suit most of *DOST*'s citations for *eldritch* well, accounting for the frequent collocation of *eldritch* with *elf* without imposing undue tautology on certain attestations. The consolidation of the argument for the **æl-rīce* etymology should in turn encourage us to accept a new addition to the Old English lexicon which implies that Anglo-Saxons had occasion to speak of what we might call 'otherworlds'.[24]

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[23] Richard Firth Green, 'Changing Chaucer', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 25 (2003), 27–52 (esp. pp. 28–29); for the alternative readings see J. A. Burrow, 'Elvish Chaucer', in *The Endless Knot: Essays on Old and Middle English in Honor of Marie Borroff*, ed. by M. Teresa Tavormina and R. F. Yeager (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 105–11; Alaric Hall, 'Elves on the Brain: Chaucer, Old English, and *Elvish*', *Anglia: Zeitschrift für englische Philologie*, 124 (2006), 225–43.