The spiritual Tolkien milieu : a study of fiction-based religion
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Chapter 11. The Elven Movement: A Case Study of Construction and Maintenance of Plausibility

This chapter is concerned with the Elven movement, a loose network of individuals who self-identify as Elves.[284] It is relevant to include this movement in a book on Tolkien-based religion, because the identity of the 'awakened Elves' is inspired by Tolkien's Quendi. Furthermore, some of the self-identified Elves not only have a Tolkien-inspired Elven identity, but also integrate other elements from Tolkien's literary mythology into their spiritual practice, for example by invoking Eru and the Valar in ritual.

The chapter falls into three sections, the first two of which are dedicated to an historical overview of the Elven movement from its inception in the early 1970s until the present day. The first section covers the history of the Elven community from its formation as an audience cult around the Elf Queen's Daughters' magical Elven letters until the emergence of the Internet. I pay special attention to the Silver Elves, who took over the intellectual leadership of the movement from the Elf Queen's Daughters in the late 1970s and developed an Elven spiritual path, drawing on both *LR* and *S*. In the second section, I trace the history of the Elven movement from the launch of the Elfinkind Digest in 1990 up to the movement's current constitution as a largely online-based community of self-identified Elves. In this section I also show how the Elven movement is embedded within larger social formations in the post-traditional religious field. Throughout its history, the Elven movement has constituted a fringe group within the broader Neo-Pagan movement, but in the 21st century most self-identified Elves have come to see themselves primarily as part of the Otherkin movement, a movement which comprises self-identified Dragons, Angels, and so on besides awakened Elves.

An analysis of the role of Tolkien's literary mythology for the Elven movement is embedded within the historical sections. I demonstrate that the Elven movement was initially inspired by the attractive image of the Elf provided by *LR*, even to the degree that prominent self-identified Elves suggest today that if Tolkien's narratives had not been published, there had probably never been an Elven movement. I also analyse how the Elven community reacted to later additions to Tolkien's mythological corpus. As we shall see, the Elves embraced *S* (published 1977) as this work provided additional information about the Quendi that helped consolidate the Elven identity and hence the Elven

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[284] I refer to this network interchangeably as the Elven movement, the Elven community, and the awakened Elves.

movement. Peter Jackson's movie adaptations of *LR* (2001-2003) led to an increase in the number of self-identified Elves, but also to heated disagreements about Tolkien's place in the movement. Generally speaking, the self-identified Elves acknowledge Tolkien's enormous importance for the movement, but also struggle with the fact that that Tolkien's books are works of fiction. They will therefore typically stress that while Tolkien's fiction helped them realise their own Elven nature, they do not identify as Quendi, but as those 'real' *álfar* or fairies who inspired Tolkien's tales. They will say so even if their notion about what Elves/*álfar* are is evidently inspired by Tolkien.[285] We can thus say that there is a tendency within the Elven movement to *assimilate* ideas from Tolkien's literary mythology, i.e. to adopt ideas from Tolkien, but deny the fictional origins of these ideas.

The third section of this chapter is concerned with the construction and maintenance of plausibility in the Elven movement. I take up three issues regarding plausibility. First, I analyse the semiotic strategies of rationalisation, legitimisation, and relativisation which the Elves use to construct and maintain the plausibility of their core claim 'we are Elves'. The Elves rationalise their Elvishness by constructing elaborate explanations of how it is possible to be an Elf, and they legitimise it with reference to authoritative sources and to their own experiences. Additionally, they sometimes protect their claim to Elvishness by relativising it, stating that their Elven identity is a matter of 'what feels right' rather than of what can be objectively proved. Second, I look at 'conversion' to Elvishness. Drawing on Tanya Luhrmann (1989), I argue that the adoption of an Elven identity can best be considered a process of interpretive and epistemic drift. I identify four stages of the epistemic drift (fascination with Elves; identification with Elves; hunch of being an Elf; certainty of being an Elf) and identify the practices which propel the drift (e.g. role-playing and activity in online groups). Third, I evaluate the strength of the Elven movement's plausibility structures. I identify those social and cultural structures which help maintain plausibility in the Elven movement (fantasy fiction, the cultic milieu, online communities, movement intellectuals), and discuss the plausibility threat posed by sceptic outsiders and debunking former members.

11.1. Tolkienesque Beginnings: The Elf Queen's Daughters and the Silver Elves

LR introduced a new image of the Elf as a powerful, human-like magician. It is therefore not surprising that the first individuals who began identifying as Elves were practitioners of Western magic. These magicians had read Tolkien in the late 1960s and began to self-identify as Elves in the early 1970s. Or, as they say themselves, at that time they began to awaken and realise their true Elven nature. This section focuses on two early

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[285] I have depicted the self-identified Elves' Quendi-inspired notion of the 'real' Elves in figure 4.3 in chapter 4 above.

Elven groups, the Elf Queen's Daughters and the Silver Elves. These groups were among the first self-identified Elves, and are furthermore interesting because they have in turn fulfilled the role of chief movement intellectuals in the Elven community.[286] Especially the Silver Elves, Michael J. and Martha C. Love, also known as Zardoa Silverstar and Silver Flame, are important because they are still active today, having spearheaded the negotiation of the Elven identity, spirituality, and mission for more than three decades.[287]

The beginning of the Elven movement can be traced back to an Ouija board session around 1972 in Carbondale, Illinois. In this session, a spirit allegedly instructed two magicians, Arwen and Elanor, to form a group to be called the Elf Queen's Daughters (SE 310813). Arwen and Elanor were not their given names, but magical names taken from *LR*.[288] After the séance, the two magicians began writing Elven Magic Letters, some of which were published in *Green Egg*, the official magazine of the Church of All Worlds

[286] Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison use the term 'movement intellectuals' to refer to the informal leaders of social movements. As they put it, movement intellectuals "articulate the knowledge interests and cognitive identity" of their movements by example (1991, 98; cf. Laycock 2012b, 160). The Silver Elves have certainly functioned as role models, though they told me that they do not see themselves as intellectuals (310813).

[287] No account of the history of the Elven movement has yet been published. That said, Orion Sandstorm, who is himself a Dragon person, has taken an important first step to document the movement's history by drawing up the *Otherkin Timeline: The Recent History of Elfin, Fae, and Animal People* (2012). The timeline builds on a large number of published works and online sources, many of which have been authored by individuals who themselves identify as Elves or Therianthropes (i.e. people who consider themselves to be animals as well as humans). The historical overview of the Elven movement given in this chapter is indebted to Sandstorm. I also draw on material from the Silver Elves with whom I corresponded in December 2009 and March 2010, and who kindly sent me a copy of Zardoa Silverstar's master's thesis in depth psychology from Sonoma State University (submitted as Zardoa Love; Love 2005). Zardoa's thesis includes both historical information about the Elven movement and systematic reflections on Elven spirituality, including Tolkien's place in it. The Silver Elves furthermore read and commented on an earlier draft of this chapter for which I am most grateful. More detailed information about the formation and history of the Elven movement can undoubtedly be found in the publications by the Silver Elves in Pagan magazines (e.g. 1986), in their Elven letters (2001a; 2007; 2012a), and in their 23 additional self-published compilations and works (2001b; 2005; 2011; 2012b; 2012d; 2012e; 2012f; 2012g; 2012h; 2012i; 2012j; 2012k; 2012l; 2012m; 2013a; 2013b; 2013c; 2013d; 2013e; 2013f; 2013g). A comprehensive analysis of this extensive material falls outside the scope of this work, however. The Silver Elves can be visited at http://silverelves.angelfire.com/ [060812]. Recently, Emily Carding has published the book *Faery Craft* (2012) in which she discusses various forms of fairy spirituality from an insider's perspective. Her book includes an interview with the Silver Elves (Carding 2012, 253-257). The Silver Elves are also mentioned in Christine Wicker's *Not in Kansas Anymore* (2005, 67-68, 107, 234). Dennis Gaffin's recent *Running with the Fairies*, which gives an insider's perspective on contemporary fairy belief in Ireland, includes a discussion of "fairypeople", i.e. people who "know that that they have been reincarnated from the Fairy Realm" (2012, back cover). These fairypeople hold beliefs strikingly similar to the self-identified Elves', but Gaffin does not link up his discussion with the international Otherkin or Elven movements.

[288] Arwen (Si: Noble maiden) is the Elf princess who marries Aragorn and chooses a mortal doom (cf. section 7.2.3). Elanor (Si: Star-sun) is the name of a flower in Lothlórien and of Samwise Gamgee's eldest daughter.

and a leading Pagan magazine in America at the time. Arwen and Elanor established a "vortex" (local centre) in Aurora, Illinois called the Fox River Elves, and new "vortices" (local centres) were established throughout America.[289]

According to the Silver Elves, the Elf Queen's Daughters sang (and still sing) hymns to Elbereth Gilthoniel (151209). That is interesting, for the Valië Elbereth/Varda is the central Vala in the Elven narrative religion in *LR* (cf. section 7.2.4). The Elf Queen's Daughters thus did not only adopt an Elven identity from *LR*, but also took over the Elves' veneration for Elbereth, hence modelling a part of their own religious practice on narrative religion from *LR*. Despite all of this, Tolkien's literary mythology remained more an add-on to the spirituality of the Elf Queen's Daughters rather than its core. Fundamentally, the Elf Queen's Daughters were Wiccans (Love 2005, 32) with a strong Graves-inspired emphasis on the Goddess. They were also somewhat eccentric feminists, referring to all members as "sisters" regardless of their gender.[290] Furthermore, Arwen and Elanor were well versed in esoteric lore and specialists in divinatory practices like the Tarot, the I Ching, astrology, and the Ouija board (SE 191209). They deeply impressed the Silver Elves who describe them as the "most adept necromancers we've ever encountered" and as being able to "influence people by their mere presence and make you feel […] that the magic is real" (quoted in Sandstorm 2012, 10).

Zardoa Love became aware of the Elf Queen's Daughters in 1975 while working in a vegetarian restaurant in Carbondale (2005, 32). At this time Zardoa was already an initiate in the yoga systems of Transcendental Meditation, the Ananda Marga Society, and the Divine Light Mission, but he felt that he had not yet found his right spiritual path (McGowan 2011). One day, while browsing the occult bookstore down the hall from the vegetarian restaurant, he stumbled across some of the Elf Queen's Daughters' Elven Magic Letters. Though he felt a bit awkward about their feminism, he contacted the group and began receiving their letters (Love 2005, 32). A couple of months later, Zardoa visited the Fox River Elves in Aurora, and one evening he had a powerful awakening experience. In that moment "I knew", he writes, "that I was an elf and that I had been awaiting all my life for my kindred to come and find me" (Love 2005, 33; see also Carding, 2012, 255). Two members of the group gave Zardoa a secret soul (or "ba kah") name which had been channelled through the Ouija board, and he later received the Elven name Gildor (from *LR*) from Arwen and Elanor (SE 310813). The Silver Elves explained that the strong awakening experience was no requirement for membership of the Elf Queen's Daughters and that no formal initiation took place (310813). About nine months later, however, Zardoa himself decided to mark his awakening, and together with another newly awakened Elf he swore to pursue the Elven way both in this life and in later reincarnations "until all our kindred have been found and awakened" (Love

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[289] Estimates of the number of vortices vary from six (the more likely number) to sixty (McGowan 2011; Sandstorm 2012, 11).

[290] They also promoted a gender neutral spelling of human as "humon" (cf. Sandstorm 2012, 16).

2005, 34). Zardoa founded his own vortex, The Elves of the Southern Woodlands, in Carbondale.

The Elf Queen's Daughters published several articles on Goddess spirituality and environmentalism in *Green Egg* in which they referred to themselves as "Elves" and "Elven Daughters". Though they never explained exactly what they meant by these self-identifications (Sandstorm 2012, 13-14), some clues are given in an article of theirs entitled "O'Mother" (EQD 1976; quoted in Sandstorm 2012, 16). The article includes numerous references to Varda and an illustration depicting her as the living Mother Earth. This identification of Varda with the personified Earth is foreign to Tolkien's mythology, and it is clear that the Elf Queen's Daughters here used Varda/Elbereth simply as a name for the Goddess or Gaia and did not consider Varda to be a discrete, spiritual being. The article furthermore suggests that all people who respect the Goddess are 'Elves' in a metaphorical sense. This implies that the "Elf Queen" to whom the group's name refers is no other than the Goddess/Gaia/Varda herself. We can conclude from this that the Elf Queen's Daughters sincerely believed in the existence of a feminine, divine power, but that their identification as Elves was of a more playful and metaphorical nature. When Margot Adler interviewed the Elf Queen's Daughters, they even told her about their Elven Letters that "[m]ost of it's nonsense. […] We don't take it too seriously" (Adler 1986, 319).[291] The Silver Elves also explained to me that a member of the Elf Queen's Daughters, Melryn, had "laughed affectionally" when Zardoa told her about his ritual pledge to pursue the Elven way. She clearly did not take that too literally or seriously either (SE 310813).

