Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

MATTERS OF BELIEF, HEALTH, GENDER AND IDENTITY

Alaric Hall
ELVES IN ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

Matters of Belief, Health, Gender and Identity
'Anglo-Saxon Studies' aims to provide a forum for the best scholarship on the Anglo-Saxon peoples in the period from the end of Roman Britain to the Norman Conquest, including comparative studies involving adjacent populations and periods; both new research and major re-assessments of central topics are welcomed.

Originally founded by Professor David Dumville as ‘Studies in Anglo-Saxon History’, the series has now broadened in scope under new editorship to take in any one of the principal disciplines of archaeology, art history, history, language and literature, and inter- or multi-disciplinary studies are encouraged.

Proposals or enquiries may be sent directly to the editors or the publisher at the addresses given below; all submissions will receive prompt and informed consideration.

Professor John Hines, Cardiff School of History and Archaeology, Cardiff University, Colum Drive, Cardiff, Wales, CF10 3EU

Dr Catherine Cubitt, Centre for Medieval Studies, University of York, The King’s Manor, York, England, YO1 7EP

Boydell & Brewer, PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk, England, IP12 3DF
ELVES IN
ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

Matters of Belief, Health, Gender and Identity

Alaric Hall

THE BOYDELL PRESS
To my parents, Ann and Henry Hall
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreword</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviations</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 A medieval Scandinavian context</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 The earliest Anglo-Saxon evidence</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Female elves and beautiful elves</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Ælfe, illness and healing (1): the ‘elf-shot’ conspiracy</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Ælfe, illness and healing (2): ælfísíden</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Anglo-Saxon myth and gender</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Believing in Early Medieval history</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 1: The linguistic history of elf</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 2: Two non-elves</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works cited</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Componential analysis of Norse words for beings</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Semantic field diagram of Norse words for beings</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Monstrosity in medieval Scandinavia</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Componential analysis of Old English words for beings</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Semantic field diagram of Old English words for beings</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Words glossed by <em>hægtes(se)</em>, and words glossing those words</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>The phonological development of <em>ælf</em></td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Foreword

Each time I have begun studying at another university, I have realised how much the last shaped my thought. This book is the product of three. Frequently returning to my alma mater, the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic at Cambridge University, I have profited greatly from friends and acquaintances old and new. Sandra Cromey of the English Faculty Library is a pearl among librarians. I had the privilege, with the support of the ERASMUS programme, to spend 2003–4 in the Department of English at the University of Helsinki, supervised by Matti Kilpiö and Leena Kahlas-Tarkka, and subsequently to complete this book as a fellow of the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies. But the core research was in and of the University of Glasgow, in the form of doctoral research funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board, supervised by Graham Caie and Katie Lowe. There I was based in the blessedly happy Department of English Language, but the Glasgow Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, the Departments of Scottish and Medieval History, and above all the Department of Celtic were communities to which this study also owes much.

Much of my most important elf-research has taken place in the company of the friends I have made in these places and I am accordingly indebted to many more people than I can mention here. To name only the most direct contributors, versions of this book have enjoyed detailed comment from my supervisors, for whose support and assistance I am grateful; my examiners Andy Orchard and Stuart Airlie; and the series editor, John Hines. Numerous other friends have commented on versions or sections, often extensively: Mike Amey, Paul Bibire, Bethany Fox, Carole Hough, Alistair McLennan, Ben Snook, Harriet Thomsett, Clive Tolley; the Process Group of Helsinki’s Research Unit for Variation, Contacts and Change in English; along with several of my colleagues at the Collegium, Petter Korkman, Juha Männinen, Ilkka Pyysiäinen and Petri Ylikoski. I have benefited further from the generosity of one-time strangers who found my doctoral thesis online and chose to send me comments: Dimitra Fimi, Frog, James Wade and especially Bernard Mees. Ben Snook and Bethany Fox along with Dave Cochran, Rory Naismith and Charles West have assisted with research materials, while Richard Burian, Jeremy Harte, Simon Horobin, Katie Lowe, Rod McConchie and Mark Zumbuhl have proved assiduous elf-spotters. The original idea for the project was Alex Woolf’s; Bethany Fox, under the auspices of the aforementioned Research Unit, assisted with the final production of the text; while Jussi Mätäomena has also been instrumental in its completion. Some further specific debts are recorded in my footnotes. Needless to say,
however, this book’s defects and errors are my own. Tell me about them via 
<http://www.alarichall.org.uk>.

The longer I spend in the business of education, the more I observe that 
academic achievement is directly proportional to parental support. Depress-
ing though the point is in general, the dedication of this book emphasises 
my gratitude that in my case it is certainly true, and the rest of my family 
too have my thanks. Bethany Fox has been mentioned in her professional 
capacity above. But for the fun I’ve had writing this book, I thank her also as 
the person in the world to whom I am most especially not married.
## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AHDWB</td>
<td>Althochdeutsches Wörterbuch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BL</td>
<td>British Library</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOE</td>
<td>Dictionary of Old English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DONP</td>
<td>A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose / Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOST</td>
<td>Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MED</td>
<td>Middle English Dictionary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OED</td>
<td>Oxford English Dictionary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

ONE assumes that when, around the end of the tenth century or the beginning of the eleventh, somewhere in the south-west of England, the scribe began what was probably the last stint on his manuscript of medical recipes, he did not guess that it would remain in use for over six hundred years – more or less until it came into the hands of Reverend Robert Burscough, who, passing it on to his friend Humphrey Wanley, transformed it from a practical text into an object of scholarship.¹ His parchment stiff, his script functional and the finished codex portable, the scribe was making a practical reference work for day-to-day use. Having already copied the Old English Herbarium and Medicina de quadrupedibus, he was concluding a large, miscellaneous collection of medical texts, known since Cockayne’s edition as Lācnunga (‘remedies’).² One wonders whether, having reproduced the conventional prose direction ‘Wið fæ ¯rstice feferfuige sēo rēade netele þurh ærn inwyxð wegbrāde wyll in būteran’ (‘For a violent, stabbing pain: feverfew and the “red nettle” [L. Lamium purpureum] that grows through the ?corn, and plantain. Boil in butter’), he registered any surprise as he proceeded to copy a long metrical charm on to folios 175–6v.³ It has, at any rate, intrigued and challenged scholars since the nineteenth century:⁴


³ Ed. J. H. C. Grattan and Charles Singer, Anglo-Saxon Magic and Medicine, Publications of the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum, n.s. 3 (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), 173–6; collated with Doane, Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts, no. 265. Fērstice is usually translated ‘sudden stitch’ (for example, Grattan and Singer, Anglo-Saxon Magic, 173). However, stitch in Modern English, when denoting a pain, denotes a ‘sharp spasmodic pain in the side resulting from running or exercising’ (Collins Dictionary of the English Language, 3rd edn (Glasgow: Harper Collins, 1991), s.v.). But the connotations of fār- are suggested by the definitions of J. Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller, An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary (London: Oxford University Press, 1898): ‘sudden, intense, terrible, horrid’ (cf. DOE, s.v.). As for stice, Bosworth and Toller gave the primary meanings ‘a prick, puncture, stab, thrust with a pointed implement’, though the only Middle English descendant of these meanings seems to have been ‘a sharp, localized pain’ (MED, s.v. stiche; see also Pettit, Anglo-Saxon Remedies, ii 230–1). For sēo rēade netele as Lamium purpureum see M. L. Cameron, Anglo-Saxon Medicine, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England, 7 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 142–3.

⁴ This may or may not have been intended as a separate remedy, but it seems either way to be intended for the same ailment: Pettit, Anglo-Saxon Remedies, ii 215–17.
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

They were loud, yes, loud, when they rode over the (burial) mound; they were fierce when they rode across the land. Shield yourself now, you can survive this strife. Out, little spear, if there is one here within. It stood under/behind lime-wood (i.e. a shield), under a light-coloured/light-weight shield, where those mighty women marshalled their powers, and they sent shrieking spears. I will send another back, a flying arrow ahead in opposition. Out, little spear, if it is here within. A craftsman sat, forged a knife/knives; small as swords go, violent the wound. 

5 Hitherto, commentators have assumed an unstated pronoun ic ('I') as the subject of stōd (Pettit, Anglo-Saxon Remedies, ii 237); indeed, Pettit himself claimed that 'there is no apparent reference for a third party'. On the contrary, the obvious subject is that of the preceding sentence, spere. The three other occurrences of ūt, ëlþtel spere are all followed by lines which seem to concern the spere.

6 This reading is supported by the half-line 'giellende gār' in Widsith (line 128; ed. R. W. Chambers, Widsith: A Study in Old English Heroic Legend (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1912), 223) and by the half-line formula af/með geiri gjallanda ('from/with a yelling spear') in stanzas 5 and 14 of the Eddaic Atlakviða, ed. Gustav Neckel, Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern: I. Text, 4th rev. edn by Hans Kuhn (Heidelberg: Winter, 1962), 241, 242. It has the further attraction of producing a parallelism with the flēogende flāne returned by the speaker of the charm. However, the phrasing inferred from the manuscript spacing by A. N. Doane, 'Editing Old English Oral/Written Texts: Problems of Method (with an Illustrative Edition of Charm 4, Wið Færstice)', in The Editing of Old English: Papers from the 1990 Manchester Conference, ed. D. G. Scragg and Paul E. Szarmach (Cambridge: Brewer, 1994), pp. 125–45, at 139 – ‘and hy.gyllende | garas sædan’ – suggests ‘and they, shrieking, sent spears’ (cf. p. 143). This is no less plausible syntactically.

7 More literally ['a] small [one] of swords', reading ësarna as a partitive genitive. On the difficulties here see Pettit, Anglo-Saxon Remedies, ii 243–5. For ësarna (lit. ‘iron’) as ‘sword’ see Bosworth and Toller, Dictionary, s.v.
Introduction

if it should be here within. Six craftsmen sat, wrought slaughter-spears. Be out, spear, not in, spear. If there is here within a piece of iron/swords, the work/deed of hægtessan,\(^8\) it must melt. If you were scoten in the skin or were scoten in the flesh, or were scoten in the blood, or were scoten in the limb (?joint), may your life never be harmed. If it was the gescot of êse\(^9\) or it was the gescot of ælfe or it was the gescot of hægtessan, now I want to (?will) help you. This for you as a remedy for the gescot of êse; this for you as a remedy for the gescot of ælfe, this for you as a remedy for the gescot of hægtessan; I will help you. Fly around there on the mountain top.\(^10\) Be healthy, may the Lord help you.

Then take the knife; put it in (the) liquid.

This text – known now as Wið færstice – is among the most remarkable of its kind in medieval Europe. Prominent among the threats which it seeks to counter are ælfe, the beings whose name has come into Modern English as elves. The seriousness with which Wið færstice, and presumably its eleventh-century copyist, treat these beings challenges our conceptions of rationality and reality, of healing and Christianity. What were ælfe? What were gescotu, and why and how did ælfe cause them? What were the êse and hægtessan with which they are associated and why were they grouped together? Moreover, although unique in many respects, Wið færstice is only one of a range of Anglo-Saxon texts using the word ælf, which afford some answers but also bring questions of their own.

Anglo-Saxon England is unique among the early-medieval Germanic-speaking regions for the extent of its vernacular literary production and survival, and it is this that fits it as a case-study of non-Christian belief in early-medieval Europe. Áelfe are mentioned reasonably often in Anglo-Saxon texts, assuring them a canonical place in histories of medieval popular religion, but never in narratives like Beowulf’s account of Grendel, or our Early Irish stories of the áes side.\(^11\) Rather, our primary evidence for ælfe comes from passing mentions in poems, glossaries and medical texts. These mentions suit different kinds of analysis from narratives: they demand that we try to

\(^8\) I take -an here and elsewhere in the charm as a genitive plural, to provide parallelism with ylfa and ýsa; this has often been assumed previously but is discussed, to my knowledge, only by Pettit, Anglo-Saxon Remedies, ii 246. Although the manuscript includes no other example of genitive plural -an, it contains similar inflexional levellings and there is a reasonable number of examples elsewhere in Old English: see Terry Hoad, ‘Old English Weak Genitive Plural -an: Towards Establishing the Evidence’, in From Anglo-Saxon to Early Middle English: Studies Presented to E. G. Stanley, ed. Malcolm Godden, Douglas Gray and Terry Hoad (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 108–29; Michael Lapidge and Peter S. Baker (ed. and trans.), Byrhtferth’s Enchiridion, Early English Text Society, s.s. 15 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), xcviii.

\(^9\) Broadly ‘pagan gods’; the meanings of this word are discussed below, esp. chapters 1 and 2.

\(^10\) The text is unsatisfactory here and the translation merely a conjecture; see Pettit’s discussion, Anglo-Saxon Remedies, ii 255–8.

establish what ælfe were through a detailed scrutiny of what the word ælf meant. Integrating linguistic and textual approaches into an anthropologically inspired theoretical framework makes possible a history both of the word ælf and of the concepts it denoted throughout the Anglo-Saxon period, from pre-conversion times to the eleventh century. It proves possible to delineate important, hitherto unrecognised features of pre-conversion world-views, and this early evidence makes it possible to trace reliably some of the changes, continuities and tensions in belief experienced in English-speaking cultures in the centuries following conversion. Such beliefs do not bear witness to processes of Christianisation alone, however: they tell us about Anglo-Saxon constructions of illness, mental health, and healing; of group identities; and even of gender and sexual relationships.

The rest of this introduction discusses my methodologies, and what I think they can and cannot reveal. Hereafter, the study proceeds to the material which, historiographically, has dominated reconstructions of the beliefs of Germanic-speaking peoples: our medieval Scandinavian texts. These have been influential in interpretations of ælf, and their reassessment forms a necessary point of departure. They also provide a proximate and reasonably well-documented body of comparative material, relating both to the semantics of ælf and to the Anglo-Saxon world-views in which ælfe had meaning. The subsequent chapters are structured by theme: our earliest evidence for ælfe, some of it pre-textual (chapter 2); a cluster of evidence for ælfe’s combined male gender and effeminate character (chapter 3); the bulk of our Old English medical texts, among them Wið færstice, focusing on the scholarly construct of ‘elf-shot’ and the importance of ælf-beliefs in healing practices (chapter 4), followed by a chapter focusing on a cluster of texts relating to the word siden, which I argue to denote a variety of magic specifically associated with ælfe, whose significance I investigate through comparative material from elsewhere in north-west Europe (chapter 5). Finally, drawing together a number of themes from earlier chapters, I discuss the relationships of beliefs in ælfe to Anglo-Saxons’ changing constructions of gender (chapter 6) before concluding with a renewed consideration of methodology, and summary of the book’s arguments (chapter 7). Two appendices present additional material. As several of my arguments involve detailed reference to linguistic changes and variations which will not always be familiar to readers and have at times been poorly reported, the first describes the grammatical history of ælf. Ælf-words where ælf- is merely a hypercorrect form of æl- are assessed in the second.

As my usage above suggests, the Anglian form ælfe is the usual citation form for the elf-word in Old English, but for the plural, commentators often use the West Saxon form ylfe. This is reasonable insofar as the singular *ylf and the plural *ælfe are probably only attested in later reflexes, but the inconsistency has caused confusion. Therefore, I use ælfe here as my plural citation form.

12 The MED says that ‘OE had a masc. ælf, pl. ylfe’ (s.v. elf), as though it showed a systematic vowel alternation, as is genuinely the case in the etymological note for fōt ‘OE fōt; pl. fēt’; the
Two compounds, *ælfisc and *ælfig, are never attested in Anglian forms, but these normalised alternatives have been used by the Dictionary of Old English. I adopt ælfisc, as its existence in Old English is shown by Middle English reflexes, but since ylfig appears only in this West Saxon form, it seems excessive, and potentially misleading, to abandon it. The usual citation form for Middle and Modern English is elf, plural elves, and for Scots elf, elvis. However, where the texts under discussion demand it, I also use other Middle English citation forms. As for cognate languages, Old Icelandic dictionaries may use alfr or álfr. Alfr was the normal form until perhaps the twelfth century, when lengthening to álfr took place as part of a regular sound-change. Being otherwise unable to be consistent, I have preferred the more familiar álfr, despite the incongruity of using it regarding early texts. Medieval German dialects may have the citation forms alp or alb – alp is preferred here; medieval Frisian has alf or elf; I prefer alf. The word ðs (broadly, ‘pagan god’), which has appeared already in the genitive plural form ðsa in Wið færstic and recurs frequently in this study, is not attested in the nominative plural. I have adopted ðse as my citation form, for reasons discussed in chapter 2.

