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ML 105—*Waltharius*  
Wortphilologie

Deus to Daemon:  
An Etymology of *Faunus*

When the Saxon warrior and criminal Ekvirid approaches Walther to force him to surrender to King Gunther, he taunts the hero with an accusation that he might be a faun. The poet writes:

'Dic', ait, 'an corpus vegetet tractabile temet  
Sive per aerias fallas, maledicte, figuras.  
Saltibus assuetus faunus mihi quippe videris.

(ll. 761-763)

Walther laughs the insult away and answers Ekvirid in kind, telling him that he may tell the Saxons (presumably when he dies) that he saw a “*fantasma fauni*” in the barren mountains.

This enigmatic flyting stands in uncertain cultural territory, referring as it does to Greco-Roman deities, which presumably none of the *Waltharius*' readers and listeners would have worshipped. If the *Waltharius*-poet wrote for a primarily pagan audience, the figure of the faun might have stood as a surrogate for other wood-deities, particularly given the importance of the oak in cults of Odin across Northern Europe. At the same time, this reference, disdained as it is by the Christian hero Walter, subtly dismisses the old forms of worship. If the *Waltharius*-poet wrote for Christians, however, the reference to fauns invokes another set of associations, which involves an equally great transformation and adaptation of the Roman faun to new cultural purposes. Close philological study of the word *faunus* illuminates these various possibilities and might even point to the nature of the *Waltharius*-poet's audience.

The word *faunus* appears often in classical literature. In contrast to later usage, however, it usually appears as a proper noun. Lewis and Short lists the term with a capital letter, and offers a miniature mythography rather than a definition. Faunus was:

a mythic son of Picus, grandson of Saturn, and father of Latinus, king of Latium; he instituted tillage and grazing, and after death was the protecting deity of agriculture and of shepherds, and also a giver of oracles; after the introduction of the worship of Pan into Italy, he was identified with Pan, and accordingly represented, like the latter, with horns and goats' feet.

Indeed, this specific and personal sense of *faunus* would seem to be the primary use of the word throughout antiquity, attested in Virgil and his commentators. Though Ovid, Lucretius, and Cicero all use the term to describe any sylvan deity, which Lewis and Short ascribe to the assimilation of the term to Pan, most of the entries in the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* refer to the proper name. The word seems to have occurred most often in late antique and early Christian commentaries on Virgil by the likes of Lactantius, Donatus, and Maurus Servius Honoratus.

In the early Middle Ages, the specific associations of *faunus* with the son of Picus still held firm, but the range of ideas and abilities associated with the figure were seen differently in the light of new beliefs. Thus, Lactantius in the fourth century compares the historical Faunus to Pompilius, an “institutor ineptorum religionum,” and writes that he established “nefaria sacra.” Isidore of Seville in the seventh century associates the word *faunus* in his *Etymologiae* with *fatuus*. He writes:

Fatuus ideo existimatur dictus, quia neque quod fatur ipse, neque quod alii dicunt intellegit. Fatuos origine duci quidam putant a miratoribus Fatuae, Fauni uxoris fatidicae eosque primum fatuos appellatos, quod praeter modum obstupefacti sunt vaticiniis illius usque ad amentiam.

(Liber X.103)

Though he does not need to state explicitly the etymology of *faunus*, associating it clearly with the known mythic figure, he does place it in the context of prophecy. As a Christian writer, he is troubled by the potential falsity of such prophecy. Thus, those who listen to Faunus and his wife Fatua are “obstupefacti...usque ad amentiam.” Faunus (and his linguistic offspring) no longer represent a legitimate if uncontrollable source of vatic wisdom; rather, they offer lawless insights, much like the demons that many Christian writers spoke through ancient pagan oracles.

In fact, by the high Middle Ages, the word *faunus* became largely decoupled from its divine Roman namesake, and DuCange and Heschel in the *Glossarium ad scriptores media et infimae latinitatis* define *fauni* simply as *daemones*. At best, *fauni* are lies created by poets, believed in only by women or young boys; at their worst, they are equated with evil spirits leading souls “in perfidiam,” “incubi” that attempt to bring about human failure. The *Glossarium* cross-references *fauni* to *fadus*, beautiful demons who later become the French “feé” or the English “faerie.” These *fauni* have become the same creatures that populate Milton’s *Comus* or Rossetti’s *Goblin Market*, hoping to lure human souls to their doom through sensuality and inebriation.

The *Waltharius*-poet stands somewhere between these extremes of Roman god and Christianized demon. Ekiwid clearly falls short of accusing Walther of being an incubus; nevertheless, his insult carries some later medieval connotations of menace. I would suggest that when Ekiwid invokes *fauni* in his “Celtica lingua,” stereotypically associated even in the Middle Ages with superstition, he refers to the tradition of prophesy associated with Roman fauns. Indeed, Walther has just defended himself from many arrows as though he knew where they would land. There are also shades of fear in his mockery, as he offers curses to Walther and demands that he declare himself, which suggest that *fauni* are creatures to be rejected, much as Satan in the baptismal vow. Walter’s response to Ekiwid confirms this. He dismisses the accusation as a joke, which implies that belief in fauns involves unmanly credulity, but he also embraces the connotations of menace associated with medieval Latin meanings of the word, promising to send Ekiwid quite literally to his doom.

For the *Waltharius*-poet, and possibly for his audience, fauns and similar pagan spirits had lost enough credibility that men might treat them as subjects for insult rather than objects of reverence; at the same time, however, they lurked at the edges of doctrine and consciousness, a latent threat that a new Christian worldview could not fully exorcise. They were not believed in, but like many imaginary creatures, they were feared.



## Works Cited

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