In any case, the rigour of the Elf Queen's Daughters was short-lived. The Aurora Elves moved to San Francisco in 1976, and around 1977 the letter writing stopped. Some of the members founded the trans-rock elven band Aeron in 1978 and published the album *Paltereon: The Far Memory of the Elves* in 1979 (SE 310813). The band's success was limited, however, and soon the Elf Queen's Daughters stopped presenting themselves publicly as Elves. From around 1979, some of the most important members began identifying instead as Tookes (after the Hobbit thains in *LR*, the Tooks; Love 2005, 36). Zardoa took his Elven identity and the pledge to awaken the Elves of the world more seriously. In 1979 or 1980 Zardoa and Silver Flame began to publish a new series of Magical Elven Love Letters. In the beginning they wrote as the Sylvan Elves, but since 1981 they have referred to themselves as the Silver Elves (Love 2005, 37-38).[292]

Both the Elf Queen's Daughters and the Silver Elves owed their Elven identity to Tolkien's writings. The Silver Elves even told me that "if Tolkien's works hadn't been published, it is likely that we would not have called ours'elves[293] Elves" (191209). It is

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[291] Adler therefore discussed the Elf Queen's Daughters in her chapter on "Religions of paradox and play".

[292] The Silver Elves still write these letters and all of them are published, as Silver Elves (2001a; 2007; 2012a).

[293] The Silver Elves always apostrophise self as "s'elf".

interesting, however, to compare exactly how the two groups drew on Tolkien. Emerging before the publication of *S*, one could have expected the Elf Queen's Daughters to identify with Hobbits and humans and to perceive the Elves as supernatural others. If they had done so, they would have been like most other *LR*-inspired Pagans (cf. ch. 8). It is therefore remarkable that the Elf Queen's Daughters identified as Elves and considered Elbereth/Varda their deity. At first sight this religious use of *LR* looks quite different from the Neo-Pagans and hippies treated earlier. Upon closer scrutiny, however, it turns out that the Elf Queen's Daughters were not so different. As we have seen, the Elf Queen's Daughters considered Varda to be merely another name for the real Goddess and they confided to Adler that their use of Tolkien was ironic. What is more, after identifying as Elves for a few years some of the leaders gave up their Elven identity to become – indeed – Hobbits. After all, then, the Elf Queen's Daughters' use of Tolkien conformed pretty much to the standard pre-*S* pattern of reading Tolkien's literary mythology in the binocular mode.

The Silver Elves were different. Contrary to the Elf Queen's Daughters, who in the early 1970s had only been able to draw on *LR*, the Silver Elves adopted *S* when it was published in 1977 and hence drew on *LR* and *S* in combination. This seems to have consolidated their Elven identity (which they have retained till this day) and led them to incorporate parts of the narrative religion of *S* into their worldview and practice. We see this clearly in the first Magical Elven Love Letters, written in the early 1980s. These letters overflow with references to Tolkien's Elves and other topics from Tolkien's literary mythology which are creatively harmonised with theosophy, exo-theology, western Buddhism, and other traditions. The style is purposefully whimsical, but in the core, the letters tackle serious issues about spirituality, environmentalism, and the art of living.

Of the first twenty letters, thirteen include references to the narrative religion of Tolkien's literary mythology. These letters discuss Eru/Ilúvatar, Melkor, various Valar (Varda, Vána, Vairë, Mandos/Námo, and Manwë), identify (Mother) Earth with Arda (rather than with Varda), and speculate on the nature of the Elves. For instance, the Silver Elves write in one letter that

> Tolkien has it that when the worlds were first separated, the Elves were given a choice between returning beyond the veil to the safety of eternal life in Valinor or to remain in the world of Man – of manifestation – thus to suffer life after death after life after death in a seemingly endless round of incarnations. Each chose by their hearts [*sic*] desire, some returned to Valinor, others, loving Man – physical life – chose the long hard road of evolution's pathway (2001a, 36-37).

Tolkien did not really state this anywhere in his narratives. As we have seen in section 9.1.6, humans and Elves who have chosen a human doom do not reincarnate in Tolkien's narrative world, but live only once after which they go to the Halls of Mandos to wait until Ilúvatar calls them home. A belief in reincarnation, which the Silver Elves share with most individuals in the cultic milieu, is here *read into* Tolkien's text. What

matters here, however, is not that the Silver Elves paraphrase Tolkien incorrectly – which they have willingly admitted – but that they use his authority to legitimise their own belief, namely that they and other Elves have chosen to incarnate into this world to help and spiritually educate ordinary humans.[294] Tolkien's authority as a creative visionary and as a scholar of mythology allows his narratives to be used as a source of legitimisation, even though the Silver Elves clearly do not consider them to constitute a work of factual history.

Though the Elf Queen's Daughters and the Silver Elves differed somewhat in their use of Tolkien's narratives, both groups considered Tolkien's literary mythology to constitute a legitimate and central source of inspiration, albeit a non-referential one that must be read in the binocular mode. As the letter quote on the previous page illustrates, the Silver Elves ascribed much authority to Tolkien's texts, but at the same time they maintained that the general truth which these texts communicate, namely that an elder race exists and that humans and Elves used to live together in harmony, is presented within an entirely fictional frame. They told me that for them Tolkien's novels constitute "an inspiring, even sacred mythology, but were never taken as the literal truth" (SE 191209).

The explicit references to Tolkien's works grow rare in later letters. The Silver Elves told me that this was because they had not attempted to re-enact Tolkien's mythology, but had used his books "as emotive guidelines for creating [their] own Elven Culture" (191209). For example, they told me that it was Tolkien's invented languages that had inspired them to create their own 30,000 words language called Arvyndase (Silver-speech) (SE 151209).[295] The Silver Elves suggested to me that most other Elves share this approach of "starting out with Tolkien and creating from there" (120310). The connection with Tolkien is never lost, however, for as the Silver Elves pointed out, moving beyond Tolkien often involves drawing inspiration from authors and artists who have themselves been influenced by Tolkien's works (SE 151209).[296]

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[294] There is nothing peculiar about using an authoritative source to legitimise one's own beliefs. As Brian Malley has shown, this is "how the Bible works" (2004).

[295] A grammar and introduction to Arvyndase is available (Silver Elves 2012c). On their homepage, the Silver Elves offer an Elfin name in Arvyndase to any Elf or Otherkin who sends them an email with information about their awakening and kin self. Zardoa says that he has given out 5400 such Elfin names over the years.

[296] Some of the works which the Silver Elves told me have inspired themselves and other Elves include the music albums *Led Zeppelin IV* (1971) and Sally Oldfield's *Waterbearer* (1978); such novels as C.J. Cherryh's *The Dreamstone* (1983a) and *The Tree of Swords and Jewels* (1983b), Emma Bull's *The War for the Oaks* (1987), and Freda Warrington's *Elfland* (2009); and the esoteric historiographies by Laurence Gardner (2003) and Nicholas de Vere (2004) which will be discussed in chapter 12.

11.2. Growth and Consolidation: The Elven Community after 1990

The publication of *S* in 1977 did not immediately lead to a new wave of Elven awakenings. On first sight, this may seem surprising, for *S* provided much more information about the Elves than *LR* had done. There are good reasons, however, why *S* did not lead to massive conversions to Elvenhood. While *S* certainly focused on the Elves, it also presented them as less enchanting and attractive (cf. chapter 9). Furthermore, *S* was a much drier text than *LR*, and it was published at a moment when the Tolkien-hype of the late 1960s had long waned. In other words, *S* provided religious affordances with which an Elven identity could be consolidated, but it was not a text that could itself cause the emotional reaction needed for an awakening.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the Silver Elves continued to write their letters and in this way brought a few individuals to awakening.[297] Even so, the letters did not facilitate a major Elven awakening. As the Silver Elves say, it was only in the late 1990s, after they had "spent twenty some years sending out letters telling people it was alright to call thems'elves elves that the phenomenon really began to take hold, and people began to awaken and dare admit what they really felt about thems'elves" (120310).

Four factors led to the growth and consolidation of the Elven movement in the 1990s and 2000s, after *S* and the Silver Elves' letters had prepared the ground in the 1970s and 1980s. First, the advent of the Internet made it much easier for individuals sharing marginal interests (such as fairy spirituality) and identities (such as being an Elf) to find each other and build communities. Second, a broader Otherkin movement (of people identifying as various sorts of non-human beings) evolved out of the Elven movement and in turn provided the Elves with a set of ingenious rationalisations of the non-human identity and welcomed the Elves into their well-managed online communities. Third, role-playing games, such as White Wolf's *Changeling: The Dreaming* (Rein·Hagen 1995), gave players the opportunity to experiment with an identity as a fae being, and according to Lupa (2007, 50), playing such games facilitated the awakening of several Elves. Finally, Peter Jackson's movie adaptation of *LR* in the early 2000s led to a new wave of Tolkien-inspired Elven awakenings. In the sub-sections below I take a closer look at these four factors in turn.

11.2.1. The Internet and the Emergence of an Online Elven Community

The first step towards establishing an online Elven community was taken in 1990 by R'yankar Korra'ti, then a student at the University of Kentucky. R'yankar, who identified as an Elf himself, had been in contact with the Silver Elves and had run a small offline

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[297] Lupa cites one elf, sade, who had awakened in response to an article (perhaps a letter) by the Silver Elves in *Circle Network News* around 1985 and who was still active in the Elven community twenty years later (Lupa 2007, 167).

group of Elves in the late 1980s (Sandstorm 2012, 25). In 1990, he launched the Elfinkind Digest, the first electronic mailing list for Elves (Sandstorm 2012, 25).[298] Though the Elfinkind Digest remained a small list with less than a hundred members, it is significant for a number of reasons. To begin with, it was the first Elven online site and it still exists today, its 23 years of existence bearing witness to the longevity and continuity of the Elven movement. Furthermore, already in 1990, the Elfinkind Digest spawned the first (small) offline gathering (Sandstorm 2012, 26), initiating a tradition of yearly regional gatherings throughout the United States. Finally, it was on this list that a broader Otherkin movement began to take form, emerging out of the established Elven community (cf. section 11.2.2 below).

Since 1990, several generations of social community and networking sites have appeared, including Yahoo! Groups (launched 1998), Facebook (launched 2004), and the blog-hosting site Tumblr (launched 2007). During the 2000s, it also becomes easier to set up sites based on discussion forums and to create private homepages. The online Elves were quick to take advantage of these new technologies as they appeared, though the older formats never went out of use completely. Accordingly, the history of the online Elven community can be split up in a number of phases corresponding to advances in the technology of the social Internet.

The first half of the 1990s was dominated by the Elfinkind Digest and similar simple electronic mailing lists, typically hosted on Usenet, the main newsgroup platform at the time. Most of these mailing lists were short-lived, though, and none of them was as important as the Elfinkind Digest. In the early 1990s, the online Elven community was very small, but that should come as no surprise, for only 0.8% of the American population had access to the Internet in 1990 and fewer still in the rest of the world.[299] While the Elves, many of whom were young students, were quick to use the new possibilities for networking supplied by the Internet, low Internet penetration effectively inhibited growth. It was only when the level of Internet connection increased significantly in the second half of the 1990s, that the Elven online community could be established in earnest.[300]

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Elven community forming was furthermore facilitated by a new generation of community-building platforms, including Microsoft's MSN groups (launched 1995), Yahoo! Groups (launched 1998), and Google Groups (launched 2001). These platforms were more user-friendly than Usenet and introduced some simple file-sharing possibilities. The Elves especially established themselves on

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[298] http://www.murkworks.net/~elflist/ [290712]. The Elfinkind Digest can be joined from this page.

[299] See http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.P2 [130812].

[300] In 1996, Internet penetration in the United States reached 16.4% and in 2002 it passed 50%. See http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.P2 [130812]. The Internet penetration in Western Europe and the rest of the developed world roughly followed America, but since most self-identified Elves are American, I provide only American figures here.

Yahoo! Groups, a milestone being the founding of the group Elven Realities in 1999. Elven Realities is still one of the largest Elven hubs on the Internet with 730 members per 20 August 2012.[301]

During the 2000s, individual Elves also began to maintain their own homepages. Some examples include a site run by Rialian Ashtae, the founder and moderator of Elven Realities,[302] and the homepage of Arethinn (formerly Eshari) who is has organised the Otherkin gatherings known as MythiCalia and who moderates the *Otherkin* community on LiveJournal.[303] Other notable Elven Internet sites belong to Tara Erinn Pelton who claims to descend from the Tuatha Dé Dannan and to the Silver Elves.[304] The Elenari are a notable group of website-based Elves who claim to be Star Elves and whose homepage, the Elenari Nexus, has been online since 2000.[305] The importance of the Internet for the Elven movement cannot be overstated. More than the three other factors to be discussed below, the Internet propelled the Elven movement's growth and consolidation. Let me therefore take a closer look, first at the Internet's role for the growth of the Elven community, and second at its role for the consolidation of the community.