A key contention of this study is that attention to linguistic detail is important. This being so, I have marked vowel-length in those early-medieval languages where it was still phonemic – most prominently Old English. This has involved introducing macrons to editions and transcriptions where the text has none, though I have shied from marking length on certain common names (for example Beowulf, Alfred). Although Fulk has shown that unstressed vowel-length remained phonemic in Old English much longer than was once thought, I have followed the convention of marking only the length of stressed vowels. Occasionally, texts cited represent a long monophthong with two graphs; on these occasions I add a macron only to the first graph. Marking the phonemic length distinctions between Old English diphthongs is tricky: as Hogg has emphasised, the long diphthongs were probably systematically equivalent in length to a long vowel and can best be thought of as ‘normal’ diphthongs whose two graphic elements are sufficient to indicate their length; it is the short diphthongs, systematically equivalent in length to a short vowel, which should be marked (with a breve). For typographical convenience, however, in Old English specifically I follow convention in marking the longer diphthongs with a macron on the first element (thus longer ðæa versus shorter ðæ); but it is important to be clear that ðæa in Old English corresponds


in length to, for example, *au* in Old Icelandic or Old High German, despite the absence of a length mark in those languages.

I represent phonetic and phonemic reconstructions using the International Phonetic Alphabet; to avoid ambiguities, I base phonemic reconstructions of Common Germanic on the phonology given by Prokosch. Translations are my own unless otherwise stated, and are not intended to have any literary merit. Occasionally, in texts not requiring a full translation, I gloss unfamiliar terms and forms, and false friends, in curly brackets { } to distinguish my interventions from the parentheses and square brackets of authors and editors. Finally, some conventions of capitalisation, mainly for Old Icelandic, can be prejudicial to my investigations: most importantly, one normally reads of *Æsir* and *Vanir*, terms for groups of pagan gods marked by capitalisation as ethnonyms, but of *álfar*, implicitly a race. To maintain these conventions in the present study is untenable. Although it would be most consistent with my arguments to capitalise all terms, it seems less prejudicial and more consistent with the conventions of the primary sources to abandon capitalisation in all cases: thus *æsir*, *vanir*, *álfar*.

**HISTORIOGRAPHY AND SOCIAL REALITIES**

*Wið færstice* has provided the inspiration for the current scholarly consensus on Anglo-Saxon *elf*. It – and, despite his protestations, it alone – was the basis for Singer’s statement in his British Academy lecture on ‘Early English Magic and Medicine’ that

> a large amount of disease was attributed . . . to the action of supernatural beings, elves, *Æsir*, smiths or witches whose shafts fired at the sufferer produced his torments. Anglo-Saxon and even Middle English literature is replete with the notion of disease caused by the arrows of mischievous supernatural beings. This theory of disease we shall, for brevity, speak of as the *doctrine of the elf-shot*. The Anglo-Saxon tribes placed these malicious elves everywhere, but especially in the wild uncultivated wastes where they loved to shoot at the passer-by.

Singer’s comments are the fount of a long tradition, made familiar through the general accounts of medieval popular religion mentioned above. ‘In Anglo-Saxon times’, Bonser reported, ‘diseases were erroneously attributed to many causes which were usually of a supernatural nature . . . The evil was most usually attributed to the elves (who attacked with their arrows) or to “flying venom”.’ Introduced already into Middle English in 1929 by Müller’s

---

emendation of vluekeche (‘elf-cake’, apparently denoting an enlargement of the spleen) to vlueschotte, the term ‘elf-shot’ made a late debut in the Old English lexicon in the 1980s as ælfscot (the word is actually first attested in Scots, in the the sixteenth century, in the sense ‘sharp pain caused by elvis’). According to Jolly’s more recent study of Anglo-Saxon ‘elf-charms’,

elves were thought to be invisible or hard-to-see creatures who shot their victims with some kind of arrow or spear, thus inflicting a wound or inducing a disease with no other apparent cause (elfshot). They appear to be lesser spirits than the Æsir deities, but with similar armaments in spears and arrows. . . . This attack by elves was eventually linked with Christian ideas of demons penetrating or possessing animals and people, who then needed exorcism.

More recently again, Pettit noted that ‘another airborne menace for man, and especially it seems for beast, was the projectile or gescot (‘shot’”) hurled by supernatural creatures, especially elves – the concept of “elf-shot”’.

I tackle this tradition in detail in chapter 4. What is important here is the demonstration that current assessments of ælfe’s roles in Anglo-Saxon medicine derive directly from the early twentieth century. Reflecting on that period in her anthropological classic Purity and Danger, Douglas observed that comparative religion has always been bedevilled by medical materialism. Some argue that even the most exotic of ancient rites have a sound hygienic basis. Others, though agreeing that primitive ritual has hygiene for its object, take the opposite view of its soundness. For them a great gulf divides our sound ideas of hygiene from the primitive’s erroneous fancies.

Douglas’s objection to derogation and demythologisation alike was that, adopting these approaches, we fail consciously to orientate our own cultural perspectives in relation to the cultures being studied. In both of the approaches which she outlined, the world-view of the student is imposed on the source material, which is, probably inevitably, found wanting. Both approaches occur in the historiography of Anglo-Saxon medicine. Falling into the second of Douglas’s camps, Singer and others considered Anglo-Saxon medicine ‘a mass of folly and credulity’. However, since the 1960s

21 Anglo-Saxon Remedies, 1 xxxiii.
23 Purity and Danger, esp. 30–6, 74–8.
24 Grattan and Singer, Anglo-Saxon Magic, 92; cf. Cameron, Anglo-Saxon Medicine, 2–3; Anne
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

scholars have increasingly revealed the deep Latin learning underlying many Anglo-Saxon medical texts. Cameron in particular has argued that many remedies contained clinically effective ingredients, and that from the perspective of Western clinical medicine, Anglo-Saxons’ ‘prescriptions were about as good as anything prescribed before the mid-twentieth century’. As Glosecki has pointed out, however, Cameron’s work is for all its merits a case-study in medical materialism. Thus Cameron, despite his lip-service to the psychological importance of ritual, found himself struggling to divide remedies into ‘rational’ and ‘amuletic’ categories. Cameron argued that ‘we should . . . put ourselves as far as possible in the Anglo-Saxons’ place, and . . . arrive at our assessments through the medical and physiological background of their time, not of ours’. But for historians to try to abandon their own belief-systems is a hopeless endeavour, leaving them and their audiences to impose their preconceptions unconsciously on the material studied. Moreover, Brennessel, Drout and Gravel have recently argued on the basis of experimental evidence that Anglo-Saxon remedies which Cameron supposed to have been clinically efficacious in fact probably were not, but one would not wish to conclude from this that we should return to Singer’s perspectives. Facing the approaches to healing which differ between our societies’ and Anglo-Saxons’ – of which elves are symptomatic – offers a different way into producing a more comprehensive and plausible assessment of Anglo-Saxon healing. Elves are neither to be explained away or ignored, nor are they to be reconstructed by imposing unwarranted assumptions upon the evidence, or by repeating those of earlier scholarship.

Douglas’s observations on the anthropology of medicine apply, mutatis mutandis, generally in the study of past societies: to avoid either dismissing past societies ‘as irrational or as unworthy of serious historical consideration’, or dismissing evidence contradicting the assumption that their members ‘must “really” have thought in the same ways as we do’, we need to invoke the concept of world-views. By world-view I mean the sum of the conceptual


28 Cameron, Anglo-Saxon Medicine, 134, 157–8; as Tom Sjöblom, Early Irish Taboos: A Study in Cognitive History, Uskontotiede / Comparative Religion, 5 (Helsinki: Department of Comparative Studies, University of Helsinki, 2000), 61, has emphasised, it is a priori unlikely that early-medieval people were any less rational than we are.

29 Anglo-Saxon Medicine, 3–4, at 4.


Introduction

categories which members of a society impose on the physical reality in which they exist. This is itself problematic, as it implies a monolithic conception of society to which I do not subscribe. Rhetorically, the problem can be circumvented in part simply by using indefinite plurals such as world-views and Anglo-Saxons; but this is not a complete solution, and I return to the problem below. My guiding assumption is that within Anglo-Saxon world-views, ælfe were a ‘social reality’. They were not an objective reality, like houses and trees, which can be readily perceived in the physical world and, insofar as anything can be, objectively proven to exist. But, just as many societies accept the existence of the Christian God, a critical mass of Anglo-Saxons accepted the reality of ælfe, and this collective belief made ælfe a social reality. Social realities are not mere fantasies: individuals cannot wish them away; any more than Beowulf could the dragon; ælfe could have played a significant role both in societies’ constructions of the world and individuals’ constructions of experience. Indeed, what looks like a social reality from an outsider’s perspective may become an objective reality as the outsider becomes an insider. The insider’s perspective on ælfe can no longer be experienced, and I must simply admit my disbelief in ælfe’s objective reality, while accepting that Anglo-Saxons’ experiences could have been construed as experiences of ælfe. In this perspective, since there was no objective reality forcing societies to recognise the existence of ælfe – only cultural and social impulses – the study of ælfe is potentially especially illuminating for Anglo-Saxon culture and society: ælfe were, amongst other things, reflections and abstractions of Anglo-Saxons’ changing ideals and concerns.

CATEGORISATION, THE LEXICON AND COMPARISON

I have claimed to be studying Anglo-Saxons’ world-views, and have put categorisation at the centre of my definition of world-view. Crucially, the category which this study investigates is not externally defined – ‘superstitions’, ‘monsters’, ‘pagan gods’ or the like – but is based instead on a word, ælf. This involves two premises. To reconstruct early-medieval concepts and conceptual categories, we should build our reconstructions up from our primary evidence, rather than positing categories and then seeking evidence for them. Meanwhile, one system of categorisation, providing valid insights into world-view, is a culture’s vernacular language.

The theoretical importance of reconstructing medieval conceptual categories rigorously on the basis of primary evidence – from the bottom up, as it were – is neatly illustrated by the recent Thesaurus of Old English.


Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

While an important achievement, this work proceeds from the top down, positing lexical categories based on Roget’s *Thesaurus*, and using Bosworth and Toller’s dictionary definitions to situate Old English words within them.35 This is the main *Thesaurus* entry concerning *ælf*:

16. The extrasensorial world
16.01 A divine being
16.01.03 A spectre, ghost, demon, goblin
16.01.03.04 Elfin race: *Ælfcynn*36
. *Elf, goblin, etc.: ælf(en), pūca, pūcel*37
.. Of elves: *ælfisc*38
.. Mountain elf: beorgælfen, dūnælf(en), muntælfen
.. Field elf: feldælfen, landælf
.. Wood elf: wudælfen, wudumær, wuduwāsa
.. Water elf: sæælfen, wæterælfen
.. Nightmare caused by elf: ælfādl, ælfsiden
. An incubus: *ælf, mera*
. A succubus: lēof39

Notwithstanding a few points of fact, my concern is with the entry’s assumptions about categorisation.37 One wonders first what an ‘Elfin race’ is. The term is presumably intended concisely to render something like ‘the races of *ælfe* and like beings’, but its members are a motley collection. The ghost-word *mera* is presumably included because Bosworth and Toller defined both it and *ælf* with *incubus*; *wudumær*, attested only to gloss the name of the nymph Echo, perhaps appears because *ælfen*, derived from *elf*, likewise glosses only words for nymphs.38 One imagines that *lēof* (‘beloved’) is included because it once glosses *succuba*, being taken therefore as a feminine counterpart to words for *incubus*, and so also to denote an ‘Elfin’ being.40 This being so, one wonders why *mære* was excluded, being categorised instead under 02.05.04.02 *A dream*, especially as its strong variant *wudumær* and its putative masculine counterpart *mera* are included in ‘Elfin race’. *Mære*’s categorisation as ‘a dream’ is presumably predicated on its modern survival in *nightmare* rather than its Old English usage, correctly reported by Bosworth and Toller, which permits no serious doubt about *maran*’s corporeality.40 The inclusion of *wuduwāsa* and *pūca* is mysterious. In short, the *Elfin race* of the *Thesaurus of Old English* is

36 Roberts, Kay and Grundy, *Thesaurus of Old English*, 1 §16.01.03.04.
37 Principally, *ylfig* (defined by Bosworth and Toller, *Dictionary*, s.v. *ilfig*, as ‘affected by elves [?], mad, frantic’), seems to have been omitted by mistake. *Mera* is a ghost-word deriving from a scribal corruption of *mære*: Alaric Hall, ‘The Evidence for *maran*, the Anglo-Saxon “Nightmares”’, *Neophilologus*, (forthcoming), §3. When *feldælfen* was coined, *feld* probably still meant ‘open, unobstructed land’ (see Margaret Gelling and Ann Cole, *The Landscape of Place-Names* (Stanford: Tyas, 2000), 269–74; for the dating of the text see p. 79 below). The interpretation of *ælfisc, ælfādl* and *ælfsiden* also requires revision (see pp. 122-3, 105 and chapter 5).
40 *Dictionary*, s.v. *mære*. 
neither an Old English nor an Anglo-Saxon category.

These objections, however, might apply to the Thesaurus's implementation rather than to its premises. More telling, then, are the assumptions built into the Thesaurus's structure. Ælfe are located in an ‘extrasensorial world’. However, while we might infer an extrasensorial world in Christian Anglo-Saxon world-views, it is not evident that ælfe belonged there; on the contrary, the evidence suggests that they were to be found in the tangible world. The use of divine being may be justifiable, but divinity is an ideologically charged concept whose applicability to non-Christian Anglo-Saxon culture is not self-evident. Some texts might justify the inclusion of ælf under ‘spectre, ghost, demon, goblin’, but others attest to quite different meanings, while we might question whether spectres, ghosts, demons and goblins, insofar as these words are applicable to Anglo-Saxon concepts at all, would have been grouped in this way by Anglo-Saxons. My focus on one word is intended to circumvent the problems inherent in defining conceptual categories first and asking questions later. I seek to judge with what words ælf overlapped semantically, and with what words it was systematically contrasted, by tracing these patterns in the primary evidence.