It is impossible to determine the *absolute* growth of the Elven movement since 1990. We do not know exactly how many individuals identified as Elves prior to the Internet, nor how many self-identified Elves can currently be found offline. It is difficult even to estimate the number of Elves online.[306] It is reasonable to conclude, however, that a

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[301] Several other Elven groups sprung up on Yahoo! Groups as well, but none of them came close to Elven Realities in importance. Like Elven Realities, most of these groups had a Pagan flavour to them. The Pagan groups include Elven Guild (founded 1999; defunct), elenari-and-friends (founded 1999; active until 2003; 58 members), ElfHelp (founded 1999; still active; 116 members), elfweare (founded 2002; active until 2006; 60 members), elvenmemories (founded 2002; still active; 80 members), The Elven High Council (founded 2002; active until 2008; 50 members), and Elven Glade (founded 2003; active until 2003; 24 members). Also two groups of Christian Elves have been active, christianelfcommunity (founded 2002, active until 2009; 91 members) and Elfinzone (2004; active until 2006; 67 members). Member figures for the Pagan Elven groups are per 070812; figures for Christian Elven groups per 140812. All groups are considered active until the number of posts/year dropped below 30. There may have been similar Elven communities using MSN Groups (though none comparable to Elven Realities in importance), but since MSN Groups went defunct on 21 February 2009, I have not been able to check this. In any case, no Elven groups of importance participated in the migration of active MSN groups to the new Multiply platform in 2009. I have found no Elven groups of note on Google Groups.

[302] http://www.rialian.com/ [130812].

[303] Arethinn's homepage can be found at http://www.eristic.net/ [100713]. It has been online since 2000.

[304] Pelton's homepage can be found at http://elvenworld.net/ [130812]. The homepage of the Silver Elves is located at http://silverelves.angelfire.com/ [060812].

[305] http://www.elenari.net/ [180712].

[306] There are at least three reasons for this. First, Elven online activity is dispersed over a large number of Internet locations, including private groups which are not easily found and whose membership figures cannot be checked. For this reason the actual number of online Elves might be larger than it seems as first sight. Second, many members, probably the majority, in the large and public groups like Elven Realities are passive members who once registered out of curiosity and never bothered to unregister. These passive

substantial *relative* growth has taken place. Prior to the Internet, there were only a few (and very small) Elven organisations. Today, the online Elven groups boast a total membership of more than a thousand. Even if not all of these members are serious, we certainly have a growth in the number of organised Elves from a handful in the 1980s to several hundred in the 2000s. A further indication of Internet-facilitated growth is the majority of new members of the online Elven communities have not developed an identity as Elves on their own, but have only done so upon being exposed to the idea that you can be an Elf yourself by stumbling upon online sites maintained by self-identified Elves. Stated differently, the Internet gave the Elven community a strong plat-form on which to present itself to potential converts, and it made it easy for interested individuals to explore the Elven community prior to making a serious commitment to membership and Elven identity.

Since most Elves are also Pagans, some of the growth of the Elven movement can be explained as a reflection of the remarkable growth of the Pagan community during the 1990s (cf. section 8.3.1). Viewing Elven growth as a reflection of Pagan growth does not diminish the importance of the Internet, however, for also the Pagan growth was largely caused by the Internet which facilitated community-building, information ex-change, and identity endorsement for Pagans (Cowan 2005) in the same way as it did for the Elves.

The Internet also allowed the Elven movement to *consolidate*. It did so in two ways. First, the new online sites gave the Elven community spatial anchorage, even if only in virtual space. Second, the discussions taking place within the online communities were in fact negotiations which led to the formation of socially sanctioned codes for what members could legitimately claim about the Elves in general and about their own Elven nature (more on this in section 11.3.1 below). Rationalisations of what it meant to be an Elf, and strategies of justifying the claim to Elven identity were discussed in the Elven online groups and repeated, combined, and internalised by members. As part of this, online Elves negotiated how Tolkien's works could legitimately be used. Since the use of Tolkien only became a hot (and indeed schismatic) issue with the appearance of the movie adaptation of *LR*, I will postpone the discussing of Tolkien's place in the post-1990 Elven movement to sub-section 11.2.4 below on the Elven reaction to the movies.

After a peak around 2000, just one year after its creation, the activity in Elven Realities began to drop dramatically as shown in the table below.

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members make the number of Elves online look larger than it actually is. The third issue that makes it difficult to establish the precise number of online Elves is that many individuals are active in several groups at once under different aliases. This, also, makes the number of self-identified Elves online look larger than it actually is.

Table 11.1. Activity in Elven Realities												
Year	**1999**	**2000**	**2001**	**2002**	**2003**	**2004**	**2005**	**2006**	**2007**	**2008**	**2009**	**2010**	**2011**
Posts	4849	20916	13599	15407	4095	2019	1148	596	375	1353	1090	340	393
Posts/day	16.1	57.1	37.3	42.2	11.2	5.5	3.1	1.6	1.0	3.7	3.0	0.9	1.1

The decline of Elven Realities does not reflect a collapse of the online Elven community as such, but it does call for an explanation. To make sense of the rise and fall of Elven Realities, let me refer to an article by Alicia Iriberri and Gondy Leroy (2009) in which they develop a life-cycle approach to the study of the online communities.

Iriberri and Leroy distinguish between five life phases of online communities, namely inception, creation, growth, maturity, and death (2009, 13-14). Transitions between the life phases are precarious; each transition has its own threats, and all share death as a possible outcome (Iriberri and Leroy 2009, 17-25). Iriberri and Leroy describe the transition into the growth stage as follows:

> [W]hen enough members have joined, a culture and identity for the community begins to develop. Members start using a common vocabulary and, as the community grows, members select the role they will play in the community. Additionally, communication and participation etiquette rules surface. Some members lead discussions, some provide support, while many look for support and information. Some members become leaders while others become followers or lurkers, who read messages posted by other members but do not actively contribute to the community. Some volunteer information while others use this information (2009, 14).

For online communities to move safely to the growth stage, it helps to (a) reach a critical mass of members fast, (b) to successfully integrate new members into the community, (c) to secure a high quality of content, and (d) to organise offline events to reinforce the social ties established online (Iriberri and Leroy 2009, 21). Elven Realities was the only Elven group on Yahoo! Groups to reach the growth stage, especially because it was the only group to ever gain critical mass. Even so, Elven Realities scored only moderately well on the other success factors. While attempts were made to organise offline gatherings, these initiatives were infrequent and the gatherings were poorly attended. Also, while much high level content was volunteered, the group's discussions were hardly moderated.

Iriberri and Leroy explain that "[a]s the online community *matures*, the need for a more explicit and formal organization with regulations, rewards for contributions, subgroups, and discussion of more or less specific topics is evident" (2009, 14, also 22-23, 24). This need also arose in Elven Realities, but it was never catered to, and herein lies the main reason why Elven Realities did not reach the maturity stage. In a discussion on Elven Realities in February 2011, Rialian, the moderator of the group, himself reflected on the decline of Elven Realities and other email-based Elven newsgroups. Echoing Iri-

berri and Leroy, he ascribed the decline to weak moderation and lack of integration of new members. This was allowed to happen because "running the list is not central to our [the moderators'] identity, so we do not take the social aspects too personally". The decline of the newsgroups cannot only be attributed to lax moderators, however. Just as importantly, Yahoo! Groups did not facilitate the formation of subgroups and advanced content management such as organising discussions in sub-forums and moving posts between discussion threads. The weakness of the very platform was the reason why email-based newsgroups fared poorly in the 2000s compared to online communities using more advanced software.

During the 2000s, most Elven online activity moved away from Elven Realities to online communities using message board services, such as ProBoards (launched 2000), and to a new generation of social networking sites, including LiveJournal (launched 1999; community function added 2000), MySpace (launched 2003), Facebook (launched 2004), Ning (launched 2005), and Tumblr (launched 2007). Besides ProBoards-based groups, which best facilitated discussions, the social blog-hosting sites LiveJournal and Tumblr were most popular, probably because these sites provided the most balanced combination of individual profiles and blogs on the one hand, and community-building on the other. By contrast, MySpace and Facebook are too individual-oriented, while Ning and the old newsgroup platforms such as Yahoo! Groups are exclusively group-oriented.

Never again an exclusively Elven online community emerged to rival the status which Elven Realities in its best years had occupied within the Elven movement. That was not because the Elven movement had collapsed, however, but because it had largely fused with the emerging Otherkin movement in the early 2000s, becoming a stream within this broader movement.

11.2.2. The Otherkin Movement

The Otherkin movement and the Elven movement are deeply intertwined. During the 1990s, the Otherkin movement emerged (at least in part) out of the Elven movement. In the 2000s, the roles had become reversed, the Elven community now benefitting from its inclusion within a broader and better organised Otherkin community. Let me first touch upon the origin of the Otherkin movement before turning to the contemporary significance of this movement for the Elven community. To do so, we must return to the Elfinkind Digest.

The Elfinkind Digest was originally intended simply for Elves, but it also attracted individuals who self-identified as various other non-human beings (Sandstorm 2012, 25). To some extent this should not come as a surprise, for in the decades after *LR* individuals had not only identified as Elves, but also occasionally as other humanoid fey beings. The Silver Elves had lived with a Gnome and a Fairy (Sandstorm 2012, 22) and the Tribunal of the Sidhe includes *sídhe* and satyr members. It was new in 1990s, however, that individuals began to identify also as non-humanoid, mythological creatures. Most of

these individuals identified as Dragons, but there were also, for example, Angels and Gryphons. The Elves did not wish to expel the Gnomes and Dragons from the Elfinkind Digest, but their presence generated a need for a more inclusive, non-human identity label. Already in 1990, therefore, the words "Otherkind" and "Otherkin" were coined and there was even talk about renaming the list "The Otherkind Digest" (Sandstorm 2012, 25-26).[307] Though this never happened, non-Elves continued to be active on the Elfinkind Digest, and soon online newsgroups emerged, both for Otherkin in general and for various specific Otherkin groups besides Elves, including self-identified Dragons and Werewolves.

The Elves profited from the emergence of the Otherkin movement in two ways. Most straightforwardly, they benefitted from the founding of a number of very well-managed online communities. Six of these are worth mentioning, namely Otherkin.net (founded 2000), the "Otherkin" community on LiveJournal (founded 2001), and the four ProBoard-based sites, Embracing Mystery (founded 2001), Otherkin Alliance (founded 2005), Otherkin Phenomena (founded 2008), and Otherkin Community (founded 2009).[308] Thanks to a critical mass of discussion participants and to good management and privacy protection, these six groups have successfully made the transition into the maturity stage in Iriberri and Leroy's sense.

The Elves make up a considerable member contingent on the mature Otherkin sites. For instance, per 1 August 2013, the five largest groups of non-Elven users on

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[307] Today the term Otherkin is used in two senses, a narrow and a broad one. In the narrow sense Otherkin refers to self-identified humanoid fey/fae beings (such as Elves) together with self-identified mythological creatures (such as Dragons). Members of these two groups generally feel comfortable identifying as Otherkin in addition to identifying more specifically as a particular kind of non-human. In the broad sense of the term, the Otherkin include also self-identified Vampires and Therianthropes, though these groups tend to dismiss the Otherkin label and prefer to organise their own communities.

The Vampire Community constitutes the largest and most independent Otherkin community and can trace its history back to the 1980s when so-called Real Vampires began to distinguish themselves from mere lifestyle Vampires. On this movement, see Dresser (1989), Keyworth (2002), Partridge (2005, 230-238), Hume (2006), and Laycock (2009; 2012b). Therianthrope communities only began to form in the mid-1990s when the identity as Therianthrope/Therian was developed and allowed a more inclusive Therianthrope community to grow out of the Werewolf community. On Therianthrophy, see Lupa (2006) and Robertson (2010; 2012; 2013). On the Otherkin in the narrow sense, see Kirby (2009a; 2009b; 2012; 2013) and Laycock (2012a). No earlier academic publications have focused specifically on the Elven movement. The best overviews of the Otherkin movement are provided by insiders. Lupa's *Field Guide* (2007) is an excellent introduction to the Otherkin (in the broad sense), and Orion Sandstorm's *Directory* of offline and (especially) online sources (2011) and his *Otherkin Timeline* (2012) are invaluable resources (though Sandstorm does not include references to the Vampire community).

[308] See http://www.otherkin.net; http://community.livejournal.com/otherkin/profile; http://www.embracingmystery.org; http://www.otherkinalliance.org; http://otherkinphenomena.org; and http://www.otherkincommunity.net [100713]. Per 10 July 2013, the *Otherkin* group on LiveJournal had 423 members and stored a total of more than 30,000 posts. It is not the only Otherkin group on LiveJournal, but anno 2013 it is still the largest and most active.