That said, I do sometimes limit the scope of my investigation by employing an analytical category of the ‘supernatural’, using supernatural in what seems to me its usual modern English usage: to denote phenomena viewed as transcending (or transgressing) normal (or natural) existence, as defined by the subject’s observation of everyday life, and of what is possible in it. This demands justification, not least because Neville has recently argued that ‘on a basic level the Anglo-Saxons did not have a word or expression for the modern conception of the natural world because they did not conceive of an entity defined by the exclusion of the supernatural’. 41 Neville had the Anglo-Saxons distinguishing only between the human world and the natural world, aligning beings such as monsters with the latter.42 Likewise, the etymologising objection that supernatural is paradoxical, as everything is included in nature, such that nothing can be ‘above’ it, has proved surprisingly tenacious given that it is precisely the paradox which it seeks to deny that gives supernatural its significance.43

The validity of a category of the supernatural is supported for Anglo-Saxon England by a variety of evidence. Mearns in particular has argued for the analytical power, and validity, of the category regarding the Old English

Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

Despite Neville’s claims, Old English had a substantial lexicon of the otherworldly, prominently involving the prefix \textit{el-} ‘foreign, strange; from elsewhere’.\footnote{Adam Jonathan Mearns, ‘The Lexical Representation of Monsters and Devils in Old English Literature’, 2 vols (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Newcastle Upon Tyne, 2002), 101, 108–37, esp. 123–7.} In practice, Neville herself used the term \textit{supernatural}, particularly in discussing \textit{Beowulf}.ootnote{DOE, s.v. \textit{el}-.} In the context of comparative religion, moreover, it seems unlikely that we can viably maintain the Christian theological convention (attested amongst both Anglo-Saxons and Anglo-Saxonists) of placing the Christian God outside nature rather than considering him supernatural.\footnote{For example, \textit{Representations}, 73, 118.} Neville’s exclusion of Christian divinity from her conception of the supernatural world resulted in a strict focus on monsters, producing a reading in which Anglo-Saxons viewed nature and the supernatural solely as threats to humanity.\footnote{On Anglo-Saxons see Neville, \textit{Representations}, 170–7; for an explicit Anglo-Saxonist Lewis, \textit{Studies}, 64–8.} But this overlooks the mediating role of Christian supernatural forces, such as nature miracles, in Anglo-Saxon literature. I argue for subtler reconstructions of the relationship between Anglo-Saxons and their world, to which the concept of the supernatural is central and powerful.\footnote{Especially \textit{Representations}, 107–9.}

Turning to the second premise of my methodology, that linguistic categorisation is an important component in world-view, the principle at least of taking care over establishing the meanings of the words which comprise our source-texts will meet no objection – though our limited evidence means that we must often speak tentatively of \textit{ælf}’s semantic ‘associations’, without always being able to specify whether these are denotations, connotations or patterns of collocation. What is less straightforward is my use of lexical semantics as a basis for mapping Anglo-Saxon beliefs. The potential of words to attest to beliefs was of course realised long ago, underpinning Grimm’s seminal, and largely unsurpassed, \textit{Deutsche Mythologie}.\footnote{Jacob Grimm, \textit{Teutonic Mythology}, trans. James Steven Stallybrass, 4 vols (London: Bell, 1882–8) (first publ. \textit{Deutsche Mythologie}, 4th edn, 3 vols (Berlin: Meyer, 1875–8)).} But since the heady days of Grimm’s linguistic nationalism, or the seminal propositions of semantic field theory and linguistic determinism in the 1920s and ’30s, the theoretical validity of this approach has been questioned.\footnote{See John Lyons, \textit{Semantics}, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 1 245–61.} A prelinguistic child can have a concept of a house; people perceive the difference between red and pink when their language uses one word of both; I may say that I am angry, while acknowledging that no word precisely denotes my experience. Thus the medievalist who would, for want of alternative data, use the lexis as evidence...
for past world-views is in an uncomfortable position. In the cognitive sciences, debate over the extent of linguistic determinism is ongoing, and experiment has focused on issues of limited relevance here: grammatical categorisation and encoding of spatial relationships; closed lexical sets such as colour-terms; or the role of language in learning to perform tasks. In the face of these problems, linguistically minded medievalists have generally either simply ignored the theoretical difficulties, or avoided making any assertions about the relevance of their linguistic studies to past societies. Thus, surveying approaches to medieval popular religion, Lees commented that ‘these studies do not conform to one methodological or theoretical school. They are instead feminist, historical, materialist, psychoanalytic, cultural, theological, and literary’. Lees’s list is catholic, but linguistics is absent.

Fortunately, linguistic determinism is not a theoretical prerequisite for the integration of lexical semantics into wider cultural research. There is instead a well-established and theoretically justified supposition that language reflects culture, which is sufficient to underpin the methods adopted here. This, as a generalisation, can hardly be denied – if language did not reflect culture then it would be an absurdly ineffectual tool for communication. People can of course conceive of things for which they lack words, and the absence of a word does not prove the absence of corresponding concepts. However, it is reasonable to suppose a priori that the distribution of words in a lexicon attests to the relative cultural salience of the concepts which they denote, with absences at least suggesting low salience.

That said, social realities specifically are arguably particularly susceptible to construction, and so to study, through language. Pending conclusive experimental evidence on the subject, I accept Searle’s argument that by definition, social realities cannot exist without symbols: symbols do not create cats and dogs and evening stars; they create only the possibility of referring to cats, dogs, and evening stars in a publicly accessible way. But symbolization creates the very ontological categories of money, property, points scored in games and political offices, as well as the categories of words, and speech acts.


54 Clare A. Lees, Tradition and Belief: Religious Writing in Late Anglo-Saxon England, Medieval Cultures, 19 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11.


56 Lyons, Semantics, 1.246–50.

57 Searle, Construction, esp. 59–78, at 75.
And as Searle argued, the symbol-system *par excellence* is language. This observation can be developed at several levels. As Berger and Luckmann emphasised, language influences how people communicate their thoughts and so how communities construct their shared realities. Language not only reflects societies’ world-views, therefore, but affects their form at a social level. However idiosyncratic an individual’s experience, it will tend to be communicated and constructed within the community through the linguistic resources at the community’s disposal. Beyond this, however, there is a case to be made that, as social realities, *ælfe* existed through the word *ælf*; it follows that, as a general principle, an *ælf* was what the word *ælf* meant. By reconstructing the semantics of the word, we can reconstruct the ontological category. This is not an entirely simple claim: it is possible that beliefs in supernatural beings are a natural by-product of human cognitive processes, and so might exist without language. But it also seems that across cultures, all concepts of such beings have lexical labels: it is reasonable to argue that the culturally specific characteristics of a class of supernatural beings will be constructed through language, and that in studying lexical evidence, we are viewing not only reflections of beliefs, but media of beliefs.

As scholars from various disciplines have argued, of course, ‘No particular set of classifying symbols can be understood in isolation, but there can be hope of making sense of them in relation to the total structure of classifications in the culture in question’. This study, then, is not only about *ælfe*, but about how the concept of *ælfe* related to other Anglo-Saxon conceptual categories. Language is well suited to this kind of investigation. Though we have few Anglo-Saxon non-Christian mythological narratives, Old English texts containing *ælf* are relatively rich in evidence for linguistic systems – for the overlaps and contrasts in meaning between *ælf* and other words. The correlation of linguistic structures with mythological categorisation has been demonstrated in the traditional grammatical structuring of the Australian aboriginal language Dyirbal, and can be argued for in the correlation of grammatical gender and cultural gender in Indo-European and other languages. In the present study, it is medieval Scandinavia which provides the test case, since there we can not only map belief through words, but check to see how well their semantics correlate with fuller mythological texts (chapter 1).

For all the value of our Old English textual and linguistic evidence, however, it would be hard (and unwise) to interpret the evidence for *ælfe* without reference to a broader cultural context – as my mention of medieval Scandinavian

---

58 *Social Construction*, esp. 51–2.
59 See n. 48 above.
evidence suggests. A context is necessary to give a sense of what interpretations of the linguistic evidence are plausible, and to assist the assessment of their wider significance. Here I use comparative material of two main types, linguistic and narrative – the former primarily as a direct source of semantic evidence, the latter primarily as a source of interpretative models. Both of these uses go back to the pioneering linguistic and folkloric research of the nineteenth century; my approaches here differ mainly in the degree of caution exercised as to what is suitable for comparison and what we can infer from it. My comparative linguistic material comprises medieval Germanic cognates of ælf and other pertinent Old English words. No interpretation of the Old English evidence should make cognate evidence unduly difficult to explain; additionally, correspondences between cognate evidence and Old English evidence can be used to suggest positively what interpretation of the Old English material is most plausible. Comparative narrative material, on the other hand, is rarely useful as direct evidence, as our lack of relevant Anglo-Saxon narratives precludes the comparison of like material with like. But narratives in which ælf appeared must not only have helped to determine the word’s meanings, but also the cultural meanings of ælfe. Narratives in medieval Norse, Irish, French and later English and Scots, then, can show what kinds of narratives ælf’s semantics are likely to have related to, providing models for the interpretation of semantic data. Although in theory narratives from any culture could provide these models, I have focused on those from medieval north-western Europe. This reflects my specialisms, but also provides a proximate reading context for the Old English evidence. With due care to avoid circularity of argument, we can use these narratives both to help to reconstruct Anglo-Saxon beliefs, and to see what is distinctive about them in their historical and cultural context.

One kind of comparative source is, regrettably, unavailable here, however: art history. Visual art might in theory have been important in shaping Anglo-Saxon beliefs – Buxton could argue of Ancient Greece, for example, that ‘for the development of the mythological tradition artistic representations were not merely as important as verbal narratives, but more important’. One thinks also of the functions of pictures in Anglo-Saxon Christianity and of early-medieval Scandinavian picture-stones and tapestries – our earliest attestation of álfr, indeed, comes from a poetic response to the decoration of a shield, Bragi Boddason’s Ragnarsdrápa. But it is not, at present, possible to identify any images or motifs with ælfe: the one traditional candidate proves to be a conventional depiction of demons. Strange beasts and monsters are prominent in early Anglo-Saxon art and demand to be understood within

65 Jolly, ‘Elves’.
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

a wider literary and linguistic context, but pre-conversion Anglo-Saxon art, where non-Christian beliefs might most clearly appear, tends to be very abstract, and its significances fiendishly hard to deduce.\textsuperscript{66} The Franks Casket does depict Weland, whose Scandinavian counterpart Völundr can be identified as an álfr, and Weland–Völundr appears on Anglo-Scandinavian stone sculpture.\textsuperscript{67} But to equate depictions of this sort with álfr or ælfe would be risky.

FOLKLORE, BELIEF AND EVIDENCE

It remains to discuss some general issues in studying historical belief-systems: my assumptions about their dynamic and variable character; and the sections of Anglo-Saxon society to whose beliefs our evidence for ælfe pertains. I work on the premise that our texts are not merely articulations or reflections of belief: they were and remain active participants in a discourse of belief conducted both between the members of textual communities, and between the communities and their texts. The better to appreciate this perspective, we may consider some of the opening comments in Henderson and Cowan's significant \textit{Scottish Fairy Belief: A History}:

researching Scottish fairy belief is rather like confronting a huge obscure painting which has been badly damaged and worn through time, great chunks totally obliterated and now completely irrecoverable, portions repainted by poorly skilled craftsmen, and other parts touched up by those who should have known better . . . In assembling this material, we have not worked toward some deconstructionist end, but rather have tried to synthesise the individual components, to reconstruct the whole essence of fairy belief as a distinct phenomenon.\textsuperscript{68}

This evocative statement undeniably strikes a chord. It is in the tradition of folkloristics which abandoned the early-nineteenth-century model of the production of folk literature – in which ancient traditions were inherited and bequeathed almost unconsciously by some undifferentiated ‘folk’ – to invoke instead the ‘tradition bearer’.\textsuperscript{69} This model improved on its forebears

\begin{itemize}
\end{itemize}
by positing that folk-traditions were transmitted by individual members of society. But, as the quotation shows, it also introduced a new note of doubt: with the introduction of the humanly fallible ‘tradition bearer’, the quality of the transmission of folklore seemed less assured.

However, in keeping with recent arguments that ‘man is not a cog in the wheel of history but an active participant in the historical process’ or that ‘it is speakers, not languages, that innovate’, Tangherlini has argued that a superior model in folkloristics is that of ‘tradition participants’.70 Scottish fairy belief may never have looked much more coherent than it does now: our ‘obscure painting’ need not represent degradation by faulty tradition bearers, but the dynamic and variable nature of tradition itself. The consequence of these theoretical approaches is the optimistic conclusion that although Anglo-Saxons encountered more, and more varied, resources for constructing their ælf-lore than now remain to us, the processes of construction were fundamentally similar: Anglo-Saxons encountered the word ælf and surmised its significance, primarily, from the linguistic and discursive contexts in which it appeared. Texts mentioning ælfe were not merely expressions of belief, but became in turn part of the material from which tradition participants constructed and transmitted their own conceptions of the beliefs involved. Those which survive are not windows on to past beliefs, but pathways into them. Moreover, unlike our traditional starting-points for reconstructing beliefs concerning non-Christian supernatural beings – (archi)episcopal denunciations like Wulfstan of York’s, collections of legends from disparate times and places like Gervase of Tilbury’s, or mythographies like Snorri Sturluson’s – most of the sources I use here here were probably not intended to be formative. Glossators trying to elucidate Latin texts had little incentive to deploy Old English terms in wilfully unusual ways and compilers of medical texts included remedies for what they perceived to be real threats.

These comments should suggest that I avoid what Boyer has called ‘the theologistic bias in cultural anthropology’ – the idea that ‘the religious representations of a given group, “culture”, or “society” constitute an integrated and consistent set of abstract principles’.71 Certainly, I endeavour to detect variation and change in our evidence. Although changes in the meanings of Old English words have been studied, it is more usual in studies of English semantic change to take Old English as one, effectively synchronic, stage in the history of English. Since most surviving Old English manuscripts were written in conservative literary registers over just two centuries, this is understandable. However, this habit disengages linguistic evidence from historical change. The present study, therefore, pays careful attention to our evidence, slight though it is, for variation over time. However, I am, like most


Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

scholars, also concerned to systematise, on the principle of economy: to see how far our varied kinds of texts, and their various implications, can plausibly be seen as the product of a limited and cohesive set of beliefs; and to detect and interpret variation and change through this process. The tension between these two stances, neatly encapsulated in McKinnell’s characterisation of ‘late Norse heathenism’ as ‘both one and many’, is inevitable. It is analogous to the position of a grammarian who must abstract a system or systems from a partial selection of surface evidence, in the knowledge that grammar in fact varies according to time, space, community, context and even individual speaker. I, like the grammarian, hope that I have succeeded in abstracting systems which represent what most members of a community would exhibit in their shared discourse.

Like the grammarian too, however, I can specify to what sections of society my data, and therefore my inferences, pertain. My discussion in this section has drawn on thinking about what we habitually call ‘folklore’, ‘popular belief’ or ‘popular religion’. At first sight, these seem natural labels for a study concerned with \( \text{Ælfe} \). But they are not. The usefulness of the concept of popular belief regarding Anglo-Saxon culture is questionable – because it is either inapplicable or untraceable. While it is evident that learned clergymen had access to different systems of belief, and lay aristocrats more access to clergymen, than the rest of the population, it is not clear that we should hypothesise a division between ‘popular’ and ‘elite’ cultures even for early-modern Europe, let alone for Anglo-Saxon England with its far slighter social stratification. Conversely, most of our evidence for \( \text{Ælfe} \) derives from texts produced by a small, learned, clerical, male, Southumbrian and probably noble section of Anglo-Saxon society. Even the personal names containing \( \text{ælf} \) are those of the nobility. If, then, we do posit a division between Anglo-Saxon popular and elite culture, there is no question that our evidence represents the elite. Nor can the attestation of similar beliefs among the peasantry in later times confirm their widespread character, as this could be because of an earlier trickle-down process rather than a once-homogeneous belief-system. So although Jolly saw the study of ‘popular religion in late Saxon England’ as a way of putting ‘elf-charms in context’, the evidence concerning \( \text{Ælfe} \) is ‘popular’ or ‘folkloric’ only insofar as we habitually abuse these terms to refer to beliefs which do not fit post-Reformation expectations of orthodox Christian belief.

One is entitled to wonder whether linguistic evidence might, despite its provenance from a limited section of society, attest better to wider beliefs. As a given language is often a medium of communication across all sections of society, the meanings of words might be more consistent across social divisions than other features of culture. This possibility rests on questions

---


74 Burke, *Popular Culture*, esp. 3–64.
Introduction

concerning the effects of social divisions in Anglo-Saxon society on language, and on the nature of the interplay between language and belief. But historical sociolinguistics is a nascent discipline, whose major advances so far relate to later periods.75 While evidence is growing for the differences between the lexica of the learned and unlearned in the Anglo-Saxon historical period, we have next to no idea about the effects of other sorts of social division on Old English.76 Even disregarding the possibility of social register prior to the Anglo-Saxon migrations and the later complications of Scandinavian settlement and the Norman Conquest, we could posit the swift growth of Old English registers following the Anglo-Saxon migrations as society grew more stratified, dialects gained and lost prestige as kingdoms competed for influence over one another, and arguably as varieties of Old English characterised by substrate influence from earlier languages developed.77 Accordingly, hints have begun to be identified to this effect in our evidence for late Old English phonology.78 It would therefore be unwise at the present


78 Alaric Hall, ‘Old MacDonald had a Fyrm, eo, eo, y: Two Marginal Developments of <eo> in Old and Middle English’, Quaestio: Selected Proceedings of the Cambridge Colloquium in Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, 2 (2001), 60–90, esp. 84; available at <http://www.alarichall.org.uk>, <http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/2890/>. Gretsch has argued in addition that the gloss burhspæce for urbanitas presupposes differences in speech between (certain) inhabitants of a burh and others (Intellectual Foundations, 164). I am not confident, however, that burhspæce has not merely calqued its first element (burh, ‘stronghold, city’) on the urbs (‘city’) implicit in urbanitas, as
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

stage of research to make assumptions about the value of our Old English evidence for the beliefs of social groups other than the elite producers and consumers of that evidence. This book is a study of elite beliefs, elucidating something of their changing meanings and functions, and emphasising the extent to which Christian Anglo-Saxon culture included or incorporated traditional ideologies.

with other Old English words which add a derivative or translation of their source word to a suitable epexegetic element, such as place-names in -ceaster like Binchester (< Vinovia) or plant-names in -wyrt like naederwyrt (apparently calqued on the plant-name viperina, < viper ‘snake’ or basilisca < basiliscus ‘basilisk, lizard’).
A Medieval Scandinavian Context

P RIMARYLY because of Icelanders’ late conversion, linguistic conservatism and readiness to transmit literature rooted in pre-conversion culture, Scandinavia has provided the basis for research into all traditional Germanic-speaking cultures. Accordingly, reconstructions of ælfe have often been shaped by evidence for the medieval Scandinavian álfar. However, it would be unwise to impose Scandinavian evidence incautiously on other cultures. If only for historiographical reasons, then, any reassessment of Anglo-Saxon ælfe must begin with the reassessment of their Scandinavian cousins. I begin here by showing how the traditional point of departure for reconstructing pre-Christian Scandinavian beliefs, Snorri Sturluson’s writings, is unreliable regarding early álfar. Later-medieval Icelandic texts also afford evidence for the meanings of álfr, but these are even trickier as evidence for pre-conversion beliefs, so I include them here only on a few specific points, focusing instead on poetry which seems likely to be old or culturally conservative, and which afforded Snorri’s own main primary source material.¹

After discussing Snorri’s work, I turn to skaldic verse, the Scandinavian praise-poetry first attested from the ninth century. The association of skaldic poetry with named poets and subjects permits the cautious dating of poems, the reliability of the dates being somewhat assured by the poems’ intricate metre and diction, which inhibited recomposition in oral transmission. Next I consider Eddaic verse, whose mythological subject matter makes it in some ways more useful than skaldic verse, but whose more flexible structures permitted greater variability in transmission, so precluding precise dating. In addition to providing this primary evidence, however, Old Norse

material, combined with the prominence of anthropological approaches in recent Scandinavian scholarship, affords means to assess the usefulness of linguistic evidence as evidence for mythology and its wider significance in early-medieval Scandinavian world-views. This provides models for interpreting the Old English evidence considered in the subsequent chapters, and a framework for introducing other Scandinavian evidence at appropriate junctures below.

I should admit at the outset that my investigations are male-centred. This is not (consciously) a willing choice, and I focus on gendering in an Anglo-Saxon context below. But females are comparatively poorly represented in our Norse mythological sources, partly defined in any case through their husbands, and partly functioning as units of inter-group exchange rather than as paradigmatic representatives of groups themselves. The early-medieval evidence points only towards male álfar. However, supernatural females do crop up at various points below, and it is important to outline my understanding of the words dis, norn and valkyrja, and of their semantic relationships. Essentially, I follow our sources in considering dis, norn, valkyrja partial synonyms with substantially overlapping meaning, taking dis to be the most inclusive in meaning. This position is supported by the analyses presented by Ström in 1954, but the convention of creating taxonomies of mythological races on a one-name, one-race basis continues to dominate scholars’ thinking. It is usual to follow the preferences of the prose sections of the Poetic Edda, and of Snorra Edda, and refer to the supernatural females in early mythology as valkyrjur (or Valkyries, Walküren, etc.). But this is historically surely an inversion: valkyrja is most likely a kenning (‘chooser of the slain’) for dis (‘(supernatural) lady’), as dis is used in, for example, Grímnismál stanza 53, Reginsmál stanza 24 and Hamðismál stanza 28. Even Brynhildr, the archetypal Wagnerian Walküre, is referred to as a dis, and never in Eddaic verse as a valkyrja. Likewise, scholars often talk of ‘the three Norns’ – but our sources never do. Norn simply denotes

---


noble and supernatural women. The three meyjar margs vitandi who appear in stanza 20 of Völuspá are identified in scholarship as ‘the Norns’ only because Snorri says (presumably on the basis of this stanza), ‘þar stendr salr einn fagr undir askinum við brunninn, ok ór þeim sal koma þrjár meyjar þær er svá heita: Urðr, Verðandi, Skuld. Þessar meyjar skapa mõnum aldr. Þær kõllum vêr nornir’ (‘a beautiful hall stands there under the ash beside a spring/pool, and from that hall come three maidens who are named thus: Urðr [‘become’], Verðandi [‘becoming’], Skuld [‘will be’]. These maidens shape people’s lives. We call them nornir.’) Even Snorri, however, does not attest to ‘the Norns’, three female shapers of fate: he says rather that these three meyjar are nornir (moreover, the names he gives them, following Völuspá, may be inspired by learned knowledge of the Classical Parcae rather than by traditional culture). Statements like ‘poets use the word disir as if it meant “norns”’ invert our evidence. This analysis provides a preliminary example of the importance of reconstructing conceptual categories from the bottom up, but also suggests that we need not approach early-medieval Scandinavian belief looking for elaborate taxonomies of supernatural females.

SNORRI STURLUSON

Snorri Sturluson (born in the late 1170s, dying in 1241) seems to have composed and edited the texts comprising Snorra Edda, his treatise on Norse poetry and mythology, more than two centuries after Iceland’s official conversion – between perhaps 1220 and 1241 – while much of what we think of as Snorra Edda may derive from later editors. Snorra Edda comprises four texts: a prologue, Gylfaginning, Skáldskaparmál and Háttatal, probably composed in reverse order. It is complemented (and sometimes contradicted) by the partly mythological Ynglinga saga, the opening part of Heimskringla – the magisterial history of the kings of Norway accepted as having probably been composed by Snorri in the same period as his Edda. Both texts are founded on quotations of older verse. Snorri’s work is, therefore, a complex blend of old and new, involving preservation, re-interpretation, neatening and misunderstanding.

6 Ström, Diser, esp. 80–95.
of inherited traditions by both Snorri himself and his redactors.\textsuperscript{12}

\textit{Álf}r occurs in \textit{Snorra Edda} most often in quotations of Eddaic verse, and in Snorri’s prose paraphrases of them. This reveals more about Snorri’s sources, which are usually attested more completely elsewhere, than his own views. Snorri’s most influential deployment of \textit{álfr}, however, occurs in his own enumeration in \textit{Gylfaginning} of the \textit{hôfuðstaðir} (‘chief places’) of the cosmos:

Margir staðir eru þar göfugligr. Sá er einn staðr þar er kallaðr er Álfheimr. Þar byggvir fólk þat er ljósálfar heita, en dekkálfar búa niðri i jörðu, ok eru þeir ólíkr þeim sýnum en myklu ólíkari reyndum. Ljósálfar eru fegri en söl sýnum, en dekkálfar eru svartari en bikk.\textsuperscript{13}

There are many places there which are magnificent. There is one place which is called Álfheimr. A people lives there which is called ljósálfar, but døkkálfar live below in the earth, and they are different from them in appearance and very different in practice. Ljósálfar are more handsome than the sun in appearance, but døkkálfar are blacker than pitch.

\textit{Ljósálfr} (‘light-\textit{álfr}’) is repeated shortly after, in a detail appended to the description of Víðbláinn, the highest of Snorri’s three himnar (‘skies’): ‘en ljósálfar einir hyggjum vér at nú byggvi þá staði’ (‘but we think that the ljósálfar alone currently inhabit those places’).\textsuperscript{14} In addition to dekkálfar, Snorri also mentions \textit{Svartálfheimr} (‘black/dark-\textit{álfr}’s-world’): seeking a way to bind the wolf Fenrir, ‘sendi Alfoður þann er Skírnir er nefndr, sendimaðr Freys, ofan i Svartálfheim til dverga nokkura’ (‘All-father sent him who is called Skírnir, Freyr’s messenger, down into Svartálfheimr to some dvergar’).\textsuperscript{15} Ljósálfr and dekkálfar are unique in Old Norse. \textit{Svartálfr} does occur in \textit{Ektors saga ok kappa hans}, from around 1300, but almost certainly by borrowing from \textit{Snorra Edda}.\textsuperscript{16} It has been observed before that the døkkálfar and svartálfar seem to be dvergar under new names: their characteristics are identical with dvergar’s, and dvergar do not otherwise occur in the cosmology of \textit{Gylfaginning}.\textsuperscript{17} When in \textit{Skáldskaparmál} Þórr demands that Loki have svartálfar make gold hair for his wife, Loki goes to beings otherwise denoted by dvergr; Andvari the dvergr is found in Svartálfheimr; and Mitchell has argued that the narrative function of the svartálfar is best paralleled by the \textit{jötunr} of whom Skírnir seeks Gerðr for Freyr in \textit{Skírnismál}, and I align the \textit{jötunr} with dvergar in the next section.\textsuperscript{18} I discount Snorri’s dekkálfar and svartálfar as evidence for earlier álfar, then.


\textsuperscript{13} Ed. Faulkes, \textit{Gylfaginning}, 19.

\textsuperscript{14} Ed. Faulkes, \textit{Gylfaginning}, 20.

\textsuperscript{15} Ed. Faulkes, \textit{Gylfaginning}, 28.

\textsuperscript{16} DONP, s.v. alf-s·sonr.


A medieval Scandinavian context

Despite long-standing scepticism, however, the ljósálfar have maintained a reputation as a race of ethereal, celestial ‘(light-)elves’. But, as Holtsmark showed in 1964, Snorri’s description of Víðbláinn was almost certainly influenced by (and possibly based on) the account of the angels in the Elucidarius, an early-twelfth-century digest of Christian theology translated into Icelandic by about 1200, certainly used elsewhere in Snorra Edda. The oldest manuscript of the Elucidarius, AM 674a 4to, includes the dialogue


Pupil: Where does God live? Master: Wherever his power extends; however, his native region is in the sky of intellect. Pupil: What is the sky of intellect? Master: There are three skies. One is bodily, that which we can see. The second is spiritual (andlegr), where the spiritual beings live who are angels. But the third is the sky of intellect, where the Holy Trinity lives; and there can holy angels see God.

From this, Snorri derived his three himnar. That the Elucidarius was also an inspiration for his ljósálfar, who ‘eru fegri en sól’ (‘are more beautiful than the sun’), is suggested by its mention of ‘englar es .vii. hlutum ero fegre an sól’ (‘angels, which are seven times more beautiful than the sun’; cf. ‘angeli, qui solem septuplo sua vincunt pulchritudine’ in the original). Admittedly, the Elucidarius situates its englar in the second tier of heaven, andlegr, rather than the third, which is where the ljósálfar appear in Snorra Edda. Nor is the phrase fegri en sól particularly distinctive. Even so, a verbal connection between the Elucidarius and Snorri’s description of the ljósálfar seems probable, ljósálfar being at one level at least a paganisation of Christian angels. Snorri presumably renamed the dvergar, therefore, to suggest that they were to ljósálfar as fallen angels were to heavenly ones – a characteristic accommodation of traditional cosmology to Christian.

20 For dating see Evelyn Scherabon Fichow and Kaaren Grimstad (ed.), Elucidarius in Old Norse Translation, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, 36 (Reykjavik: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1989), xvii, xxvi; on Snorri’s use Holtsmark, Studier, 35–8; cf. Simek, Dictionary, s.vv. andlangr, víðbláinn; Margaret Clunies Ross, Skáldskaparmál: Snorri Sturluson’s Ars Poetica and Medieval Theories of Language, The Viking Collection, 4 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1986), 55–8.
22 Ed. Fichow and Grimstad, Elucidarius, 8; Lefèvre, L’Elucidarium, 361.
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

That Snorri chose álfr as a counterpart for the Christian engill (‘angel’) is not, of course, without interest. If nothing else it suggests that álfr had positive connotations. However, Snorri had few options at this point. Of the other native Norse words denoting male supernatural beings which had positive connotations, Snorri had already employed áss and vanr, while the plurals regin and tívar were both archaic and entrenched as synonyms for the æsir. Snorri’s only likely alternatives were the rather colourless vætr (‘(supernatural) being’) and andi (‘spirit’). The fact that he chose álfr over these can be adequately explained from other evidence: Skáldskapamál shows that Snorri knew the kenning álfr ðúll (denoting the sun and discussed below), which could be taken to associate álfr with light, and he may have felt a need to fit álfr into his mythography which did not extend to the more generic terms vætr and andi.

Álfr does occur in chapters 48–9 of Ynglinga saga, in the epithet of Óláfr Geirstaðaálfr (‘the álfr of Geirstaðir’), for whose son, Snorri claims in the saga’s preface, Þjóðólfr ór Hvini composed Ynglingatal, the poem on which the saga is based. But Ynglingatal itself does not contain the epithet. Although no explicit explanation for it is ever given, it has excited speculation linking álfr with the dead, because in other accounts, which Heinrichs has argued to have originated in a twelfth-century Óláfs þáttr Geirstaðaálf’s, people sacrifice to Óláfr after his death. But, besides Heinrichs’s point that the ideology of the þáttr is very much of the later twelfth century, its account of Óláfr’s cult perhaps reflecting saints’ cults, this is not clearly the reason for Óláfr’s name. Various other factors might be relevant: his mother comes from Álfheimar; as I discuss below, álfr is common in poetic epithets for men and Geirstaðaálfr could originate as one of these; it may be also be an epithet of Freyr, from whom Óláfr is descended in the sagas; and in the þáttr, Óláfr is especially


25 Ed. Faulkes, Skáldskaparmál, i 85, 133.


A medieval Scandinavian context

handsome, a characteristic shared by álfr in the Sogubrot af fornkonungum, from around 1300.29 Óláfr’s epithet is, therefore, too ambiguous as evidence for the early meanings of álfr.

Finally, it is worth discussing a major division in the mythography of Gylfaginning which ostensibly excludes álfr: Snorri divides the gods into two groups, the æsir and the vanir. This division has been received as axiomatic in most modern mythography, but it is curiously ill-paralleled. Moreover, Snorri’s usage of álfr in Skáldskaparmál is much closer to that of his poetic sources than to Gylfaginning. For example, Snorri states that ‘Mann er ok rétt at kenna til allra Ása heita. Kent er ok við jötna heiti, ok er þat flest háð eða lastmæli. Vel þykkir kent til álfa’ (‘It is also proper to call a person by the names of all the æsir. They are also known by the names of jötnar, and that is mostly as satire or criticism. It is thought good to name after (the) álfr’).30 This matches attested skaldic usage (discussed in the next section), but does not fit well with Gylfaginning’s ljósálfar and døkkálfar. This is not the place to reassess our evidence for the vanir and the assumptions which past scholarship has made about it. However, it is worth emphasising that Gylfaginning and Ynglinga saga aside, vanr is a rare word in Norse and unattested elsewhere in the Germanic languages, whereas álfr is well attested, widespread and with a range of clear Indo-European cognates.31 Whereas in Gylfaginning the gods are divided into the æsir and vanir, our other evidence, including Skáldskaparmál, repeatedly prefers to speak of æsir and álfr. The possibility arises that vanr and álfr originally denoted essentially the same mythological construct, their dissimilation in Gylfaginning perhaps reflecting Snorri’s systematising mythography. I discuss this prospect further below. For now, however, we may turn to our poetic evidence.