Otherkin.net were Therians (N=144), including especially Grey Wolf Therians; Dragons (N=124), mostly of the Western type; Vampires (N=70), including both Psychic and Sanguinarian ones; Angelic beings (N=70), including archangels and fallen angels; and Demonic beings (N=47). By comparison, the site hosted 76 Elves. This figure is somewhat misleading, however, for while the Therian and Dragon categories include various subtypes, several kinds of Elves were granted their entirely own category. Besides the 76 Elves, some of whom were Dark Elves and Star Elves, Otherkin.net hosted an additional 51 Faeries, 21 Sidhe, 15 Tuatha Dé Dannan, and 2 Fae. More comparable with the Therian and Dragon totals is thus the figure of 165 Elves and Elf-like beings (not counting self-identified Nymphs, Goblins, and other demi-humans), making this group constitute the largest contingent of members.[309]

The Elves profited from the emergence of the Otherkin movement in a second way by taking over rationalisations and legitimisations developed by non-Elven Otherkin intellectuals. As we shall see in section 11.3.1 below, both Elves and Otherkin generally believe to be non-human souls in human bodies, and during the 2000s, movement intellectuals in the Otherkin movement developed explanations of how this condition could arise as the result of voluntary incarnation, so-called walk-ins, and so on (cf. section 11.3.1 below). While not intended to rationalise and legitimise Elvenhood in particular, these Otherkin rationalisations were immediately usable also for Elves. In this way, being a part of the Otherkin movement, increased and consolidated the arsenal of plausibility-maintaining strategies at the Elves' disposal.

To sum up thus far, we have seen that both the Internet and the Otherkin movement helped the self-identified Elves by facilitating community-formation and information exchange. In other words, the Internet and the Otherkin movement could help nurture an Elven identity that was already present. That does not explain why many individuals approached existing Elven and Otherkin groups with a well-developed infatuation with elves. Elven-centred role-playing games and Peter Jackson's movie adaptation of *LR* constitute two sources of such infatuations and must both be considered facilitating factors behind the growth of the Elven community in the 1990s and 2000s. In the two following sub-sections, I look in turn at Elven role-playing games and Jackson's *LR* movies.

11.2.3. *Changeling: The Dreaming* and Other Role-Playing Games

We have already seen that fantasy fiction, including Tolkien's literary mythology, can lead individuals to formulate the hunch that they are themselves Elves, but arguably role-playing games constitute an even more effective means for transforming fascination with elves into Elven self-identification. Role-playing games such *Dungeons & Dragons* (first edition 1974) offer people a chance to take on another role, for example as an Elf for

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[309] See http://otherkin.net/community/directory/species.html [010813].

the duration of the game, and for some players these games were the first step towards adopting a permanent identity as Otherkin.

The most significant role-playing games for the Elven and Otherkin movements were the *World of Darkness* series published by the game company White Wolf in the 1990s. This series included *Vampire: The Masquerade* (Rein·Hagen 1991), *Werewolf: The Apocalypse* (Rein·Hagen 1992), and *Changeling: The Dreaming* (Rein·Hagen 1995).[310] White Wolf's games nurtured an Otherkin identity more potently than earlier role-playing games because they were the first games to take a non-human perspective. In earlier role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, it had merely been an option to play a demi-human all players, but in most games in the *World of Darkness* series, all players were by definition non-humans. Each of these games focused on a different kind of non-humans. In *Changeling: The Dreaming*, for instance, the game which is most relevant for the Elven movement, players take on an identity as a fae being, i.e. an elf, gnome, phooka, gremlin, troll, or similar being. The game is set in a gothic punk world, and the idea is that the players are changelings, i.e. fae souls born into a human body.

The similarity of the game idea and the beliefs already held in the Elven movement – not to mention in the Tribunal of the Sidhe – is striking. It is therefore not surprising that some people drifted easily from playing the game to adopting the belief that Changelings/Otherkin are real. White Wolf's games furthermore appeared at the same time as the Otherkin movement went online, and online discussions of game experiences acted as a catalyst for the transformation of non-human roles into Otherkin identities (Lupa 2007, 50; Robertson 2010; 2013). Many people who were already fascinated with vampires, who already believed in fairies, or who started off with some similar infatuation played the games, and serious discussions about being Elves, Otherkin, Vampires, or Werewolves emerged from the gaming sessions. As Lupa explains,

> [t]he subject matter of the games led to the inevitable wonderings: "Well, what if this was real? What if there really were werewolves, and vampires, and faeries in our day and age?" Most players likely simply shrugged it off as a passing fancy. However, many Otherkin found that the flights of fancy could open up opportunities to discuss more serious approaches to the idea of nonhumans in a human world (2007, 50).

Some Elves even integrated the games into narratives of legitimisation, arguing that the games testified to the reality of fae beings incarnating into human bodies. Rich Dansky, one of the designers of *Changeling*, told the journalist Nick Mamatas that he had come across the electronic mailing list darkfae-l whose members wondered "how the folks at White Wolf had gotten so much of their existence right". The discussants had come to the "obvious conclusion that we'd gotten it right because we ourselves were in

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[310] Other White Wolf games let players imagine themselves as wraiths (Hartshorn 1995), mummies (Hubbard et al. 2001), or demons (Lee, Stolze, and Tinworth 2002), but these monsters have proved too unhuman and unattractive for people to identify with on a noteworthy scale in the Otherkin community.

fact changelings" (Mamatas 2001).[311] White Wolf must have been well aware of the religious affordances of their games, for they consciously advertised among Pagans and occultists. For instance, a theme issue on Elves in *Green Egg* (summer 1995) included both a full-side colour ad for *Changeling* and a review of the game (Sandstorm 2012, 37).

Though difficult to quantify, it seems warranted to say that *Changeling: The Dreaming* indirectly contributed to the growth and consolidation of the Elven movement by providing an easy and gradual entry into the community. Furthermore, it may have contributed to the Otherkin cause by normalising identification with non-humans. If many people *play* at being non-humans, it becomes relatively less cognitively dissonant to *identify* as a non-human.

11.2.4. After the Movies: A New Wave of Tolkienesque Elves

Peter Jackson's movie adaptations of *LR* premiered in 2001, 2002, and 2003. In this section I look at the reception of these movies within the Elven community, but first it is necessary to assess the role which Tolkien's narratives had played in the Elven movement in the 1990s.

The fact is that Tolkien's literary mythology had not played the same significant role in the Elven movement in the 1990s as it had done for the Elf Queen's Daughters and the Silver Elves in the 1970s and early 1980s (cf. section 11.1 above). For the Elves who awakened during the 1980s and 1990s and who had not experienced how *LR* had been infused with subcultural capital by the hippies in the late 1960s, Tolkien's literary mythology was merely one possible source of inspiration among others. Even for the Silver Elves, the importance of Tolkien's narratives decreased over time. The vast majority of self-identified Elves since the 1980s have considered Tolkien's literary mythology to be a legitimate source of inspiration when approached in the binocular mode, but have considered it to be less relevant and authoritative than other texts, including both Celtic and Germanic mythology and works of specifically Elven fiction. Only a small minority within the Elven community integrate aspects of Tolkien's narrative religion into their beliefs and practices, for instance by praying to Ilúvatar or working with the Valar in ritual.

This was the situation when *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the first of three instalments of Peter Jackson's movie adaptation of *LR*, hit the cinemas in 2001. The religious affordances of the movies will be considered in chapter 14. Here it only concerns us that the movies gave Tolkien's Elves new life and visual form, and that the cinematic enchantment ignited a new fascination with Elves. Some of the new elf enthusiasts found and joined the online Elven community and claimed to be Elves themselves. The Elven movement thus profited from the movies by gaining new members, but the movies also

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[311] Mamatas' article "Elven Like Me: Otherkin come out of the closet" (2001) was published in the American newsweekly *The Village Voice*. It was the first journalistic piece on the Otherkin movement.

led to a controversy about Tolkien's legitimacy, and ultimately to a sort of schism in the Elven movement. This was because the Elven community reacted with hostility to a new type of self-identified Elves who did not read Tolkien's literary mythology in the binocular mode as a parable about the 'real' Elves, but considered it to accurately reflect a spiritual reality.

As the following exchange from Otherkin.net illustrates, it caused irritation among some members when other awakened Elves made far-reaching claims about the 'real' elves while it was patent that their knowledge stemmed from the *LR* movies. In a review of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Syleniel, a self-identified "reincarnate elf", said: "I was very pleased by the portrayal of the elves. They looked, walked, acted and even spoke like elves. *They were very reminiscent of what I remember*. In full elven form we can look that unearthly (especially as in Lothlórien). That's part of who we are" (emphasis added).[312] Other members were unhappy with Syleniel's source-product reversal, i.e. her claim that her past life memories and the *LR* movie corresponded because Jackson had 'gotten it right' and not because her 'memories' were shaped by the movies. Violin Goddess responded with an entry in the Otherkin wiki on 'Tolkienesque Elves'.[313] While diplomatically keeping open the possibility that memories such as Syleniel's might be genuine, Violin Goddess considered it more likely that they were based on the movies and that Syleniel and her sort were "wannabes". Violin Goddess acknowledged that Tolkien's Quendi resemble real elves somewhat, but that was because Tolkien "incorporated a fair amount of myth and legend into his stories". She hereby affirmed the dominant Elven standpoint that Tolkien's mythology can be used as a source of inspiration for self-identified Elves, but only as metaphorical binoculars with which one can come to see the 'real' elves.

The hostility towards explicitly movie-inspired Elves must be seen against the backdrop of a general discussion on fiction-basedness within the Otherkin movement. 'Conventional' Otherkin accept individuals who claim to possess non-human souls and individuals who claim to "soulbond" with other entities, whether these are factual, fictional, or self-imagine (Lupa 2007, 95; Kirby 2009a, 74-76; 2012, 134-135). Fiction- or mediakin, however, have been highly controversial because they go one step further and claim to be patently fictional beings (Lupa 2007, 202-206; Kirby 2009a, 59-64; 2012, 133). Especially the so-called Otakukin, who identify with Japanese anime and manga characters, are considered illegitimate, and critical Otherkin have emphasised extreme cases in which several Otakukin have claimed to be the very same manga character. Such cases are rare, however, and the real issue seems to be that the Otakukin's blatant use of fiction calls attention to the fact that the Otherkin movement in general is fiction-based, a fact most Otherkin go to great pains to conceal.

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[312] Syleniel (2001), "Lord of the Rings movie review", http://otherkin.net/articles//lotr-syl.html [091209]. Spelling corrected.

[313] Violin Goddess (n.y.), "Tolkienesque", http://otherkin.net/wiki/Mythology/Tolkienesque [091209].

Faced with the accusation of being wannabes, most movie-inspired Elves allowed themselves to be socialised into adopting more conventional Elven beliefs. They were taught to assert that they were real Elves, and that Tolkien's fictional Quendi did not refer to real elves in a straightforward way. They also learned that if they were to draw on Tolkien's works, the books and especially *S* enjoyed more prestige than the movies. In other words, they passed through a similar process of rationalisation ("starting out with Tolkien and creating from there") as the first generation of Elves had gone through three decades earlier. Even though the new recruits soon learned to downplay the role of Jackson's movies for their 'awakening', it is unquestionable that Jackson's movie adaptations of *LR* and the renewed interest in Tolkien's books (including *S*) which they spawned constitute an important factor behind the continued growth of the Elven community in the 2000s.

Not all movie-inspired Elves were socialised into the mainstream Elven movement. Some formed their own groups and developed along an explicitly Tolkien-based path. Their online communities include the Yahoo! Groups Elende (founded 2003) and Children of the Varda (founded 2003), and the Internet sites Indigo Elves (founded 2005), Faer en Edhel Echuiad (The Spirit of the Elf Awaken Again; active 2005-2006), and Tië eldaliéva (The Elven Path; founded 2005). Mirroring the Silver Elves' transition from *LR*-inspired to *S*-inspired Elves in the late 1970s, *S* also soon replaced the movies as the central Tolkien text for this new generation of Tolkien-based Elves. The Tolkienesque Elven groups ascribe more authority to *S* than the Elven community at large, subscribing to a literal-affirmative reading of *LR* and *S* and counting the Quendi and the Valar to be real beings. Depending on whether their reading takes a mytho-historical or a mytho-cosmological turn, the Tolkien-based Elves interpret Middle-earth either as our world in prehistory or as a place on another plane. Since these Elves combine their identification as Elves with other forms of Tolkien spirituality they will be discussed in chapters 14 and 16.

11.2.5. The Elven Movement as Tolkien-integrating Religion: Summary

With the historical overview of the Elven movement in place, it is now possible to summarise the use of Tolkien's literary mythology within the movement. It is useful to look in turn at Tolkien's impact on the very Elven identity of the self-identified Elves and on his influence their spiritual beliefs and practices.

The identity of the awakened Elves is indebted to Tolkien in two ways. First, the very term 'Elf' bears witness to Tolkien's influence. Before Tolkien, the French loanword 'fairy' was used by most writers, including Margaret Murray, Gerald Gardner, Robert Graves, and Walter Yeeling Evans-Wentz, to refer to the demi-humans of folklore. Tolkien gave the Anglo-Saxon term 'elf' a revival, and the self-identified Elves follow Tolkien here although they sometimes downplay their indebtedness to Tolkien by adopting

the archaic spelling Elfin.[314] Second, the self-identified Elves are inescapably influenced by Tolkien's new vision of the Elves as tall and majestic human-like magicians. This is so, no matter whether the self-identified Elves have this image directly from Tolkien or via later Tolkienesque fantasy. Also, they take over this image of the Elves no matter whether they classify Tolkien's works as fiction, myth, or history. In the imagination of the self-identified Elves, as in the contemporary imagination in general, it is Tolkien's magnificent and powerful Elves rather than Murray's gnomish and subdued fairies who define what an Elf is like. Attesting to this, Lupa writes in her *Field Guide to the Otherkin* that the kin selves of contemporary, self-identified Elves "tend to more closely resemble J.R.R. Tolkien's mythos than tales of "little people"" (2007, 160). As we shall see in the next section, the Elves take care, however, to embed this Tolkien-inspired image of the Elf within established and authoritative traditions of fairy lore. Indeed, they construct a new Quendi-inspired, but folklore-legitimised notion of the 'real elves' by blending Tolkien's attractive but fictional Quendi with the allegedly real but unattractive fairies/elves of folklore (as depicted in figure 4.3 in chapter 4 above).

If the Elven identity is always more or less influenced by Tolkien, it differs much to what extent self-identified Elves integrate other elements from Tolkien's literary mythology into their spirituality. Some Elves engage in Tolkien-based rituals directed at Ilúvatar or the Valar; most do not, though they consider such rituals to be legitimate. In general, the Elves do not share a set of distinctively Elven beliefs and rituals, but typically identify as Pagans and/or magicians as well as Elves, thus subscribing to a wide variety of esoteric ideas and practices which they share with non-Elven Pagans and magicians. In a nutshell, the identity of the self-identified Elves is Tolkien-integrating, but their practices and beliefs are for the most part not. Elves who occasionally *do* pray to Ilúvatar and/or engage in Valar-directed rituals are the exception to this rule.

It should furthermore be pointed out that the Elven identity (and hence the Elven movement as such) is more indebted to *LR* than to *S*. We have seen that the Elven movement emerged in the early 1970s, i.e. after *LR* but before *S*. We have also seen that the movie adaptation of *LR* led to an increase in members of the Elven community. By contrast, the Elven movement did not experience any noteworthy growth upon the publication of *S*. The religious affordances of *S* are relevant only for those Elves who, in addition to entertaining an identity as Elves, also engage in Tolkien-integrating rituals and beliefs. We have seen that the Silver Elves' early letters drew extensively on *S*, as do a minority of Tolkien-integrating Elves in Elven Realities. Also the specifically Tolkien-based Elven groups which were founded in the years right after the movies (cf. chs. 14 and 16) draw on *S*. In short, the Elven identity of awakened Elves is based primarily on

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[314] English knows three adjectives derived from the noun Elf. Elfin (old) and Elvish (new) are the standard forms. Tolkien uses the term Elvish, but only in a substantivised form to refer to the languages Quenya and Sindarin. He introduced the new adjective 'Elven' as the adjective form of Elf – just as he modified other spellings, writing for instance 'dwarves' instead of 'dwarfs'.

LR, while the spirituality of those Elves who also engage in rituals directed at Eru and/or the Valar is based on *S*. The self-identified Elves who engage in Tolkien-integrating rituals are interesting because they constitute the overlap between, on the one hand, the community of self-identified Elves for whom Tolkien-integrating rituals are optional, and, on the other hand, the spiritual Tolkien milieu (cf. chs. 10, 14, and 16) which is defined by its Tolkien-integrating rituals, but in which only some religionists identify as Elves.

11.3. Construction and Maintenance of Plausibility in the Elven Movement

In the preceding two sections, I have sketched the history of the Elven movement and analysed its use of Tolkien's literary mythology. In this section, I take up the issue how plausibility is constructed and maintained within the Elven community. The section is comprised of four sub-sections, the two first of which explore the Elves' repertoire of semiotic strategies for plausibility construction. In the first sub-section, I chart the Elves' cultural, genetic, and spiritual rationalisations of their Elven nature; in the second sub-section on justification, I discuss their strategies of legitimisation and relativisation. In the third sub-section, I discuss 'conversion' to Elvishness, before finishing off by identifying the Elven movement's plausibility structures and plausibility threats.

11.3.1. Semiotic Strategies for Plausibility Construction I: Cultural, Genetic, and Spiritual Rationalisations

This section is concerned with how the awakened Elves rationalise their Elven identity. The point of departure is that all self-identified Elves share the core belief 'we are Elves'. I call it a core belief because it is this belief which keeps the Elven movement together; it is not necessarily the belief in which individual self-identified Elves are most confident.

The attractiveness and plausibility of the core belief 'we are Elves' hinges upon the formulation of second-order rationalisations that specify the Elves' nature and mission. The Elven community has developed rationalisations that cast the Elven identity in three different ontological modes, i.e. as being of a cultural, genetic, or spiritual nature. As a rule, self-identified Elves are not committed to just one of these rationalisations, but rather see them as a repertoire of accepted explanations that can be actualised in different contexts.

The most cautious rationalisation strategy takes Elvishness to be a purely cultural matter. According to this view, being an Elf means that one continues the cultural and religious tradition of those aboriginal human tribes, such as the Picts, who according to Margaret Murray, Gerald Gardner, and Robert Graves had mistakenly become depicted as fairies or elves in later folklore. This cultural identification as Elf is immediately open

to any contemporary Pagan who believes his or her own religion to be a continuation of the Old Religion practised by the pre-Christian 'fairy tribes'. As we saw in section 11.1, the Elf Queen's Daughters identified as Elves in this purely cultural sense when they considered themselves and everyone else who lives in respect of the Goddess to be Elves. Also the Silver Elves sometimes use the adjective elven/elfin to refer inclusively to all those who reinvigorate the Old Religion of the aboriginal Europeans, i.e. to all contemporary Pagans.

While it is possible for Pagans in general to flirt with a cultural identification as Elves, the self-identified Elves within the Elven movement usually go further and consider Elvishness to be either a matter of descent or incarnation, or both. Consider as a first illustration Margot Adler's description of the Silver Elves in *Drawing Down the Moon* (1986).[315] Adler described them as

> [a] small group that sends out elvish letters from time to time and spreads magic about the world, finding elves and faerie folk here and there. The letters are free for the asking, but first class post stamps are requested to cover costs. The Silver Elves feel themselves to be *the genetic and spiritual descendants* of all the gentle folks through the ages whose cultures have been obliterated, oppressed, and absorbed (1986, 522; emphasis added).

In what follows, I look in turn at what it means for the self-identified Elves to be the "genetic" respectively "spiritual" descendants of the gentle folk. In section 11.3.2 below, I return to the significance of the small world 'feel' in the phrase, 'The Silver Elves *feel* to be the genetic and spiritual descendants of all the gentle folks through the ages'.

To be an Elf in a genetic sense can mean two things in the Elven movement. Some self-identified Elves interpret the claim in a euhemeristic way. For them, being a genetic Elf means to descend from the 'fairy tribes' whose Old Religion they reinvigorate and whom they believe to have possessed great magical abilities. These Elves make a hard claim about their ancestry, but at the same time reduce the significance of their genetic Elvishness to the membership of a specific human race. The self-identified Elves who see themselves as descendants of the fairy tribes always combine this claim of ancestry with the cultural understanding of Elvishness discussed above. The euhemeristic-genetic rationalisation thus represents a half-way position between, on the hand one, an exclusively cultural rationalisation of Elvishness without any claim of descent, and, on the other hand, a more full-fledged genetic rationalisation of Elvishness in which the Elves are taken to more than human.

The claim that the contemporary Elves descend from super-human beings come in different forms. In some versions the Elven ancestors are equalled with the Tuatha Dé

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[315] *Drawing Down the Moon* was the first book to present an overview of American Paganism. It included an appendix with short descriptions of many different groups together with contact information. The first edition, which included a discussion of the Elf Queen's Daughters, was published in 1979; the Silver Elves were included in the appendix to the second edition.

Dannan; in others the Elven race is traced even further back. A particularly elaborate account of Elven ancestry was presented by Aeona Silversong in a series of articles in *Green Egg* in the mid-1990s (1995; 1996a; 1996b; 1996c), in which she claimed that the Elves had originally come from the stars about 250,000 years ago, raised Atlantis, and built the pyramids.[316] This all happened in the harmonious time before the "Faerie wars" between humans and elves which forced the elves to retreat to the Otherworld (Silversong 1996c).[317] Before retreating, however, some of the intergalactic elves must have interbred with humans, for Silversong considers herself to be an Elf due to her "ancient Milesian blood" (1995), i.e. by genetic descent.[318]

Many Elves consider Silversong's theory to be a legitimate piece of Elven historiography and certainly a more fascinating one than the feeble claim to mere cultural heritage. In the Elven movement, protological narratives like Silversong's are furthermore mirrored by eschatological visions. Most famously, Adrian Mulvaney Morningstar published the "Elven Nation Manifesto" in 1995 in which he called upon "all fellow non-humans" to work towards the enchantment of the physical world and the thinning of the Veil in order to allow "The True Fae" of the Otherworld to live among us once more. Many Elves (and Otherkin) believe that it is their mission to break down the Veil and reinstate the protological unity of Fae and humans.[319]

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[316] With these articles, Aeona Silversong attempted to revive the Elf Queen's Daughters. The first article was printed in the theme issue of *Green Egg* which also featured a review of *Changeling: The Dreaming*. The issue was dedicated to fairies and includes other articles by self-identified Fey (Sandstorm 2012, 37).

[317] This notion of star elves is clearly formulated in the light of the exo-theology of such figures as Charles Fort (1919) and Erich von Däniken (1968). Both championed the "ufological euhemeristic" theory that the "gods" of ancient religions where really aliens from outer space (Grünschloß 2007). The reinterpretation of the elves in exo-theological terms was facilitated by the fact that also Tolkien associated the Elves with the stars. Indeed, his Quendi are named the "Eldar" (Qu: People of the Stars) by the Valar. That is not, however, because Tolkien's Elves originate from the stars, but because they awaken at a moment when the stars are the only cosmic sources of light. The notion of the "Faerie Wars", which Lady Danu of the Tribunal of the Sidhe referred to as the "great strife", builds on the notion in the *Book of Invasions* that the Milesians took Ireland from the Tuatha Dé Dannan and forced them to retreat to the underground Otherworld (cf. section 10.2.1).

[318] Silversong's identification of the elves with the Milesians rather than with the Tuatha Dé Dannan is unusual. It illustrates that many self-identified Elves (and Pagans in general) want to legitimise their claims by appealing to a mighty tradition and/or lineage *in general*, but that details do not matter. Self-identified Elves and other 'Cardiac Celts' (cf. Bowman 1996) want to descend from the legendary conquerors of Ireland, and the Elves furthermore like to identify one of these conquering peoples as the real tribe which gave rise to the later legends about elves. It does not matter, however, whether the elves are identified as the fourth people to conquer Ireland, the Fir Bolg (Zell 2004, 321), the fifth, the Tuatha Dé Dannan (Tribunal of the Sidhe), the sixth, the Milesians (Silversong 1995), or a bit of them all (L. Gardner 2003, cf. ch. 12).

[319] The Manifesto was originally posted on eleven (!) Usenet groups in 1995, but was banned from Usenet because it transgressed the cross-posting regulations. It was later reposted and discussed on other lists, including the Elfinkind Digest (Sandstorm 2012, 34). A short-lived email list sprung from it, and excerpts from this list can be read at http://www.rialian.com/elvsnatn.htm [130812]. On Otherkin millennialism

In the Elven movement, the two narratives of genetic descent (from aboriginal 'fairies' and from star elves) co-exist with rationalisations that consider Elvishness to be a *spiritual* matter. For example, in his master's thesis in depth psychology, Zardoa professes the belief that Elves are essentially spiritual beings who can "incarnate within any culture [they] choose" (2005, 25). Zardoa expressed the same view when he pledged that he would continue working towards the awakening of all Elves in future incarnations (cf. section 11.1 above). According to the spiritual rationalisation of Elvishness, it is thus the *spirit* or soul (rather than the body) which is Elven, and it is this spirit which will remain Elven in future incarnations.