30 Ed. Faulkes, Skáldskaparmál, i 40, cf. 5.

31 Kuhn ‘Religionsgeschichte’, iv 272–6; on álfr’s cognates see pp. 54–5 below. Richard North, Heathen Gods in Old English Literature, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England, 22 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 177–8, suggested that the prototheme of Old English wanneseoce, occurring among interlinear glosses on comitiales (‘epileptics’) in Aldhelm’s Pros a de virginitate (quoted below, pp. 149–50), is cognate with vanr. However, vanr is an i-stem and as such should appear in Old English as *wene – unless we assume declension-change, adding another hypothesis to the argument. (Alternatively, if wann-is considered a borrowing of vanr, it is not evidence for a Common Germanic etymon.) I suspect that this is simply the common if semantically problematic Old English adjective wann (on whose semantics see Andrew Breeze, ‘Old English Wann, “Dark; Pallid”: Welsh Gwann “Weak; Sad, Gloomy”’, ANQ, 10 (1997), 10–13; putatively ‘dark’), wann denoting a symptom of illness in Old English (as in Gif him biþ ælfsogoða discussed below, p. 105–6) and in Old Frisian wanfelle, wanfelic (‘with bruised skin, black and blue’; see Rolf H. Bremmer, ‘The Old Frisian Component in Holthausen’s Allenglisches etymologisches Wörterbuch’, Anglo-Saxon England, 17 (1988), 5–13, at 11).
Álfr appears in skaldic verse almost invariably in kennings – essentially poetic metaphors – for human warriors. It is fairly common in this role, and is attested already in the work of the earliest skald, Bragi inn gamli Boddason. At some point in the ninth century, Bragi called the legendary king Jörmunrekr söknar álfr (‘áltfr of attack’) in stanza 4 of his Ragnarsdrápa, and the hero Hogni raðarálfr (‘áltfr of the ship’) in stanza 11. Around the end of the century, Þjóðólfr ór Hvini called Hálfdan hvítbeinn Óláfsson brynjalfr (‘armour-áltfr’) in stanza 30 of his Ynglingatal, and numerous other examples followed. Perhaps because álfr never actually denotes an álfr in skaldic verse, this corpus has been little used as evidence for álfr’s early meanings. But, following my arguments in the previous chapter that the meanings of words can tell us about the concepts which they denoted, the kennings offer important insights.

The usage of álfr in kennings suggests that it only denoted males. This may not, admittedly, have applied to the plural: áss denoted a male god, but æsir could include the female ásynjur (albeit infrequently); likewise, álfr might have denoted both males and females. By the high Middle Ages, Icelandic could denote female álfr with the compound álfskona (‘áltfr-woman’), but we have no early evidence to clarify the situation. Wolff extracted a second point from the kennings, however: whereas Snorri proscribes the mention of jotnar in kennings for people, he accepts álfr, who, Wolff inferred, ‘dem Menschen freundlich sind’ (‘are friendly towards humans’). This observation has not been developed, but an examination of words for supernatural beings in kennings both confirms and elaborates it.

Strikingly, álfr shares its distribution in skaldic verse distinctively, among words denoting kinds of supernatural beings, with kennings containing áss.
Áss occurs often as a simplex, and in kennings for poetry and gods. But its most common use in kennings is, like álfr, as the headword in kennings denoting human warriors, such as Íss Fróða hríðar (‘áss of Fródi’s storm (=battle)’) in stanza 32 of Vellekla, composed by the pagan Icelander Einarr skálaglamm in the late tenth century. By contrast, few other words denoting types of supernatural beings occur in kennings for humans. God and regin occur, but only rarely, and are partially if not wholly synonymous with áss. Words for disir are common as modifiers in kennings for warriors (for example valmeyjar álfr, ‘álfr of the slaughter-maid’), but not as headwords. In kennings for women, ásýnja occurs, which we may take as an extension of the data for áss; and possibly hand, another synonym for áss (occurring only in the plural form bond). Dis and norn occur fairly often, and again seem on external evidence to have been at least partially synonymous. Taking draugr in kennings for humans to be the homonym denoting living warriors rather than dead ones, none of the numerous other Norse words for types of supernatural beings, such as dvergr, jotunn, mara or þurs, appears in kennings for humans. Nor, it should be noted, does vanr, which occurs only a few times in skaldic verse.

This distribution suggests that to the formative skaldic poets, álfr denoted something mythologically close enough to human males to be used as the generic element in kennings for them, and something close enough to áss to share this usage with it distinctively among words for supernatural beings. More generally, words for supernatural beings used in kennings for humans can thus be reckoned in three groups: áss, ásýnja and their (partial) synonyms god and regin; álfr, and dis and norn. Assuming that this system exhibited symmetry of gender, this analysis suggests that disir and nornir were to the álfar as the ásýnjur were to the æsir – their female counterparts. Finally, words denoting monstrous beings were evidently excluded from this system – except, if we accept Snorri’s claim in Skáldskaparmál, in mockery – suggesting that álfar joined æsir and humans in a systematic opposition to monstrous beings.

The distribution of words for supernatural beings in kennings for men is paralleled by other sorts of early Old Norse lexical evidence. Compounds ending in Old Norse -kunnr and -kunnigr (variant forms of the same word, cognate with English kin, not to be confused with the homophonous kunnigr ‘knowledgeable’, cognate with cunning) and their Germanic cognates were used either to denote descent from or origin in the determiner of the compound (for example Old Norse reginkunnr, Old English godcund, ‘originating with god(s)’), or similarity in nature to it (for example Old High German manchunt

---

38 Finnur Jónsson, Norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning, Bt 123; Sveinbjörn Egilsson, Lexicon poeticum, s.v. Íss; cf. Meissner, Kenningar, 264.
39 Sveinbjörn Egilsson, Lexicon poeticum, s.vv.; cf. Meissner, Kenningar, 264.
40 Meissner, Kenningar, 273–4.
41 Sveinbjörn Egilsson, Lexicon poeticum, s.vv.; cf. Meissner, Kenningar, 408–9, 411–12; above, pp. 22–3.
‘male’). The determiner usually denoted a being. Of determiners denoting supernatural beings, only god- and its cognates are well attested; Old English also innovated engelcund and deofolcund. But although the dataset is small, Old Norse exhibits compounds with the determiners ás-, álfr-, regin- and god-—precisely the range of words for supernatural beings used in kennings for men.

Further parallels can be found in the Old Norse personal-name system, which I outline below in my discussion of Anglo-Saxon names. But the theophoric associations of álfr are particularly emphasised by two Norse dithematic names. As Müller pointed out, the Old Norse deuterotheme -arinn, probably cognate with Old Icelandic arinn (‘hearth’) and Old High German arin (‘altar’), appears only in the names Þórarinn and Álarinn. The fact that álfr occurs here uniquely beside the deity-name Þórr suggests again that álfr had theophoric connotations. Likewise, in Denmark, probably in the eleventh century, the sons of one Eykil were named Alfkil and Þorkil. Hald found that ‘Áskell og Þórkell er de mest udbredte navne på ketill’ (‘Áskell and Þórkell are the most widespread names in -ketill’) in early-medieval Denmark, reflecting a general pattern of alternation between Ás- and Þór in personal names. Once more, we find álfr distinctively associated with a theophoric name. Álfr appears in one other kenning, less useful here: álfrðull (denoting the sun), which occurs occasionally in both skaldic and Eddaic verse. Unfortunately, its precise significance is unclear: since in verse rðull as a simplex also denotes the sun, the kenning álfrðull was no doubt used for metrical convenience as a formulaic variant. But the association of álfr with a word denoting the sun must have been semantically congruent, presumably adding connotations which could be employed to literary effect. However, we must proceed from our knowledge of álfr to the explication of the kenning, rather than the other way, so álfrðull may be excluded from consideration for now (see further the next section).

Likewise stanza 5 of Sigvatr Þorðarson’s skaldic Austrfararavísur, recounting

44 See Sveinbjörn Egilsson, Lexicon poeticum, s.vv. áskunnigr, áskunnr, álfrkunnigr, álfrkunnr, godkynningar, reginkunnigr, reginkunnr; cf. Johan Fritzner, Órdbog over det gamle norske sprog, 4 vols (Oslo: Den Norske Forlagsforening; Universitetsforlaget, 1886–1972), iv s.v. álfrkynr; Hofstetter, ‘-cund’. Regin-compounds occur in two verses and two runic inscriptions; áskunnigr and álfrkunnigr only in Fafnismál stanza 13 (ed. Neckel, Edda, 182), and álfrkunnr only in Snorri’s discussion of it (ed. Faulkes, Gylfaginning, 18); guðkynningar occurs in verse only by emendation (from -konungr in Ynglingatal st. 27). There is also an exception, trollkunnr, in Ynglingatal stanza 3, which, if the first element does not simply denote ‘magic’, might be understood as a parallel to Snorri’s claim of kennings using the names of jotnar in mockery.
46 Lis Jacobsen and Erik Moltke (ed.), Danmarks Runeindskrifter, 3 vols (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1941–2), 1 cols 432–3 [no. 376]; the second element, a contracted form of ketill ‘cauldron, pot’, may, like -arinn, have ritual associations; Kristian Hald, Personnavne i Danmark, 2 vols (Copenhagen: Dansk Historisk Fællesforening, 1971–4), 115.
47 Hald, Personnavne, 1 48–50, at 49.
48 Sveinbjörn Egilsson, Lexicon poeticum, s.v. álfrðull.
A medieval Scandinavian context

the Christian Sigvatr's travels in the pagan lands east of Norway around 1020, describes a heathen ekkja ('widow') refusing Sigvatr board for the night for fear of 'Óðins . . . reiði' ('Óðinn's wrath'), because an alfa blót ('álfr's sacrifice') is taking place in the house.49 This text implies that álfar might be worshipped in late Swedish paganism, and it is of interest, in view of the association of álfar with Freyr elsewhere, that there is strong evidence for the prominence of Freyr in Swedish paganism.50 But it gives no other concrete information. Sigvatr's association of the álfa blót with Óðinn could be mere stereotyping of pagan practice. It has been supposed that the ekkja must have been running the álfablót, but all Sigvatr really tells us is that she answered the door.51 However, the stanza does recall our scattered evidence for sacrifices to disir and may reflect the pairing of álfr and dis suggested by their respective use in kennings for men and women. Useful observations along these lines have been made before, but again lexical evidence has been missed, this time in the compound álfablót.52 The only words for types of supernatural being in Old Norse to be compounded with -blót are álfa- here; disa- in the disablót ('disir's sacrifice') mentioned, for example, in Ynglinga saga chapter 29 and Egils saga Skallagrímssonar chapter 44; the more general (skurð)goða- ('of (carved-)gods-'); and the borrowed djöfla- ('of devils-').53 Once more, the evidence is slight, and somewhat ambiguous, but a connection between álfr and disir here does seem likely.

Skaldic verse suggests the basic associations of álfr and álfar in pre-conversion Scandinavian traditions: with gods and, metaphorically, with men. Álfar, along with these groups, were systematically contrasted with monsters. Taking only the evidence for words denoting males, my inferences so far can be presented as a componential analysis in terms of the two features ±MONSTROUS and ±SUPERNATURAL:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>karlmaðr</th>
<th>áss</th>
<th>álfr</th>
<th>jötunn</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SUPERNATURAL</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MONSTROUS</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Componential analysis of Old Norse words for beings

Needless to say, this analysis is crude; introducing distinctions of gender to it, for example, would produce the familiar problems of binary componential

49 Ed. Finnur Jónsson, Norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning, Bt 221.
50 De Vries, Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte, II 194–203; Turville-Petre, Myth and Religion, 168–70.
51 For example, Jan De Vries, 'Über Sigvats Álfablótstrophen', Acta Philologica Scandinavica, 7 (1932–3), 169–80, at 170–1; Jochens, Images of Women, 46, 48.
52 See Ström, Diser, esp. 12–31; Näsström, Freyja, 127–9; Sundqvist, Freyr’s Offspring, 225–32, and 99–105, 285–9, for a broader contextualisation.
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

analyses. The analysis can also be expressed as a semantic field diagram (Figure 2).

While it would be possible to speak hereafter of álfar as ‘non-monstrous supernatural beings’, I suggest instead ‘otherworldly beings’ as an appropriate alternative term; its mixed connotations of wonder and fear will emerge below to be fitting to members of this category.

This interpretation differs from a predominantly German historiographical tradition linking álfar (somewhat like Snorri) with dværgar, in aligning álfar rather with æsir and disir, and dværgar with the monstrous jötnar. Although the alternative alignment would help to explain medieval German folklore, in which not only zwerger but beings lexically related to elves are smiths and

Figure 2. Semantic field diagram of Old Norse words for beings

54 On which see Lyons, Semantics, esp. 1 322–5.
live under the ground, mine is the one suggested by the kennings, the earliest Norse evidence. The tendency to conflate elben with zwerger in German sources can be explained fairly straightforwardly by demonisation of elben, building on certain of their traditional associations. A further reason for associating dvergar and álfr has been that dvergar are prominently associated with smithing, and that this characteristic is also shared by the eponymous protagonist of the Eddaic Völundarkviða, discussed further below, who is probably an álfr (and perhaps also that the Middle English poet Laȝamon attributed King Arthur’s mailcoat to an ‘aluisc smið’ in a passage which is, however, laden with interpretative difficulties). However, the æsir too are intimately associated with smithing, in stanzas 7 and 61 of Völuspá, as are otherworldly beings elsewhere in medieval Europe, such as the Irish síde and French fées, and none of these are closely associated with dvergar or like beings. It might also be added, since this is not the last time smiths will appear in this book, that, as Wicker has pointed out, the fact that supernaturally empowered figures are smiths does not mean that smiths are necessarily supernaturally empowered. Evidence that smithing was considered magical, or was otherwise associated with supernatural powers, exists for various cultures around the world – a point emphasised most famously by Eliade, and frequently assumed for early-medieval northern Europe. But although the prestige of metalworking skills and their ideological importance in this region is clear, there is precious little evidence that smithing was seen as inherently supernatural.


58 Ed. Neckel, Edda, 2, 14; see also Boberg, Motif-Index; cf. McKinnell, Meeting the Other, 23. Tom Peete Cross, Motif-Index of Early Irish Literature, Indiana University Publications, Folklore Series 7 (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1952), 254 [F.217.3]; Anita Guerreau-Jalabert, Index des motifs narratifs dans les romans Arthuriens français en vers (XIle-XIIIe siècles) / Motif-Index of French Arthurian Verse Romances (XIth–XIIIth Cent.), Publications romanes et françaises, 202 (Geneva: Droz,1992), 64, 67 [F271.3, F343.3].


Lines 47–55 of the eighth-century Irish lorica known as Patrick’s Hymn do explicitly invoke protection ‘fri brichtu ban ḫ gobann ḫ druid’ (against the incantations of women and smiths and druids’); but in our early-medieval sources, magic and weaving are much more strongly associated than magic and smithing, and no-one, as far as I am aware, has claimed that weaving was an inherently magical or supernatural process, or that weavers were necessarily supernaturally empowered by their craft.62

I maintain, then, my binary division between æsir and álfr on the one hand and dvergar and jotnar on the other. This is not to say that there was never any ambiguity about these categories: distinctions between æsir and jotnar, accurate as generalisation, are not always entirely neat, and the same may be true of álfr and dvergar.63 But it is to say that at an ideological level, clear distinctions did exist, to which the vast majority of our early evidence neatly conforms. Basic though it is, the Norse model provides important information about the early meanings of álfr. Moreover, it hints at a major mythological pattern in early-medieval Scandinavian world-views, delineating a fundamental binary opposition between beings which are human or otherworldly on the one hand, and those which are monstrous on the other. These themes are elucidated by reference to the next body of evidence, Eddaic verse.

ÁLFR IN EDDAIC VERSE

Álfr is frequent in the Eddaic corpus, whose usage is largely consistent with the skaldic verse, but which presents mythological traditions more fully. Tempting though it is to try to order the Eddaic poems by date or place of origin, the uncertainties and complexities of transmission in the corpus make this too problematic to be attempted here.64 Nor do I analyse all the occurrences of álfr. This is not because they are not of interest, but because my primary concern here is to develop a reliable and pertinent context for interpreting our Anglo-Saxon evidence. One poem, however, is particularly important to the present study because it not only contains álfr but seems also to have English connections: Völundarkviða. Accordingly, I consider Völundarkviða below, separately from the other texts.


Formulas and Freyr

As commentators have often noted, álfr mainly occurs in Eddaic poetry in the formulaic collocation æsir ok álfr, which we have met already in Old English form in the alliterative pairing of èse and ælfe in Wið fæ ¯rstice. The formula and its variants occur fourteen times, as in Hávamál stanzas 159–60, which are particularly noteworthy because æsir and álfr both seem to be denoted there by tívar (‘gods’):

Pat kann ec ðp fiórtánda,  ef ec scal fyrða liði
telia tiva fyri:
ása oc álfa ec kann allra scil,
får kann ósnotr svá.
Pat kann ec ðp fimtánda, er gól Þióðrørir,
dvergr, fyr Dellingr’s durom:
afl gól hann ásom,  enn álfrum frama,
hyggio Hroptatý.65

I know it, the fourteenth, if I must reckon up tívar in front of a company of people:
I know how to distinguish all the æsir and álfr; few who are not wise can do so.
I know it, the fifteenth, which Þjóðrørir the dvergr chanted in front of Dellingr’s doors:
he chanted strength for the æsir, but success for the álfr,
intelligence for Hroptr-Týr [=Óðinn]

Áss always comes first in the pair except in Skírnismál stanzas 17–18. The collocation is doubtless sometimes merely formulaic, and besides showing that æsir were associated with álfr is not in itself very informative.66 Rather it is contexts like the one just quoted that give us evidence that álfr here denoted something very like áss.