Self-identified Elves who believe their spirit or soul to be Elven have developed various rationalisations for how that can be. There are two main theories, a cautious and a bold one. According to the Silver Elves, everyone (also humans who do not identify as Elves) have a true spiritual nature, and self-identified Elves merely differ from normal humans in that they *label* this spiritual nature Elven. For this reason, the Silver Elves have no problem being human Elves (310813). Most other Elves, especially those active in the Otherkin movement, insist that the Elves are essentially non-human, possessing a particularly Elven *rather than* human soul or spirit. These Elves have developed a number of explanations for how Elven souls, which do not naturally belong in human bodies, have ended up there nonetheless. A common belief is that Elven souls may choose to reincarnate into human bodies. In this case, the Elven soul is believed to enter the human body at conception, thus taking up the place that would otherwise have been filled by a human soul. The Elves also reckon with the existence of more complex incarnation scenarios. One scenario is the *walk-in*, a kind of possession referring to a foreign soul entering the body after birth, either displacing the original soul or co-existing with it. The condition of two or more souls co-existing in the same body, either naturally so or as the result of a walk-in, is referred to as *multiplicity*.[320]

Spiritual rationalisations of Elvishness tend to come with the claim that the true home of the Elves is situated in another, spiritual world, which is typically referred to as the Otherworld, the astral plane, or Faery. Like Pagans in general, many Elves slide between a literal affirmation of the existence of this spiritual world and a psychological-reductive interpretation of it along Jungian lines. In his thesis, Zardoa for instance equates "Faerie" with Jung's collective unconscious (2005, iv), but he later explained to me that he had only done so to make the thesis acceptable to the psychology department (120310). Most 'soul-Elves' consider Faery to exist independently of the collective uncon-

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concerning   the   Veil,   see   also   Laycock   (2012a,   77).   For   the   manifesto,   see http://groups.google.co.uk/group/alt.magick/msg/e5adba21569abd19?dmode=source&hl=en [070812].

[320] The Elves share these explanations of how a non-human soul can end up in a human body with other Otherkin. See Lupa (2007, ch. 2) and Kirby (2009a, ch. 3) for details. As Laycock (2012a, 70) points out, the notion of 'walk-ins' was coined already by nineteenth century Spiritualists; it was revived by Ruth Montgomery's book *Strangers Among Us* (1979).

scious, though they maintain that the unconscious can serve as a bridge between this world and the other. This position avoids reducing Faery to a purely psychological realm while explaining why psychological techniques (e.g. the Tarot, the I Ching, and the active imagination) can give one access to Faery/Otherworld.

Like the genetic Elves, many soul-Elves trace their history back to a past among the stars. The Silver Elves claim that they have worked Elfin Magic and awakened other Elves "for lifetimes, for aeons both on the Earth and previously among the stars" (191209). Also Lady Danu of the Tribunal of the Sidhe told me that the kin folk "came from the stars" (290909).[321] The Elenari, a group of self-identified, reincarnated Star Elves, likewise claim to hail from a cluster of home worlds among the stars. It remains unclear whether these home worlds are situated among the physical stars or on a non-physical, astral (!) plane. One complex theory is that the Elves were first incarnated from the astral plane into a life on other planets before coming to Earth in this life.[322]

The variety of rationalisations of the Elven self makes clear that the Elves are forced to negotiate a balance between *fabulousness* and *plausibility*. On the one hand, it is the fantastic and fabulous, such as the identity as a descendant of star elves-Atlanteans, which makes it worthwhile at all to identify as an Elf. People want to be Elves because the Elven identity combines a sense of sectarian exclusivism (Elves are more authentic and more in touch with nature) with ontological exclusivism (the Elves constitute a superior and spiritually advanced race) and sometimes fuses the two into a mission (out of compassion, the Elves have incarnated to educate spiritually laggard humanity). On the other hand, many self-identified Elves are uneasy about these strong claims and feel drawn to the more plausible, but also less attractive notion that Elvishness is purely cultural.

Fabulousness and plausibility can be seen as two opposite attractor points between which all Elven rationalisations are stretched out. We can observe, therefore, that even when Elves emphasise either fabulousness or plausibility, that emphasis is somewhat offset by the opposite attractor point. Those individuals who claim to descend from the ancient Elves who raised Atlantis (fabulousness) do not claim to have inherited their powers (plausibility). By contrast, those individuals who merely claim to continue the

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[321] It must be mentioned that also a number of individuals who do not identify as Elves consider themselves to be "starseed", "star people", or "Wanderers", i.e. incarnations of souls who have lived on other planets before (Virtue 2007, ch. 4; Elkins and Rueckert 1977; Mandelker 1995; Rueckert 2001). In fact, it seems to be much more common for people to identify as star seed in general rather than as (Star) Elves in particular. By their example, the many self-identified starseed lend plausibility to the Elves' claim to originate from the stars: If the existence of starseed is already accepted, it becomes easier to believe that some starseed are also Star Elves.

[322] The homepage of the Elenari can be visited here: http://www.elenari.net/ [180712]. Another attempt to harmonise the physical and metaphysical views on the nature of the Elven astral home world involves the postulated existence of "Faerie Gates or physical wormholes to faerie" (McGowan 2011).

aboriginal religion of the human 'so-called elves' (plausibility) insist that these tribes possessed magical powers and that they themselves share these to some extent (fabulousness).[323] In all cases, claims which are considered too unrealistic for the physical present are projected either in *space* (to another plane, to another star system, or to the unconscious) or in *time* (to a mythological protology or eschatology). While all self-identified Elves who want respect in the Elven community will deny that they or other contemporaries possess the magical powers or near-immortality of Tolkien's Quendi, they will consider it possible that Elves of such stature exist in another star system, on another plane, existed on our planet in the past, and/or will come to exist again in the (near) future, either as a result of the confluence of the scattered Elven gene pool[324] or because of the sundering of the Veil.

11.3.2. Semiotic Strategies for Plausibility Construction II: Legitimisation and Relativisation

No matter how the Elves rationalise their claims to Elvishness, they further tend to engage in a variety of epistemological defences of their rationalisations. Interestingly, the Elves simultaneously engage in both of the two meta-strategies of justification identified in chapter 5, happily combining *legitimisation*, which seeks to prove the objective truth of their claims, with *relativisation*, which reduces the veracity of their claims to a matter of subjective feeling.

The awakened Elves possess two main strategies of legitimisation, the first of which makes an appeal to subjective experience. Elves who believe to possess an Elven soul often report past-life memories from previous Elven lives. We have already seen this in the case of Syleniel who remembered scenes from previous lives which resembled the representations of Lothlórien in the *LR* movies (cf. section 11.2.4 above); in section 11.3.3 on conversion we shall see another example. Subjective proof is also claimed by those self-identified Elves who regularly visit Elven home worlds by means of astral projection or similar techniques and who consider their ritually induced experiences to

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[323] In a similar way, other Otherkin communities have sought to negotiate rationalisations that strike a balance between fabulousness and plausibility. In the Therian community, for instance, claims to nobody takes people seriously who claim to physically shape-shift like the werewolves of folklore (Robertson 2010). Therefore, only a few Therians claim to be shifters, and those who do so consider shape-shifting a mental (one's inner wolf awakes), phantom (increased awareness of phantom limbs), or astral affair (Lupa 2007, 283). Similarly, self-identified Vampires do not claim to be Undead or immortal and only scoff at the allegedly 439-year-old Elizabeth who called Vampire investigator Stephen Kaplan to tell him her story (cf. Kaplan 1984, ch. 5). Furthermore, most Vampires rationalise the thirst for blood which defines Sanguinarian Vampires as merely a form of Psychic Vampirism, it being the life force *in* the blood rather than the blood itself that they crave (Laycock 2012b, 145).

[324] In the 'folk evolutionism' which predominates among genetic Elves, Elven genes are considered to be not only dominant, but also to be able to extinguish human genes altogether over generations. The offspring of two half-elves (each with 50% Elvish genes) is considered to have *more than* 50% Elvish genes.

demonstrate the existence of these otherworlds. Also the use of Tolkien's works can be justified with subjective experience. For instance, Lady Danu of the Tribunal of the Sidhe explained that when she read *LR* as a child "it felt like I had come home, I felt as though I was remembering the stories as I was reading them" (290909).

The Elves' second legitimisation strategy is to appeal to authoritative sources, whose established prestige the Elves enlist to back up their own claims. These authoritative sources come in different kinds. The self-identified Elves regularly refer to mythology, folklore, and legend, especially the *Book of Invasions* and other parts of the Celtic tradition, which they consider to contain a core of historical truth. They also refer to works that insist on the reality of spiritual or physical Elves, such as the works of Walter Yeeling Evans-Wentz, Margaret Murray, Gerald Gardner, Robert Graves, and Dion Fortune. Many of these works are academic in their own self-understanding, and the Elven community consider them to provide scholarly proof of their beliefs. The Elves can use these works as sources of legitimisation, because they are considered authoritative within the cultic milieu in general, and it does not matter that they are dismissed as outdated, forged and/or pseudo-scientific by contemporary mainstream scholarship. Elves who believe to descend genetically from historical elves furthermore back up their view with reference to Laurence Gardner (2003), an esoteric historian whose speculations about an "Elven bloodline" will be discussed in detail in chapter 12. Tolkien's works are sometimes used as a source of legitimisation as well, often based on the assumption that Tolkien possessed genuine knowledge of the Elves which he esoterically conveyed in his works. The Elves are divided on this issue, however. Many Elves find that Tolkien's literary mythology cannot be used as a source of legitimisation, and that it is Tolkien's massive influence on the Elven movement which itself needs to be legitimised, for instance by pointing out the more authoritative sources which Tolkien drew on.[325]

The Elves' use of scholarly sources as a strategy for legitimisation is broader than the epistemological strategy of "scientism" identified by Olav Hammer (2004), cf. section 5.1.4 above. Discussions of scientific legitimisation in new religions (e.g. Hammer 2004; Lewis 2007; Lewis and Hammer 2011) tend to focus on how religionists appeal to

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[325] It is worth noting that many of the works which Elves today refer to as sources of legitimisation are the very same sources out of which the idea that one can be an Elf was created in the first place several decades ago. In the previous chapter on the Tribunal of the Sidhe, I showed that it was the 'fairy theories' of Graves, Evans-Wentz, and others which originally facilitated the formation of the identity as Changelings. Though I have not discussed it in this chapter, those same theories helped formulate the Elven movement's notion that one can be an Elf. As soon as the idea that one can be an Elf/Changeling was established, however, this notion began to live its own life, and individuals could now be introduced to this idea without knowing anything about the sources out of which it had originally been forged. From this point onwards, the identity as Elf/Changeling became the core belief of new religious movements (the Elven movement; the Tribunal of the Sidhe), and rationalisations of this identity began to be developed which went beyond the original sources. The fairy theories which originally had supplied building blocks for the religious blend 'humans can be Elves' continue to play a role for the Elven movement (and for the Tribunal of the Sidhe), but now as indirect sources of legitimisation rather than as direct sources for religious blending.

contemporary and cutting-edge research fields such as quantum physics and systems theory (e.g. in so-called New Age physics) and how they use pseudo-scientific jargon (e.g. in Scientology). The appeal to scholarship which the Elven movement engages in is different from scientism and focuses instead on the strategic use of disciplines such as archaeology, anthropology, history, and folkloristics for purposes of legitimisation.[326] Since mainstream scholarship does not support the Elves' claims, an appeal is made instead to various forms of *stigmatised scholarship*. The Elves appeal to *superseded scholarship* which mainstream academia no longer considers legitimate (Nutt, Murray); to *rejected scholarship* which has been denied scholarly legitimacy from the outset on methodological grounds (Graves); and to *suppressed scholarship* which allegedly reveals knowledge which mainstream academia acknowledges as true, but suppressed out of political motives (Laurence Gardner and Nicholas de Vere).[327]

In combination with the elaborating rationalisations and objectivising legitimisations discussed so far, the Elves use a third semiotic strategy to defend their beliefs. They often relativise their beliefs, thus de-objectivising them and making them immune to rational critique. The Elves use two major strategies of de-objectivisation that both can be considered variations of subjectivisation (rather than compartmentalisation). The first is an appeal to subjective *feelings*. We already saw that the Silver Elves, according to Adler, "feel themselves to be" Elves. Along the same lines, Zardoa writes in his thesis that it ultimately does not matter whether his claim about possessing an Elven soul is accurate as long as it helps him sustain a meaningful "personal myth" (Love 2005). He also states that the Elves do not know for sure whether their Elvishness is "inherited" or whether they have themselves "created" it (Love 2005, 23). While asserting that he "always felt, deep, deep within, that [he] was descended from elves" (Love 2005, 24), Zardoa also writes that "if there never were a historical people called elves, there are now!" and that is ultimately what matters (2005, 23-24). Along similar lines, another prominent Elf, Rialian Ashtae, writes in his foreword to Lupa's *Field Guide* that for him the core of being an Elf is to have an "identity feeling" as Elf and *to accept* it as true because "it feels right" (2007, 15, 16).

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[326] Appeal to non-scientific scholarship is not restricted to the Elven movement, but is widespread in the cultic milieu. On alternative appeals to archaeology, see for example Andersson (2012), Lewis (2012b), Cusack (2011), and Nickolls (2011).

[327] The categories stigmatised, superseded, rejected, and suppressed scholarship are constructed to mirror Michael Barkun's notions of stigmatised, superseded, rejected, and suppressed knowledge (2003, 27). Together with forgotten knowledge and ignored knowledge, superseded, rejected, and suppressed knowledge constitutes the five principal types of stigmatised knowledge out of which conspiracy theories are created (Barkun 2003, 26-29).

A related strategy is to appeal to individual *choice*. In an article from 1986 in the *Circle Network News*, the Silver Elves seem to consider Elvishness a freely chosen thing.[328] They write:

> We never anoint someone as an elf. It has always been our position that no one, absolutely no one, has the right to say who is or is not an elf save the individuals themselves. They and only they have the final word on whether they are elves, gnomes, pixies, men or women. We may sometimes have our opinions and intuitions, but only they know. Should they stay with us or go their way is of no consequence, for *they are still elfin so long as they wish to be* (Silver Elves 1986, 23; emphasis added).

At the time, the Silver Elves were living with various house-mates, many of whom iden-tifying as other-than-humans (there was a Gnome, a Faerie, some Star Elves, etc.; Sand-storm 2012, 22). The above quote seems to reflect the Silver Elves' experience with these (sometimes only temporarily) elfin people. The statement could also be a token of respect for the Elf Queen's Daughters who indeed remained Elves only as long as they chose to.

It should be emphasised that in the Elven community as such, the view that Elvishness is consciously chosen is very rare. That is probably because this view under-mines all but the cultural understanding of what it means to be an Elf, as one can ob-viously not choose to have Elven ancestors or an Elves soul. Indeed, Elves will as a rule assert that they *are* Elves. Even if they have not always identified as Elves, they will explain that they always *were* Elves, but that they only realised this fact at a certain point in time, when they 'awakened' as self-conscious Elves.

This sub-section and the previous one have shown that the Elves possess a repertoire of semiotic strategies – rationalisations, legitimisations, and relativisations – which they use to protect the plausibility of their basic identity claim, namely that they are Elves in one way or the other. Before moving on to a discussion of Elven conversion, let me make two additional points about these semiotic strategies.

First, it is noteworthy that the Elves draw on established strategies of rationalisa-tion and justification from the cultic milieu to construct their own particularly Elven versions. They do so, not only because the cultic milieu provides readily available mo-dels, but also because these models come with prestige and plausibility. Consider, for instance, the Elven claim that not only are there spirits on the astral plane, but many of them prove to be Elves and some of them walk among us, incarnated in human bodies. This is not so difficult to believe for one who already believes in astral spirits. Because the Elves intertwine their own particular ideas with ideas which are widely accepted, their rationalisations, such as being incarnated astral spirits, can pass as plausible both

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[328] The Circle Sanctuary's quarterly *Circle Network News* was founded in 1974 and is among the chief national Pagan magazines in America.

within the Elven movement and within the cultic milieu at large.[329] Self-identified Elves also adopt established strategies for producing evidence for their beliefs. The best example is perhaps the use of past-life regression to 'retrieve' memories of past Elven lives. Past-life regression is considered s viable sources of knowledge within the cultic milieu, and the authority of the technique translates directly into the plausibility of the experience: if one has memories of previous Elven lives, then one ha really lived as Elf before. Finally, the Elves' appeal to subjective feelings is possible because the cultic milieu promotes the relativistic epistemology which underpins it.

The final thing I want to emphasise is the ease with which the Elves' combine the various semiotic strategies of plausibility construction. Individual Elves do not subscribe to just one particular view of why they are Elves, but slide between various explanations and happily hold several to be true at the same time. Indeed, I have quoted the Silver Elves throughout to illustrate how the same Elves can simultaneously subscribe to virtually all available rationalisations and justifications of being Elves. This approach is not particular for the Silver Elves, however. Like the Silver Elves, Elves in general feel that they are both the genetic and spiritual descendants of the gentle folks, and they tend to combine legitimisation with relativisation. Similarly, all Elves refer to subjective experience to justify their claim to Elvishness. Depending on mood and context, however, they will slide between referring to subjective experiences in order to objecti-vise their Elven identity (i.e. I feel it, so it is true) or to de-objective it (i.e. I feel it, so it is true for me, even if it is not objectively true).

11.3.3. Interpretive and Epistemic Drift: 'Conversion' to Elvishness

Like the two previous sub-sections, this one is concerned with the construction of plausi-bility in the Elven movement, but the emphasis is different. The previous sub-sections took up the issue how the Elven community as a collective actor constructs plausibility through the development of a repertoire of rationalisation and justification strategies. The present sub-section takes the point of view of the individual member and zooms in on the gradual 'conversion' process through which individuals become convinced that they are Elves.

Sociologists of religion agree to such a degree on how conversion to new religious movements takes place that we can aggregate their theories into a 'standard model'.[330] This standard model for conversion to new religious movements can be summed up in

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[329] To speak with Colin Campbell, the Elves join the game of "mutually supporting ideas" (1972, 123) which helps keep the cultic milieu together.

[330] I have aggregated the standard model from the work of Robert Balch (1980), Eileen Barker (1984), David Snow and Richard Machalek (1984), Brock Kilbourne and James Richardson (1988), and Lewis Rambo (1993; 1999). The sociological approach to conversion as a gradual process was initiated by John Lofland and Rod-ney Stark (1965).

three points. First, agency is placed with the convert. The initiation of the conversion process is seen as freely chosen, and converts are not believed to be 'brainwashed' or socially coerced. Sociologists of religion emphasise that individuals are free to break off from the conversion process before it has been completed and point out that most converts-in-being in fact do so. Second, the standard model conceives of conversion as the adoption of a new religious worldview which replaces a previously held worldview. According to this view, conversion thus entails the substitution of a secular worldview for a religious worldview or the substitution of one religious worldview with another. Third, the standard model emphasises that the conversion process is gradual. The replacement of worldviews is preceded by a long phase in which the convert acquires the movement's beliefs and practices and learns its social roles and rules of conduct. Conversion is realised when the convert reaches a point of conviction and publicly confesses this conviction. That the conversion process is gradual does not rule out that converts may have a significant conversion experience that for them clearly marks the transition from a pre-conversion state to a post-conversion state. In any case, converts will typically construct 'conversion narratives' which emphasise one experience or choice as the crucial one which signifies the transition from their previous life from their present commitment.

Elven conversion largely conforms to the first and the third points of the standard model, but not to the second. Concerning the first point, agency clearly lies with the individual convert in conversion to Elvishness. The loosely organised Elven community does not engage in proselytising and boasts no initiatory training programmes. The community has little formal power with which to compel, convince, and socialise potential members. To be sure, the online Elven groups that constitute the main social hubs of the Elven movement possess social codes which newcomers are expected to learn and adopt, but it is the individuals themselves who choose whether they want to join these groups and let themselves be socialised. Furthermore, members are free to leave the online Elven groups and continue as solitaire Elves, or even to abandon the Elven identity all together. The social cost of defecting is minimal because social ties are weak and because those who give up the Elven identity can usually fall back on a more fundamental identity as Pagans.

This takes us to the second point. Elven conversion does not involve the substitution of one worldview for another, but rather the addition of a new identity on top of an already held religious worldview. The situation is similar to the kind of conversion which Christel Manning refers to as "combination" (1996, 311) and which she observed in a group of Christian women who adopted a form of feminist Paganism focused on the Goddess *without* giving up their Christianity. As Manning put it, these women embraced Jesus *and* the Goddess. Conversion to Elvishness is different from the 'combination conversion' studied by Manning, however. Whereas the women studied by Manning worshipped both God and the Goddess and hence engaged in practices of the same type and function but from two different traditions, the adoption of an Elven identity

does not compete with any beliefs and practices centred on divine beings that one might already hold. As a consequence of this, the Elves can synthesise their newly gained identity with their former beliefs whereas the women studied by Manning did not merge Christianity and Goddess spirituality into a new synthesis.[331]

Like all other conversions, conversion to Elvishness is a gradual process. Inspired by Tanya Luhrmann's (1989) study of how newcomers in the magical milieu gradually adopt an identity and ideology as magicians, one can perceive conversion to Elvishness as an "interpretive drift". Luhrmann defines interpretive drift as

> the slow, often unacknowledged shift in someone's manner of interpreting events as they become involved with a particular activity. As the newcomer begins to practice, he becomes progressively more skilled at seeing new patterns in events, seeing new sorts of events as significant, paying attention to new patterns (1989, 312).

Luhrmann's description of interpretive drift is focused particularly on the change in magicians' experiences and interpretation of events as they come to see events in their lives as effects of magic. Also in the Elven movement, however, one can speak of interpretive drift. Awakening Elves are subject to an interpretive drift towards perceiving themselves as Elves and asking themselves 'what the Elves would do' in any given situation.

The interpretive drift involves, or leads to, what I suggest to call an 'epistemic drift'. Luhrmann observed that newcomers entered the magic milieu with only "a vague notion" that magic might influence the outer world (1989, 317), but that this vague notion with time crystallised into a firm belief in the reality of magic (1989, 315). Also the self-identified Elves go through a process of epistemic drift from hunch to conviction. They join the Elven community with a hunch that there is something Elven about themselves. After adopting the social role as Elf and learning the Elven community's rationalisations of Elvishness, they gradually come to believe and assert that they are Elves. This account still leaves open the questions: where does the hunch to be Elven come from in the first place? And how is the hunch transformed into certainty? Let me

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[331] Manning defines "combination" as a conversion process resulting in "the blending of two or more religions into a new syncretistic worldview" (1996, 311). Also Snow and Machalek (1984, 169-170) have pointed out that there exist forms of conversion in which the convert is not required to give up his old worldview, or in which the new worldview is a development of the old rather than a substitution of it, but according to Manning, Snow and Machalek do not go far enough. That is because they still count on conversion as resulting in the commitment to one particular religious institution, even though this institution may be syncretic, as in the case of the Theosophical Society or the Jesus Movement (Manning 1996, 311). The women studied by Manning combined church membership with private Pagan gatherings. Put in my own terms (cf. section 4.1.1 above), they hence did not really engage in syncretism, but rather in supplementary bricolage, i.e. combining two separate religious commitments without seeking to formally synthesise them (cf. Manning 1996, 300).

first quote from Arethinn's account of her awakening as fae, and then draw up an ideal-typical model of Otherkin 'drifting'.

> Me, I was one of the ones who always "felt a little different", something I generally attributed to the fact that I was the only pagan/witch I knew of in my high school or junior high, and in addition to that, kept secretly believing in unicorns and all that well into my teen years. When I was 11, a friend of mine and I used to pretend that we were characters from ElfQuest [a cult comic about Elves on an exo-planet], and that is really what started the whole thing, [...] About December of 1997 I had been looking at [online] pages about elves and things, mainly on account of playing Menzoberranzan [...] [a *Dungeons & Dragons* game set in a place dominated by Dark Elves, so-called Drow]. Naturally, this led me to a few [online] pages of "real" dark elves and such. Didn't think much about it at the time, beyond "wouldn't that be neat." Some months later [...] I found a link on some page to join the original wyldefae elist [...] Wow, but wasn't this a revelation. It was weird to encounter so many magickal people in one place, so many fae. [...] I was still a little "left out" until I started having – or properly, retrieving, since it was through a shamanic journey – memories. And the fact that my worldview coincides with so many of the fae – well, it's just more evidence.[332]

Several phases of interpretive drift precede the formulation of a hunch that one might be an Elf oneself. The very beginning of the drift to Elvishness must be sought in individuals' initial *fascination* with elves. This fascination does not come out of nowhere, but is usually the result of the consumption of fantasy fiction. In the case of the Silver Elves and many others, Tolkien's fiction ignited the first interest in elves; for Arethinn it was the ElfQuest comics.[333] The fascination with elves is gradually consolidated into an *identification* with the elves as individuals engage in some combination of the following practices: consuming additional fiction on elves in particular, searching the Internet for information about elves, dressing up as elves at the Elf Fantasy Fair or at similar

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[332] http://www.eristic.net/fey/living/howiawoke.php [100713].