Uncertainty as to the precise significance of álfr in æsir ok álfr does not usually much trouble modern readers, and need not have troubled medieval ones, but it does present a serious inconvenience in Lokasenna. Lokasenna’s prose introduction gives a list of gods, explaining that at Ægir’s feast, ‘Mart var þar ása oc álfa’ (‘Many of the æsir and álfr were there’). Three times in the poem itself, Loki says ása oc álfa, er hér inno ero (‘of the æsir and álfr who are here within’).67 However, despite the presence in Lokasenna of most of

the Scandinavian pantheon, conventional accounts of Norse mythology list no álfar among them, following Snorri in labelling the named gods æsir or vanir. But Lokasenna is a tightly constructed poem and mythologically well informed.\(^{68}\) It would be uncharacteristic, then, for it to repeat a formula which within its mythological frame of reference is partly otiose. Stanza 30 is rhetorically a fine insult:

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{Þegi þú, Freyja! þic kann ec fullgerva,} \\
\text{era þér vamma vant;} \\
\text{ása oc álfa, er hér inni ero,} \\
\text{hvver hefir þinn hór verið.}^{69}
\end{array}
\]

Shut up, Freyja! I know you completely, there is no lack of vices in you; of the æsir and the álfar who are in here, each has been your lover.

But it is rather deflated if we must envisage Freyja being accused of sex with some anonymous and shadowy collection of álfar.

The obvious explanation for the mysterious álfar of Lokasenna is to identify them with Snorri’s vanir.\(^{70}\) This prospect is particularly supported by Grímnismál stanza 5, where Óðinn declares that

\[
\text{Álfheim Frey gáfo í árdaga} \\
tívar at tannfé.^{71}
\]

The gods gave Freyr Álfheimr in ancient days as tooth-money [i.e. a gift at a child’s first tooth].

Freyr is here portrayed, then, as the lord of the world of the álfar. In Snorra Edda and Ynglinga saga, Freyr is, of course, a prince of the vanir rather than the álfar. However, vanr occurs neither in Lokasenna nor Grímnismál, despite the extensive mythological lore in these poems. The simplest interpretation of these texts is to take Snorri’s pairing of æsir and vanir to be a variant of a pairing of æsir and álfar, with vanr and álfr, in at least some times and places, denoting the same mythological construct. This reading would explain why Freyr would rule Álfheimr; why áss and álfr are used in the same way in kennings for men with vanr never being used, alongside the related question of why Snorri would suggest using names of æsir and álfar, but not vanir, in kennings for gods and men; and why Freyja stands accused of having sex with all the æsir and álfar at Ægir’s feast. Indeed, if Freyja, Freyr and Njörðr are to be interpreted in Lokasenna as a kin-group of álfar as they are normally interpreted as a kin-group of vanir, then Loki’s use of the æsir ok álfar formula in indicting Freyja would imply that she had not simply slept with all the æsir, but with her own family – neatly foreshadowing that very accusation, in stanza 32.

---


\(^{69}\) Ed. Neckel, Edda, 102.

\(^{70}\) Cf. De Vries, Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte, 11 203; Holtsmark, Norrøn mytologi, 78; Näsström, Freyja, 61.

\(^{71}\) Ed. Neckel, Edda, 58.
A medieval Scandinavian context

Admittedly, some Eddaic poems do present álfar and vanir as different races. Examples include Sigrdríforumál stanza 18 and Skírnismál stanzas 17–18, but much the most prominent is Alvíssmál, which mentions álfar ten times, and vanir nine, as in stanza 12:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Himinn heitir með mýnnom,} & \quad \text{enn hlýrnir með godom,} \\
\text{kalla vindofni vanir,} & \\
\text{upheim iðtnar,} & \quad \text{álfar fagraræfr,} \\
\text{dvergar driúpan sal.}\end{align*}
\]

It is called himinn (‘sky’) among people, but hlýrnir (lit. ‘warm/mild one’) among the goð; the vanir call it vindofni (‘wind-weaver’), the jótnar upheimi (‘world above’), the álfar fagraræfr (‘beautiful roof’), the dvergar driúpan sal (‘dripping hall’).

The distinction implied in these poems between álfar and vanir I take as a variant tradition, probably exhibiting a tendency to reanalyse synonyms as words denoting different things, perhaps partly through late- or post-pagan syncretic processes which brought together variant mythologies and terminologies without integrating them fully. Alvíssmál in particular is essentially a catalogue of poetic diction structured as a wisdom-contest, in which poetic names for different parts of the cosmos are attributed to menn, god, vanir, jótnar, álfr and dvergar, generally in that order. The position of álfr notwithstanding, this sequence moves broadly from the centre to the periphery of the Scandinavian world-view, which might be taken as evidence for an association of álfr with jótnar and dvergar. Moreover, on ten of their appearances, álfr are juxtaposed with jótnar, which finds a parallel in Beowulf’s half-line ‘eotenas ond ylfe’, which pairs the words’ Old English cognates and could be taken as evidence for traditionality.\(^\text{73}\) I think that these similarities, however, are chimeric. Alvíssmál’s subject matter is primarily poetic diction, not mythography: the exigencies of metre as the poem gathers alliterating diction from limited pools lead to variations in the order or vocabulary in most stanzas, including undoubted duplications (such that æsir and upregin appear in st. 10, menn and halir in 28, and jótnar and Suttungs synir in 34), while its portrayals both of Þórr and of the dvergr Alviss are inconsistent with other sources.\(^\text{74}\) Although the contrast in the diction preferred by álfr and dvergar in the stanza quoted hints appealingly at ethnic characterisations, the words associated with a given group rarely suggest any mythographic programme. The pairing of álfr and jótnar – in addition to the convenience of the words’ alliteration in Eddaic metres – could be based as much on contrast as on similarity.

Alvíssmál brings us to the association of álfr and dvergar discussed above; again, I find little support for the reading in Eddaic verse. I have quoted stanza

---

\(^{72}\) Ed. Neckel, Edda, 72–3, 125–6, 193.

\(^{73}\) See pp. 69–70.

\(^{74}\) Acker, ‘Dwarf-Lore’.
160 of Hávamál, in which the dvergr Pjóðrørir 'afl gól . . . ásom, enn álfr frama' ('sang strength for the æsir, and for the álfr success'), but whatever is afoot here, it associates dvergar with álfr no more than with æsir. More striking to my mind is stanza 143 of Hávamál, which, describing the carvers of runes, recalls the binary division between æsir and álfr on the one hand and jötnar and dvergar on the other:

Óðinn með ásom,  enn fyr álfr Dáinn,
    Dvalinn dvergom fyrir,
    Ásviðr iðtnom fyrir,
    ec reist síalfr sumar.76

Óðinn among the æsir, and for the álfr, Dáinn,
    Dvalinn for the dvergar,
    Ásviðr for the jötnar,
    I myself carved some.

Dáinn is the name of a dvergr in Völuspá 11 and (possibly derivatively) Hyndluljóð stanza 7; meanwhile, the names Vindálfr and Gandálfr also appear together in Völuspá's list of dvergar, in stanzas 12 and 16.77 However, the recurrence of the transparently meaningful name Dáinn ('the dead one') is no cause for surprise – it is, after all, the name of a hart in Grímnismál stanza 33.78 The existence of dvergar with names in -álfr in Völuspá has been taken as evidence that dvergar might be álfr. This is a problematic inference, however. The historical personages called Gandálfr apart, it assumes that the element had a literal meaning when name-elements’ meanings are often metaphorical (cf. the dvergr-names Aurvargr ‘gravel-wolf’, Miðviðr ‘middle board’).79 If names in -álfr mean that their bearers are álfr, then we might conversely expect to find more dvergar with names in -dvergr and jötnar with names in -jötnunn (there are none).

Having consolidated the alignment of álfr and æsir attested in the skaldic verse, one wonders further if álfr might have been used as a cognomen of Freyr, since this could explain the kenning álfrðull: if we may adduce Snorri’s statement in Gylfaginning that Freyr ‘ræðr fyrir regni ok skini sólar’ ('rules over the rain and the shining of the sun'), then perhaps álfr in álfrðull denotes Freyr himself.80 Snorri’s claim gains some slight support from the name of Skírnir, whom Freyr sends to woo Gerðr in Skírnismál: Skírnir’s name is transparently derived from skírr ('clear, bright'), and links Freyr indirectly with this characteristic. Reading álfr in álfrðull as a heiti for Freyr brings an arguably appropriate mythological connotation to the kenning, suggesting ‘the rðull (denoting the sun) of the Álfr (=Freyr)’, and such developments

75 Ed. Neckel, Edda, 41.
76 Ed. Neckel, Edda, 41.
77 Ed. Neckel, Edda, 3, 4, 289.
78 Ed. Neckel, Edda, 64.
80 Ed. Faulkes, Gylfaginning, 24.
of names for supernatural beings into gods’ names are well attested.81 The names Álfarinn and Þórarinn would correspond the better if álf- here is taken to denote an individual god. But little can be made of these hints.

**Volundarkviða**

Volundarkviða demands special attention because it is the only Old Norse poem where a character is clearly identified lexically as one of the álfr: Volundr is described as ‘álfa lióði’ (as I discuss below, probably ‘member of the álfr’ but perhaps ‘ruler of the álfr’, st. 10) and ‘vísí álfa’ (probably ‘wise one of the álfr’ but possibly ‘warrior of the álfr’, st. 13, 32).82 This identification presents the welcome prospect of associating álfr with narrative motifs as well as lexical contexts. Moreover, McKinnell has consolidated the long-standing idea that Volundarkviða contains a number of Old English loan-words, and perhaps influence from Old English poetic metre.83 This fits with the fact that Volundr is otherwise rather poorly attested in Scandinavia, whereas there is a plethora of medieval references to Volundr’s counterparts in the West Germanic-speaking regions, including several from Anglo-Saxon England showing that his story there was similar to Volundarkviða’s.84 Accordingly, the other main Scandinavian account of Volundr, Velents þáttr in Þiðreks saga af Bern, is based mainly on German sources.85 Precisely what Volundarkviða’s English connections were is harder to guess, not least because there are various cultural and perhaps linguistic layers to the text; but connections of some sort are not in doubt, so the poem may offer evidence which is especially relevant to Anglo-Saxon culture.86 Here I summarise the text, outline and develop the evidence for its relevance to the present study, and proceed to a reading of the poem which I will pick up on in my arguments below.

---

81 Cf. *tīwaz ‘god’ > Old Norse Týr (singular) ‘the god Týr’ but tīvar (plural) ‘gods’; Wilfried Stroh, ‘Vom Faunus zum Faun: Theologische Beiträge von Horaz und Ovid’, in Ovid: Werk und Wirkung, Festgabe für Michael von Albrecht, ed. Werner Schubert, Studien zur klas­sischen Philologie, 100 (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1990), pp. 559–612 (also available at <http://www.klassphil.uni-muenchen.de/~stroh/FAUN.htm>, accessed 17 May 2006) for the argument, inverting previous assumptions, that Faunus may owe his name to the fauni. Likewise, Freyja, seen as the pre-eminent, divine dis, is usually assumed to be the dis of the Disarsáir (dis’s hall’) mentioned in Heiðreks saga and Ynglinga saga, respectively ed. Jón Helgason, Heiðreks saga: Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs, Samfund til Udgivelse af Gammel Nordisk Litteratur, 48 (Copenhagen: Samfund til Udgivelse af Gammel Nordisk Litteratur, 1924), 44; Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Heimskringla, i 58; see further Ström, Diser, 32–69; Nässt­röm, Freyja, esp. 133–5.

82 The poem is ed. Neckel, Edda, 116–23.


86 For layering see Dronke, The Poetic Edda, 287–90.
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

Völundarkviða begins with the flight of three women identified in stanza 1 as meyjar, dróstr, alvitir and suðrœnar (‘young women, stately women, foreign beings, southerners’) and in the prose introduction as valkyrjar, to a ‘sævar strand’ (‘lake/sea-shore’) where they take for themselves the three brothers Egill, Slagfiðr and Völundr. However, nine winters later, they leave the brothers; Slagfiðr and Egill go in search of their women, but Völundr remains at home instead, forging baugar (‘arm-rings’) for his woman (stanzas 1–6). This part of the story is not present in Þiðreks saga, though it is an essential part of the Völundarkviða that we have.87 Discovering that Völundr is living alone, Níðuðr, ‘Niára dróttin’ (‘lord of the Njárar’), has him captured in his sleep (stanzas 7–12). Níðuðr takes Völundr’s sword and gives one of the rings which Völundr made for his missing bride to his daughter Böðvildr, and, at his wife’s instigation, he has Völundr’s hamstrings cut, imprisoning him on an island (stanzas 13–19). Völundr takes his revenge on Níðuðr first by enticing his two sons to visit with promises of treasure, killing them, and making jewels of their eyes and teeth (stanzas 20–6); and then by enticing Böðvildr by promising to mend the ring which she was given, getting her drunk, and implicitly having sex with her (stanzas 27–9). The poem culminates in Völundr taking to the air by some means which is not clearly described and telling Níðuðr what he has done (stanzas 30–9), focusing finally on the plight of Böðvildr (stanzas 40–1).

However, the two terms by which Völundr is linked with álfar are obscure. Both are formulaic half-lines, appearing in the following stanzas:

Sat á berfiðli, bauga talði,
alfa liði, eins sacnaði;
hugði hann, hefði Hlóðvés dóttir,
avitr unga, væri hon aprKR komin.
(Stanza 10)

Kallaði nú Níðuðr, Niára dróttinnn:
‘Hvar gaztu, Völundr, viþi álfa,
vára aura í Ulfðolm?’
(Níðuðr cried now, the lord of the Njárar,
‘Where did you get, Völundr, viþi of álfa,
your wealth in Úlfðalar?’
(Stanza 13)

‘Seg þú mér þat, Völundr, viþi álfa:
af heilom hvat varð húnom [MS: sonom] mínom?’

87 However, chapter 23, ed. Bertelsen, Þiðriks saga, i 46, ii 63–5, does contain a narrative like this concerning the birth of Velent’s father, and some transference may have taken place. For the story-type more generally, see Anne Burson, ‘Swan Maidens and Smiths: A Structural Study of Völundarkviða’, Scandinavian Studies, 55 (1983), 1–19, at 3–5.
A medieval Scandinavian context

‘Tell it to me, Völundr, visi of álfr: what came of my healthy cubs?’
(Stanza 32)

The phrase visi álfr occurs only in Níðuðr’s speeches, one preceding and one following Völundr’s vengeance. The repetition is significant, since in the first instance it helps to express Níðuðr’s gloating, emphasising that he has captured an otherworldly being, but in the second, it emphasises his humbling by that being’s revenge.88 The phrase could equally be understood as ‘leader of the álfr’ or ‘wise one of the álfr’, and there is little to choose between these on internal evidence.89 If the formula is related to the repeated alliteration of Wēland with wīs our Old English translation of the tenth Metre of Boethius’s De consolatione philosophiae and in chapter 19 of the associated prose Consolation of Philosophy, both times in an addition to Boethius’s text, then visi would be ‘wise one’ (this is unambiguous only in the prose, but surely holds also for the verse).90 But the alliteration of these words was so obvious a device, even in prose, that the two formulae are likely to be independent.91

By contrast, the ljóði of ‘álfa lióði’ is unique, with no certain meaning.92 Ljóði must be related to the rare and poetic ljóðr (‘a people’) and, amongst other cognates, the common Old English lēod (when masculine, ‘man, warrior’; when feminine, ‘people’). The usual assumption is that ljóði is a native Norse noun, guessed to mean ‘leader’, in which case Völundr, ‘leader of álfr’, need not have been an álfr himself. However, borrowing from Old English is also possible. This is tempting both in view of Volundarkviða’s other English connections and Dronke’s observation that álfa ljóði is most closely paralleled in poetry surviving in the Germanic languages by the Old English poetic formula genitive plural ethnonym + lēod, as in Ebrea lēod, Gēata lēod and Secgena lēod (‘male member of the Hebrews/Geats/Secgan’).93 Dronke was concerned that ‘elves’ are not ‘associated with the term “people” (ljóðr, lēod) in ON or OE’, but I demonstrate otherwise for Old English in the next chapter, emphasising the validity of the comparison.94 That Old English lēod could be borrowed as ljóði is shown by the borrowing of Old English hrēoðan as Old Norse hrjóða (showing eo–jó); hired, hird as hirdr (showing d–d); and, amongst others, belli

89 See Klaus von See et al., Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda (Heidelberg: Winter, 1997–), ii 182–3, where the former interpretation is preferred.
91 My interpretation here is diametrically opposite to McKinnell’s (‘The Context’, 3): McKinnell considered that Alfred’s wīsan is ambiguous between Old English wīs (‘wise’) and wīsa (‘leader’), whereas it is not; but whereas McKinnell thought the parallel significant, I do not.
92 See von See et al., Kommentar, ii 170–11; Dronke, The Poetic Edda, 310–11.
94 Poetic Edda, 311.
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

(girdle’ < belt), kastali (‘castle’ < castel), munki (‘monk’ < munuc, showing weak masculine for strong). Álfa ljóði, then, could be Norse in origin, but it is more likely a sign of the English influence, lexical and poetic, on Völundarkviða. Either way, however, the balance of probability suggests that álfa ljóði indicates that Völundr is one of the álfar.

Völundr’s association with álfar has caused some discomfort among critics who see him as a human hero, particularly since Völundarkviða’s prose introduction states him and his brothers to be ‘synir Finnakonungs’ (‘sons of the king of the Finns’). I take this problem as the first of various pieces of evidence to be considered here that our categorial distinction between supernatural beings and ethnic others is anachronistic; we might think more usefully in terms of ‘in-groups’ and ‘out-groups’. In its manuscripts, Völundarkviða unarguably keeps mythological company, as does the depiction of Völundr on the Viking-age Swedish picture-stone Ardre VIII. Individuals from the out-group are liable to be associated with the supernatural; supernatural beings are liable to be associated with out-groups. As I discuss further below, in some respects the closest parallel to Völundr in our Scandinavian mythological material is the áss Óðinn.

The relevance of Völundarkviða to contextualising Anglo-Saxon ælfe, then, is clear. Völundarkviða is not a simple text, however. In particular, in the poem’s opening stanzas, our perspective is with Völundr as he faces a group of otherworldly females, but after the dissolution of Völundr’s own in-group, the audience’s perspective is partially re-oriented to that of the Njárar, Bjǫvvíldr’s people. This shift is of course part of what makes the poem powerful, but it emphasises that it has several narrative and thematic layers, which must be assessed with suitable subtlety. My analysis focuses on Völundr’s own otherworldly encounter with the meyjar, and his revenge upon Níðuðr.

Everything that happens in Völundarkviða can arguably be traced back to the arrival, in its opening stanzas, of three meyjar:

95 Jan de Vries, Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch (Leiden: Brill, 1961), s.vv. This argument is similar to McKinnell’s, but McKinnell, ‘The Context’, 3, and ‘Eddic Poetry in Anglo-Scandinavian Northern England’, in Vikings and the Danelaw: Select Papers from the Proceedings of the Thirteenth Viking Congress, Nottingham and York, 21–30 August 1997, ed. James Graham-Campbell, Richard Hall, Judith Jesch and David N. Parsons (Oxford: Oxbow, 2001), pp. 327–44, at p. 331, posited the etymon as Old English lēoda, putatively a weak derivative of lēod attested only in the plural, defined by Bosworth and Toller as ‘a man, one of a people or country’ (Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, s.v.; cf. T. Northcote Toller, An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary: Supplement (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921), s.v.; De Vries, ibid, s.v. ljóði). However, a weak etymon for ljóði is not required. Moreover, the lēoden forms should be taken simply as weak variants of lēod: morphologically, lēod was complex, having both masculine forms with long-stemmed masculine i-stem inflections (which were producing weak variants in other words already in Old English: see pp. 87–8) and feminine forms with ẹ-stem inflections, themselves liable to transferral to the weak declension (especially in Northumbrian with its loss of the final nasals which helped to distinguish weak inflections: see A. Campbell, Old English Grammar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), §§379 n. 3, 472, 587, 6107 n. 3, 617.


A medieval Scandinavian context

Maidens flew from the south, through Myrkviðr, young alvitur, to follow/determine fate; on the shore of the sea/lake they paused to rest, southern ladies, they spun expensive linen.

One of them took Egill, to embrace/protect him, the fair maiden of men, to her bright breast; the second was Svanhvít (Swan-white), she cast off her swan-cloak; and the third, their sister, guarded the white neck of Vǫlundr.

Hines has argued that in Norse mythological literature,

the power of the female, to captivate and outwit the male as well as in her special craft – spinning and weaving yarn and fate – is taken as one of the givens of the dramatic scene: the orlog seggia, ‘declaring of fate’, that the meyiar margs vitandi, ‘maidens knowing about many things’, lay down for men.

This certainly applies well to Vǫlundarkviða, while it is also worth noting that the association of women with shaping the future has Anglo-Saxon comparisons. This female power to determine Vǫlundr’s actions is symbolised by a ring: Vǫlundr makes it for his mær, arguably to bring her home; Níðuðr takes it, its absence making Vǫlundr imagine her to have returned, which leads to Vǫlundr being captured and hamstrung; Níðuðr gives it to Bǫðvildr, whose desire to have it mended leads her into Vǫlundr’s power and to the culmination of Vǫlundr’s revenge. The first two stanzas, then, provide the necessary narrative conditions for the story as Vǫlundarkviða tells it; and they situate the beginnings of events with seductive otherworldly females. As McKinnell commented, ‘it seems clear that the poet stresses the role of women in the story largely because his attitude to them is consistently suspicious; he portrays them as selfish [and] insincere’.

Vǫlundarkviða’s opening has received curiously little attention in the study of medieval Scandinavian supernatural females, but it is particularly interesting in the present context in view of my suggestion above that álfar can in some ways be taken as male counterparts to the disir, while I argue below, on the

98 Ed. Neckel, Edda, 117.
basis of Wið færstice, for a similar pairing in Anglo-Saxon culture. Studies of Völundarkviða have instead emphasised comparison with folk-tales of swan-maidens, while McKinnell pointed to parallels with the Old French fées. These comparisons are helpful, but should not be taken to exclude Völundarkviða’s meyjar from mainstream traditions of Norse supernatural females: they are examples of a continuum of otherworldly females whom, as I have discussed above, we might generally label disir. In particular, Völundarkviða’s meyjar are similar to the three canonically mythological ‘meyjar, margis vitandi’ (‘maidens, knowing much’) coming from a sær (‘large body of water’) and shaping the fate of men in Völuspá stanza 20. They take Völundr and his brothers into their protection, with the verbs verja (‘cover, clothe, embrace’) and varða (‘guard, protect’), a motif well paralleled by the dis Sigrún in Helgakviða Hundingsbana I, who, like Völundarkviða’s meyjar, is also denoted with the unusual element -vitr (in hjálmvitr, st. 54; cf. Sigrdrífumál).

That Völundarkviða’s meyjar, following the pattern identified by Hines, also ‘captivate and outwit the male’ is also plausible. The language of action and protection which is applied to the maidens’ seduction of the brothers conversely implies the brothers’ disempowerment. This reading may elucidate a long-standing crux: why Völundr’s neck, as the mær puts her protective arms about it, is described as hvítr, when whiteness and brightness are almost invariably associated in Eddaic poetry with female rather than male beauty. Motz saw the adjective to associate Völundr with the swan-maidens, which it does, but her point does not detract from its connotations of femininity. McKinnell argued that ‘fair skin is probably an indication of noble birth here’, on the basis of the description of the noble woman Móðir (‘Mother’) in stanza 29 of Rígsþula, declaring her

brún biartari, brióst lióšara,
ðáls hvitari, hreinni miólo.

103 Chapter 6. Völundarkviða is, for example, omitted from the mythological surveys of De Vries (Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte) and Turville-Petre (Myth and Religion), and the specialist studies of Ström (Diser) and Jochens (Images of Women); it was summarily dismissed by Ritik Kroesen, ‘The Valkyries in the Heroic Literature of the North’, Skáldskaparmál, 4 (1969), 129–61 (at 137); and excluded by McKinnell, Meeting the Other, 5–6, on the grounds that it ‘is almost certainly of non-Scandinavian origin’. Dronke, The Poetic Edda, 301–2, at 301 stated likewise that ‘it is important to note that the swan maidens of Vkv are not valkyries, although the prose prologue calls them so with great confidence’, but her reading is ill-justified; cf. the circular argumentation in her note to stanza 15, lines 5–8 (p. 313).


106 To offer only a few examples, Völundarkviða’s meyjar are ljóss (‘light, bright’), as are women in Hávamál 92 and Sigurðarkviða in skamma 53; in Hávamál, Öðinn describes his desire for ‘Billingr’s sun-white maid’ (st. 97), while bór’s daughter is in Alvissmál called ‘miallhvíta man’ (the snow-white maid’; st. 7); Helgakviða Hundingsbana II calls Sigrún ‘sóljþótt’ (‘sun-bright’; st. 45) and ‘hvít’ (‘white’; st. 48), the latter word being used also of Erna in Rigspula (st. 39) and Svanhildr in Sigurðarkviða in skamma (st. 55).


brow brighter, breast lighter, 
neck whiter than new-fallen snow.

But this associates Móðir’s white neck inextricably with feminine beauty. Some have argued that associations of álfar and ælfe with beauty explain Völundr’s white neck, or that the whiteness is an echo of álf’s etymological association with whiteness. The idea that Völundr’s masculinity is indeed compromised by hvítr is further consolidated by the only other major exception to the rule that only women are hvítr in Eddaic poetry: Heimdallr. Þrymskviða calls Heimdallr ‘hvitastr ása’ (‘whitest of æsir’; st. 15); the same stanza also identifies him as one of the vanir, which suggests a further, albeit tantalising, connection between vanir and álfr.

Then Heimdallr, the hvítastr of the æsir – he knew well what was to come, like the other vanir – said this: ‘Then let’s dress Þórr in a bridal veil, let him wear the great necklace of the Brísingar!’

Here, Heimdallr proposes that Þórr wear women’s clothing to disguise himself as Freyja. As Þórr swiftly points out, doing so would prompt the accusation that he is argr (stanza 17), so it is surely appropriate that the suggestion comes from the hvítastr ása, arguably ‘the most feminine of the æsir’. This reading is admittedly hard to parallel, but this may be because in Christian culture hvítr took on important religious connotations of moral purity, submerging an older usage.

We may plausibly explain Völundr’s description as hvítr as an allusion to his disempowerment at the hands of seductive women. It is no surprise, then, that he is absent from the action when his brothers discover the departure of the swan-maidens, and that unlike them he does not set off in search of his partner but remains at home. Although we have no Old
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

English text like Völundarkviða, the theme of Völundr’s disempowerment and arguably feminine characteristics, and his contrast with the powerful and proactive meyjar, will be of interest when we come to examine the Anglo-Saxon evidence for ælfe’s associations with feminine beauty, magic, and otherworldly females in chapter 5.

We may turn now to the perspective of Bóðvildr and the group to which she belongs. As Grimstad observed, Völundr’s revenge against Níðuðr is reminiscent of Óðinn’s in Grímnismál – a comparison which fits neatly with my argument here for the similarity of alf to æsir.115 In Grímnismál, Óðinn visits, incognito, the hall of the human king Geirrœðr, testing his hospitality. Geirrœðr tortures Óðinn between two fires. Óðinn is helped by Geirrœðr’s son Agnarr, whom he rewards with mythological lore; he then reveals his identity and escapes, indirectly causing Geirrœðr’s death as he does so.116 Like Völundr, Óðinn punishes a bad deed by taking revenge and escaping – Óðinn also rewarding a good deed – effectively acting as an arbiter of appropriate behaviour. According to Grímnismál’s prose epilogue, Óðinn simply disappears, but Völundr’s escape by flight in bird-form is reminiscent of Óðinn’s escapes in eagle-form in prose texts.117 As I argue below, these texts provide a powerful model for understanding both alf and ælfe.

In the course of avenging socially unacceptable behaviour, Völundr shows himself to pose a sexual threat to a young woman of the in-group. This is consistent with the other narratives of otherworldly beings considered below, and with hints in the English traditions concerning the associations of ælfe-elves. Bóðvildr’s misfortune here, and her brothers’, relates not only to their father’s transgression, but also to their own decision to leave the safety of their immediate community to visit Völundr on the island where he has been imprisoned: there may, then, be some encoding of Völundr’s threat in space. However, Bóðvildr’s case also allows us to infer more positive aspects in Völundr’s revenge. For Bóðvildr, sex with Völundr leads in other versions of the story to the birth of a hero, Vitki in Þiðreks saga and Widia in English tradition.118 In another layer of meaning, then, shame is counterbalanced with pride, in a pattern well paralleled by Classical accounts of gods seducing mortal maidens.119 It conceivably also provided a discourse through which unsanctioned pregnancy could be handled by a community.

All the same, Völundr’s experience in the second part of Völundarkviða once more emphasises his disempowerment, stemming ultimately from

A medieval Scandinavian context

his seduction by the otherworldly mær. Such ambiguous characteristics in mythological heroes have troubled previous commentators, who have sometimes sought interpretative paths round them, but I think they demand to be faced and interpreted. Völundr is captured in his sleep, he is hamstrung by a queen, and his sword is stolen. His revenge is commensurate with his disempowerment, involving the murder of boys and the seduction/rape of a girl; his escape is effected by transformation, not, as in stories of Øinn, to an eagle, but, to judge by his webbed feet (fitjar, stanza 29), to some sort of waterfowl, more than anything like the mær who first seduced him. While the seductive powers of women are arguably construed as threats to men in this poem, criticism falls also upon the men in each case for surrendering their independence of mind. These points suggest strongly that male supernatural beings might be associated with characteristics and activities which were normally deemed improper to members of the in-group, and will be important in establishing the relationship of ælfe to Anglo-Saxon gendering.

INTERPRETATIONS

We can now see álf to have denoted something conceptually similar to áss, and both asir and álfar to have been metaphorically associated with humans. Grímnismál declares that Freyr was given Álfheimr to rule, consolidating the circumstantial evidence that in a number of Eddaic poems the álfar relate to the asir as the vanir do in Snorri’s mythography, and some partial synonymy between álf and van seems likely. The group asir–álfar–menn was in turn systematically opposed to another group, at least sometimes anthropomorphic, which I have termed monstrous, including beings denoted by the partial synonyms jotunn, dvergr and þurs. Völundarkviða, whose story seems certainly to be about one of the álfar, also suggests narrative motifs associated with álfar: intervention in the in-group’s affairs to punish transgressions of proper behaviour; posing sexual threats; and compromised masculinity. To conclude this analysis of Norse evidence, I argue that my more basic observations concerning álf’s semantics correlate with wider (albeit later) evidence for early-medieval Norse-speakers’ cosmologies, and that we can correlate the semantics of key terms in Old Norse mythologies, including álf, with wider world-views. Essentially, the semantic field diagram presented above (Figure 2) can also be taken as a schematic map of early-medieval Norse-speakers’ cosmologies. This correlation provides support for taking similar approaches to Old English semantic evidence.