[333] Most scholarship on the Otherkin movement emphasises its fiction-based character (e.g. Kirby 2009a; 2009b), but the role of fiction in the Vampire community is contested. The established view is that the Vampire community owes its existence largely to Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* (1976; movie adaptation 1994) which humanised and eroticised the Eastern European ghoul (Keyworth 2002, 355, 357; Hume 2006). In his work on the Vampire community, Joseph Laycock has challenged this dominant position, however, and adopted the view of Vampire intellectual Michelle Belanger. Belanger claims that the Vampire community is made up of individuals who share a particular psychic condition, namely the need to receive additional life energy (referred to as *prana*) from others. So-called "energy workers" with this need only subsequently *chose* the vampire myth and identity as their metaphorical emblem (Belanger 2004, 36-37). Many so-called Sanguinarian (i.e. blood-drinking) Vampires also claim that their blood cravings came first and that they only adopted the Vampire identity as a means to make sense of this condition (Laycock 2009, 10). Even so, Laycock acknowledges the importance of fiction for sustaining the Vampire identity and community (2009, 39-48). On fiction supporting the Vampire Community in general, see also Partridge (2004, 126-131).
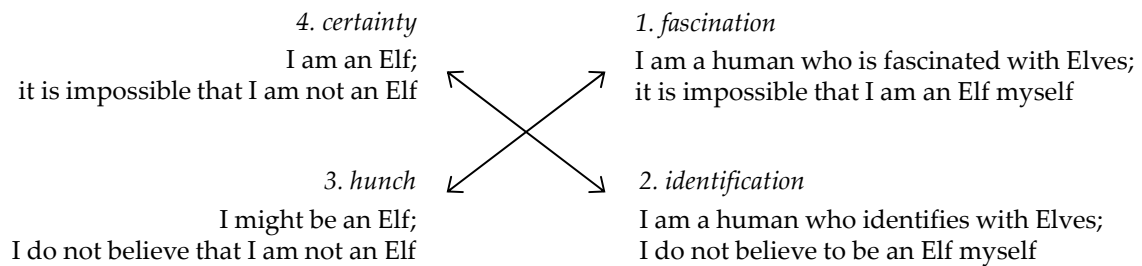
events,[334] and playfully and temporarily experimenting with being an elf in role-playing games. These role-playing games can either be paper-and-pencil games like *Dungeons & Dragons* or *Changeling: The Dreaming*, live action role-playing games, or online games, such as *World of Warcraft*. The identification with elves can further evolve into a *hunch* of being oneself an Elf as one becomes aware that there exist communities of individuals who seriously self-identify as such, especially if one joins such communities, adopts an Elven name (for instance from *LR*) as magical name or Internet alias, and so on. Typically it is not only the attractiveness of being an Elf that propels the interpretive drift, but also a feeling of being different or alienated and hence in need of a new, positive self-image. It is entirely typical that Arethinn begins her account with the words: "Me, I was one of the ones who always "felt a little different"".[335]

The Elven community consists of three types of members: those who 'know' they are Elves (the 'awakened Elves'), those who have a hunch that they are Elves, and those who are just interested in studying elves. Most joiners, like Arethinn, belong to one of the two latter categories, but with time, some of them drift towards a steady belief in being Elves themselves. New members use online groups as a relatively safe environment to practice the social identity as Elves and to learn the Elven community's stock of rationalisations of what Elves really are, how one can be an Elf, and why the Elves have come to earth. Electronic mailing lists also include accounts of senior Elves' awakenings which new members can use as models for their own. Many Elves, including Arethinn, ritually induce visualisations which can be interpreted as retrieved memories or journeys to other worlds. Experiences such as these are psychologically important as subjective evidence that can gradually consolidate the hunch of *perhaps being* an Elf into the conviction that one *is* an Elf. Awakening experiences are also socially important because a plausible awakening story is the key to acceptance within the community. One can know for sure that a shift from hunch to belief has taken place when Elves are willing to defend their Elven identity and justify it to strangers with the various rationalisations from the community's repertoire (descent, soul transmigration, etc.) As shown in figure 11.1 below, the epistemic drift to Elven awakening can be conceptualised in Greimasian terms as a drift through the various epistemic modalities of a semiotic square (cf. section 5.1.4 above).

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[334] The Elf Fantasy Fair is held twice a year in the Netherlands. See www.elffantasyfair.com [100212] and Ramstedt (2005, 183-185).

[335] Lupa (2007, 28) and Laycock (2012a, 74) consider the Otherkin movement *in toto* to be a reaction to a general condition of alienation in modern society.

Figure 11.1. Epistemic Drift to Elvishness

4. certainty	*1. fascination*
I am an Elf;	I am a human who is fascinated with Elves;
it is impossible that I am not an Elf	it is impossible that I am an Elf myself
3. hunch	*2. identification*
I might be an Elf;	I am a human who identifies with Elves;
I do not believe that I am not an Elf	I do not believe to be an Elf myself

11.3.4. Plausibility Structures and Plausibility Threats for the Elven Movement

So far, we have examined the processes through which an Elven identity can be rational-ised, justified, and adopted. Let me now turn to the social and cultural structures which help maintain plausibility for the Elven identity once it has been constructed and embraced. I touch upon four plausibility structures for the Elven movement, namely fantasy fiction, the cultic milieu, the Internet as a social platform, and the Elven community's movement intellectuals. I also discuss the plausibility threat posed by deconverted Elves and Otherkin who publicly denounce their former conviction of being a non-human.

First of all *fiction*. Tolkien's fiction and that of other fantasy authors not only offers an Elven identity for individuals to adopt, but also helps sustain such an identity through continued reading. Even when the Elves read fantasy fiction in a binocular mode, doing so reinforces their fundamental belief that Elves, magic, otherworlds, and so on exist. Fiction with Elven characters, such as Tolkien's narratives and Freda Warrington's *Elfland* (2009), furthermore provide role models for self-identified Elves and provide information about 'what the Elves would do' in various situations. As such, fantasy fiction fulfils the same identity-stabilising function as religious narratives (such as the Christian gospels) do in established religions. That fiction can play this role is not distinctive for the Elven movement and other Otherkin groups, but characterises also the Neo-Pagan movement and New Age in general (cf. sections 8.3.3 and 2.2.2).

Second, the *cultic milieu* works as a strong plausibility structure for the Elven movement. In sections 11.3.2 and 11.2.2 above, we have already seen that the cultic milieu in general and the Otherkin movement in particular have provided the Elven community with models for rationalisation and justification. In this way, the cultic milieu has facilitated the construction of theories about Elvishness which the Elves themselves find plausible. The cultic milieu works as a plausibility structure for the Elven movement in two additional ways. First, the fact that the belief in elves/fairies is completely normal within the cultic milieu seems to rub off an aura of plausibility onto the awakened Elves' more wide-ranging claim to be Elves themselves. When a large group of people believe in something (*in casu* that elves exist), it becomes more plausible for a sub-group to take this belief one step further (*in casu* to believe to be themselves Elves). Second, the cultic milieu supplies the Elven movement with an infrastructure.

Because the Elven movement is too small, for example, to maintain its own magazine running or to organise offline gatherings with more than a handful individuals, it has been necessary for the Elven community to connect itself to larger and better organised groups within the cultic milieu. In the 1970s through 1990s, the Elven movement constituted a part of the Neo-Pagan fringe and used the Pagan movement's infrastructure. For example, self-identified Elves published in Pagan magazines, as I have demonstrated by quoting articles from two such magazines, namely *Green Egg* (articles from 1976, 1995, and 1996) and *Circle Network News* (one article from 1986). In the 21st century, the Elven movement has merged with and become a substantial part of the Otherkin movement. The self-identified Elves now benefit from the Otherkin's infrastructure, especially their well-organised online communities and occasional offline gatherings.

This brings us to the *Internet*, which plays a more ambiguous role. On the one hand, the Internet facilitates information exchange and socialisation, and provides assurance and affirmation for new members. As we have seen in section 11.2.1 above, this is particularly true of the large Otherkin sites which have well-moderated forums, succeed in guaranteeing the privacy of their members, and encourage and facilitate occasional offline gatherings. Even though they are located online, these sites harbour real communities and maintain a social reality, a *nomos* in which the existence of reincarnated and genetically descended Elves is a matter of fact. In this sense, the online communities function as plausibility structures for religion in the classic sense formulated by Peter Berger (1967 45). On the other hand, Internet communities can also be disenchanting. They expose one to fellow Elves who naturally fall short of the idealised (Tolkien-inspired) sages. Furthermore, though the Internet facilitates the sharing of ideas and experiences, online Elven groups lack some of those characteristics which normally turn religious communities into particularly strong plausibility structures (cf. Durkheim 1995; Rappaport 1999). There is no physical co-presence and no collective rituals that can strengthen identity and social cohesion. In other words, while the online Elven communities certainly function as plausibility structures, these plausibility structures are relatively weak compared to those possessed by most religious offline groups.

Finally, the Elven community's *movement intellectuals* can be said to constitute a plausibility structure for the members at large. The Silver Elves, in particular, provide plausibility support in two ways. First, their very continued presence lends plausibility to the Elven community. It simply makes it easier to claim that one is an Elf when others have made that same claim for almost 40 years. Second, while the Silver Elves have not been alone in developing the Elven community's repertoire of rationalisations and justifications (cf. sections 11.3.1 and 11.3.2 above), they stand out from other movement intellectuals because they have published their ideas about the Elvishness and Elven spirituality. Indeed, they have published all their Magical Elven Love Letters and more than twenty other books.[336] All the Silver Elves' works are self-published, however, and

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[336] See footnote 287 above.

lack the quality that a professional editor could have helped to achieve. Perhaps partly for this reason, none of the Silver Elves' books have achieved the status of a standard work. Their books thus stand in contrast to Michelle Belanger's *The Psychic Vampire Codex: A Manual of Magick and Energy Work* (2004) which has come to define the Vampire community and which serves as a strong plausibility structure.[337]

Summing up the plausibility structures of the Elven movement and the types of support they provide, we can say that (a) fantasy fiction helps sustain the core identity as Elf through continued reading, (b) the cultic milieu provides an infrastructure for the Elven movement as well as more inclusive groups (Otherkin, Neo-Pagans) to identify with and gain (perceived) social support from, (c) Internet communities help disseminate ideas, attract new members, and sustain the identity of those who have already joined, and (d) movement intellectuals provide role models and rationalisations. All in all, the plausibility structures are fairly strong, but not as strong as those enjoyed by most offline religious groups.[338] It is a good question whether these plausibility structures are strong enough to facilitate further growth in the Elven movement, especially when taking into consideration that the Elven movement does not only possess plausibility structures, but also faces plausibility threats.

The most notable plausibility threat faced by the Elves is public ridicule. One form of public ridicule is constituted by campaigns of so-called trolling, i.e. postings of messages on online forums that make the Elves out for freaks and lunatics. While such trolling is annoying, it is not completely dissuasive. It is worse when journalists join in the mocking, informing the public that Elves and Otherkin are weirdoes. For good reasons, the Otherkin community did not cheer when Zack Parsons published *Your Next-Door Neighbor is a Dragon* (2009), which included an unflattering portrayal of Roger the Elf and his blatant failures in demonstrating his magical powers.

Even worse than journalists writing mockingly for a general public, are testimonies by 'deconverted' Otherkin who state that their earlier conviction to be a non-human was a regretful delusion. One such testimony was published by Belladonna, a former Fairy, in the Pagan online magazine *Witchvox* in 2011.[339] Belladonna wrote that she had always been and still was a Pagan, but that she around 2001 had also believed that she was a Fairy with a Fairy soul and phantom wings. Belladonna had been part of a group of friends that also included a Wolf, an Angel, and a Dragon, but she now believes that she and her friends were delusional, and that she had been manipulated into believing those

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[337] Michelle Belanger's book is so far the only work by an Otherkin intellectual which has been published with a commercial publisher rather than by means of self-publishing.

[338] By comparison, the plausibility structures of the Vampire community are stronger. The Vampires have a stronger offline presence, more visible movement intellectuals, and specifically Vampiric practices related to blood-transfer and psychic Vampiric energy working. These superior plausibility structures have allowed the Vampire community to grow much larger than the Elven movement.

[339] See http://www.witchvox.com/va/dt_va.html?a=uspa&c=words&id=14693 [100713].

weird things by the shamanistic, self-identified Werewolf who led the group. Testimonies such as Belladonna's constitute a double plausibility threat for Elves and Otherkin. They hurt extra much because they are formulated by former insiders, and because they are written for Neo-Pagans, a group which most Elves and Otherkin feel to belong to and on which they count for recognition. Putting even more plausibility pressure on the Otherkin movement, Lupa, for years a self-identified Wolf Therian and chief movement intellectual within the Otherkin movement, recently confessed on her blog: "I no longer identify as a therianthrope".[340] While Lupa did not regret having "explored [her]self within the Otherkin framework", she symbolically marked her deconversion by withdrawing her *Field Guide to the Otherkin* (2007) from print.

It remains to be seen how strong the plausibility threats facing the Elven and Otherkin movements are relative to the plausibility structures that support them. As things stand, it is difficult to predict whether the 2010s will lead to further growth of the Otherkin movement and the Elven community within it, or to plausibility crisis and collapse.

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[340] http://therioshamanism.com/2013/04/02/letting-go-of-therianthropy-for-good/ [120713].