I have argued from skaldic evidence in particular that álfar, asir and menn were semantically aligned with one another in contradistinction to monsters. This binary opposition corresponds well with a horizontal cosmology which scholars have deduced from our sources. To quote Hastrup,

121 De Vries, Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte, ii 372–92; A. Ya. Gurevich, ‘Time and Space in the
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

horizontally, the cosmos was divided into Miðgarðr and Útgarðr. Miðgarðr was the central space, as implied by the name (‘middle-enclosure’), inhabited by men (and gods), while Útgarðr was found ‘outside the fence’, beyond the borders of Miðgarðr, and inhabited by giants and non-humans. We note here the close parallel to the conceptualization of the farmstead (innangarðs [literally ‘within the enclosure’]) and the surrounding uncontrolled space (útangarðs [literally ‘outside the enclosure’]). According to the myths of creation, this initial division of cosmos into two separate spaces was brought about by the gods (æsir), who subsequently built their own abode, Ásgarðr, somewhere inside Miðgarðr. There was no opposition between heaven and earth in this model, and topologically Ásgarðr was inseparable from Miðgarðr. Consequently there was no absolute distinction between men and gods. In opposition to the men and the (controlled) gods stood the uncontrolled, often hostile, jötnar (‘giants’) and other kinds of supernatural beings.122

Inferring this binary system involves a number of simplifications. In particular, Kuhn warned that the terms Miðgarðr, Ásgarðr and Útgarðr may be comparatively late innovations in Norse; the proper noun Útgarðr is attested only once, in Gylfaginning, its systematic opposition with Miðgarðr being a scholarly construct.123 However, our earliest Norse evidence does suggest a similar division into Mannheimar, Godheimar and Jötunheimar (‘Human-, Goð- and Jõtunn-world(s)’), which, if we can assume that Goðheimar was within Mannheimar, is consistent with the system which Hastrup posited.124 These three heimar correlate neatly with the three groups of beings which I have identified on semantic grounds, æsir and álfar, menn, and monsters. Although this kind of simple, binary cosmological paradigm is internationally widespread, it is by no means universal, differing – to give an important counterpoint – from the world-views implied by biblical Judaic writings.125 The boundaries between the worlds were not rigid, varying according to contexts social (for example subsistence farming vs trading), temporal (for example day vs night), literary (for example, historia vs fabula), and so forth. While the model might be applied on a macrocosmic (or mythological) scale, it equally had a microcosmic dimension, with the farm a miðgarðr surrounded


123 Hastrup, Culture and History, 147.
by a chaotic outer world.\textsuperscript{126}

Within this broad binary paradigm, gods and monsters related to men in two main ways. As recent commentators have emphasised, mythological narratives of relationships between Æsir and Jötnar -- which involve violence but also intermarriage -- probably reflected, or provided models for, relations between Norse-speaking in-groups and their ethnically different neighbours, principally the Finnr (‘Sámi’).\textsuperscript{127} Here, then, gods and monsters exist in parallel to in-groups and out-groups. But in another kind of relationship, gods and monsters were corporeal beings walking in men’s world, whom men might in theory encounter. This is a more useful model for interpreting the Anglo-Saxon evidence for ælfe, since the most prominent material relates to their propensity to inflict illness on members of the in-group. Scandinavian gods and monsters were conceptually similar to, and might even be identified with, ethnic others, while members of the human in-group could, actually or metaphorically, become monstrous, particularly if they remained in contact with the in-group after the severances of outlawry or death.\textsuperscript{128} That gods and


men were not essentially different is likewise well established for medieval Ireland, with Classical parallels.\textsuperscript{129} This is the situation in \textit{Völundarkviða} and the canonically mythological \textit{Grímnismál}, as well as various later sources, among them the \textit{Sögubrot af fornkonungum}, from around 1300, which says that ‘er kunikt i ollum fornum frassognvm um þat folk, er Alfar hetv, at þat var miklu fríðara en engi onnur mankind a Norðrlondum’ (‘it is made known in all the old histories of the people which is called the \textit{Alfar}, that it was much more beautiful/handsome than any other human race in the North-lands’).\textsuperscript{130}

Admittedly, Barrett and Keil have shown that recalling and retelling narratives leads people to anthropomorphise incorporeal, omnipresent gods in ways which contradict their stated theological ideas, and our source material is predominantly narratives.\textsuperscript{131} On the other hand, they also argued that the anthropomorphic God who emerges from recall and retelling better reflects people’s intuitive, day-to-day conception. It is often assumed that Christian Scandinavians’ depictions of the pagan gods as powerful humans with magical powers, as in the prologue to \textit{Snrorra Edda} or the first book of Saxo’s \textit{Gesta Danorum}, necessarily shows Christian euhemerisation of pagan divinities which had implicitly been more similar to the Christian God.\textsuperscript{132} But I suspect


that the ‘euhemerisations’ in our Norse sources involved no paradigm shift from traditional culture. Indeed, the euhemerised gods of Snorri Sturluson and the Old English translation of Boethius’s *De consolatione philosophiae*, unlike those of other early-medieval euhemerists, deliberately use their magical powers to establish divine reputations, rather than simply being apotheosised after their deaths, perhaps suggesting that Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians altered their inherited conceptions of pagan gods to a minimal extent.  

A more subtle supplement to the binary model is required to interpret how men of the in-group related to gods and to monsters. A convincing one is suggested by the relationships between the Hellenic citizens of the city-states, wild beings such as satyrs and nymphs (Σάτυροι, Νύμφαι), and barbarians and monsters such as the centaurs or cyclopes (Κένταυροι, Κύκλωπες), in ancient Hellenic world-views. As Bartra put it, the mythology implies the existence of a mythological space inhabited by wild men that are clearly distinguishable from barbarians. In contrast with barbarians, who constituted a threat to society in general and to Greek society as a whole, the wild man represented a threat to the individual. White clearly demonstrates that, conventionally, barbarian lands were geographically remote, and the moment of their incursion upon the frontiers of the Greek world would signal an apocalypse: the appearance of hordes of barbarians implied the fracturing of the foundation of the world and the death of an epoch. In contrast the wild man is omnipresent, inhabiting the immediate confines of the community. He is found in the neighbouring forests, mountains and islands.

This is undeniably a grand tidying up of the evidence; a full investigation would develop Buxton’s self-consciously pluralistic approaches to Hellenic mythological landscapes. But the model is convincing and ethnographically paralleled. In it, the role of the barbarians is identical to that of the * jotnar in Old Norse material concerning the Ragnarök, recalling Old Norse-speakers’ binary division between humans and monsters and their alignment of monsters with ethnic others. The wild men, however, fall between Hellenic citizens and barbarians, affording a neat parallel for the * álfr. Like the wild men and in contradistinction to monsters, Oðinn in *Grímnismál* and *Völundarkviða* are not threats to humanity itself, but to individual people.

---


Whereas the threat of the monsters is chaotic and final, the threats posed by Óðinn and Völundr serve to punish transgressions of acceptable behaviour, and to warn those who hear of them against similar transgressions.

Ethnic others in early-medieval Scandinavian world-views need not only have been identified with monsters. The Írar (‘Irish’) are associated in the sagas with positive supernatural powers and worlds. Both Finnar and Írar may threaten members of the in-group, but, at least at times, in ordered threats to transgressing individuals. Non-monstrous but supernaturally empowered ethnic others, gods, wild men and so forth can be seen in some ways as one conceptual group, conveniently labelled otherworldly. Lindow considered that readings of this sort are ‘incompatible’ with the association of jotnar with the Finnar/Sámi, but I think rather that we have variation. It might be attributed to chronological, social or regional factors, but also to the slippery nature of the concepts involved. As Cohen argued, ‘representing an anterior culture as monstrous justifies its displacement or extermination by rendering the act heroic’, and in contexts of conflict, one might expect the monstrous potentialities of Finnar to gain prominence. The same point stands, mutatis mutandis, for pagan gods faced with Christianisation. On the other hand, social contact in a stable, if uneasy, co-existence might promote instead the otherworldly potentialities of neighbouring peoples. We should, then, view our model as a cline between two poles, the extremes marked by men of the human in-group on the one hand and monstrous beings on the other:

- MONSTROUS
  human in-group
  gods etc.
  ethnic others
  jotnar etc.

+ MONSTROUS

Figure 3. Monstrosity in medieval Scandinavia

This cline puts ethnic others in a suitably ambiguous position, from which they might be associated either with gods and the like or with monsters.

This handling of the Norse evidence does not incorporate all of the complicating detail which could be adduced, such as vertical cosmological elements, other words for supernatural beings in Norse, or the place of gender. I advance these models, therefore, only tentatively as a reconstruction of world views in any given variety of medieval Scandinavian culture. However, I do think that they suggest an acceptable range of likelihoods for the ways in which...

---


140 Lindow, ‘Cultures in Contact’, 103 n. 2.

A medieval Scandinavian context

concepts of álfar related to those of æsir, menn and jotnar, and to discourses of group identity. They also show how semantic evidence for the meanings of these words indeed reflects Scandinavian world-views as attested by other kinds of evidence, providing a framework for exploring the earliest Old English evidence for the meanings of ælf and ælfē.
The Earliest Anglo-Saxon Evidence

By investigating the Norse evidence for álfr, it has been possible to reconstruct some of álfr's earliest meanings and relationships with the main semantic fields which it bordered or overlapped. We may turn now to álfr's Old English cognate. Reconstructing pre-conversion meanings of ælf is difficult, and attempts hitherto have been either too tentative or too speculative to be useful. But ælf had a prominent place in the Old English system of dithematic personal names, and was also involved in the Old English morphological reorganisation of etymological long-stemmed masculine i-stems around the seventh century. These sources provide evidence correlating almost exactly with the early Scandinavian evidence for the meanings of álfr, the correlation in turn suggesting that we may be able to adduce other conclusions from the Norse material to early Anglo-Saxon world-views. Thus, this chapter not only provides a basic picture of the early meanings of ælf against which to seek evidence for subsequent continuity and change, but considers a key aspect of the place of ælfe in Anglo-Saxon culture. Those desiring more contextualisation of the linguistic issues discussed here will find guidance in Appendix 1 below.

I contextualise my findings with reference to Beowulf. Beowulf explicitly situates ælfe in a vividly realised world of men and monsters. The poem provides remarkable insights into how supernatural beings could feature in Anglo-Saxon constructions of the world, in large part consolidating the arguments which I make on the basis of early Old English and Norse evidence. However, the early evidence for the meanings of ælf also makes it possible to argue that Beowulf was to some extent innovative: specifically, its alignment of ælfe with monsters and demons can be seen to reflect demonisation following Christianisation in Anglo-Saxon culture.

ETYMOLOGY

Both cognate and internal Old English evidence demands a masculine Common Germanic nominative singular */ałβi-z/ (alongside a variant */ałβa-z/) denoting some kind of supernatural being (see Appendix 1). Grimm observed that its obvious Indo-European cognates, deriving from a base */ałβa-/, are connected semantically by whiteness, and it must originally have meant ‘white one’. Close relatives are Latin albus (‘(matt) white’); Old Irish ailbhín (‘flock’);

1 Teutonic Mythology, ii 444. An alternative etymology derives ælf from a variant of Indo-European
The earliest Anglo-Saxon evidence

Albanian elb (‘barley’); and Germanic words for ‘swan’ such as Old English ylftu.\(^2\) However, the etymology is not in itself very revealing: innumerable explanations could be hypothesised for the association of supernatural beings with whiteness. Grimm took the whiteness to imply positive moral connotations and noted the congruence with Snorri Sturluson’s ljósálfar, and although I have concluded that the ljósálfar were influenced by angels, we might equally invoke álfroðull, denoting the sun, as evidence for an ancient association of álfr with light.\(^3\) However, the closer relatives of *alβiz, while suggesting whiteness, do not suggest lucidity. I have discussed above how the only adult males in the Poetic Edda to be described by the usual Old Norse word for ‘white’, hvítr, are the álfr Völundr and the vanr Heimdallr – and that this description seems to connote a lack of masculinity, a characteristic which is hinted at in a range of our Old English evidence for elf. At any rate, the Indo-European etymology of elf must be explained by our medieval data, and not vice versa.

PERSONAL NAMES

We do have some early evidence for the meanings of elf, however, in names. Some names in the early Germanic languages were monothematic – having only one element – and these are often obscure and problematic, and of little use here.\(^4\) However, the early Germanic languages had a rich tradition of

\(^*\)lbhu, presumably with an a-colouring laryngeal, an etymon supposedly evidenced by Sanskrit r̥bhu (‘clever, skilful, inventive, prudent’, but also, as N. D. Kazanas, ‘Indo-European Deities and the Rgveda’, Journal of Indo-European Studies, 29 (2001), 257–93, has discussed at p. 274, the name of a deity and by extension a class of deities), since Sanskrit r̥ can derive not only from Indo-European *ṛ/ṛ, but also Indo-European *ṝ/. Bizarrely, this is the only etymology for elf in the OED (s.v. elf), which perhaps helps to explain the occasional support still voiced for the idea (for example, Kazanas, *ibid*, 276; Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, 261–2). But, as Peters, ‘OE álf’ , 252–3, showed, r̥bhu affords slender evidence for a possible etymon of elf; it is admittedly short of likely cognates (see Manfred Mayrhofer, *Kurzgefaßtes etymologisches Wörterbuch des Althochdeutschen / A Concise Etymological Sanskrit Dictionary*, 4 vols (Heidelberg: Winter, 1956–80), s.v. r̥bhu), but elf will not solve this problem (cf. Albert L. Lloyd and Otto Springer, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Althochdeutschen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988–), s.v. alb). Lise Menn, ‘Elvish Loanwords in Indo-European: Cultural Implications’, in *An Introduction to Elvish*, ed. Jim Allen (Hayes: Bran’s Head Books, 1978), pp. 143–51, has suggested at p. 143 that the root *alβi* is itself a loan from Sindarin alph (‘swan’). This raises some intriguing possibilities. However, her argument that Old English ylftu preserves the original meaning is hard to sustain in view of the full range of Indo-European evidence and ylftu’s obviously secondary character: for its suffix see Joseph B. Voyles, *Early Germanic Grammar: Pre-, Proto-, and Post-Germanic Languages* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1992), §§7.2.8, 7.2.32.


\(^3\) Teutonic Mythology, II 444.

Elves in Anglo-Saxon England
dithematic personal names, formed according to a shared naming-system comprising name-elements drawn from the common lexicon.5 Since its reflexes occur in names throughout the Germanic languages, we may number *alβiz among these, and such names may afford evidence for the semantics of ælf.6 The presence of the word in Germanic names is paralleled by the presence of its cognate albio- in Celtic ones (for example, Albieò) and might reflect earlier Indo-European usage or be based on directly Celtic (as with the borrowing of Celtic *rīks (‘ruler’) as both a common noun and a name element).7 Regardless of its ultimate origin, however, it is possible to analyse the presence of *alβiz in the Germanic naming system as a synchronically significant element.

Germanic dithematic name-formation was controlled in three main ways: dynastic relations might be expressed through repetition or alliteration of name-elements between generations; some elements usually only occurred finally (as generics), while others, including *alβi-, usually only occurred initially (as modifiers); and, according to conventional wisdom, there was a strong preference for second elements whose grammatical gender corresponded with the sex of the name-bearer.8 This naming-system was maintained in Old English. In day-to-day usage, of course, names doubtless primarily denoted their bearers rather than being lexically meaningful compounds, and Germanic names probably always included elements which were not transparently meaningful, either because they had been borrowed from other languages or because linguistic changes had rendered once-transparent elements obscure.9 It is also clear that by the end of the Old English period, dithematic names were generally of fixed form and, undergoing sound-changes and reductions not found widely elsewhere in the lexicon, had often

6 See William George Searle, Onomasticon Anglo-Saxonicum: A List of Anglo-Saxon Proper Names from the Time of Beda to that of King John (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1897), 6–30 (summarised by Jente, Mythologischen Ausdrücke, 170–1); Ernst Förstemann, Altdeutsches Namenbuch, rev. edn, 2 vols (Bonn: [n. pub.], 1900–16), i s.v. alfi, supplemented by Henning Kaufmann, Altdutsche Personennamen Ergänzungsband (Munich: Fink, 1968), s.v.; Lind, Norsk-isländska dopnamn, cols 11–14, 16; Norsk-isländska dopnamn och fingerade namn från medeltiden: supplementband (Oslo: Dybwad, 1931), cols 1, 18.
7 For *rīks see Green, Language and History, 150–1.
The earliest Anglo-Saxon evidence

become opaque as lexically meaningful compounds. 10 But for most of the Old English period, the vast majority of dithematic names were evidently lexically transparent and potentially lexically meaningful – as a number of puns and literal translations into Latin attest. 11

The potentially complex relationship between name-elements and their lexical counterparts certainly encourages caution in using personal names to reconstruct ælf's lexical meanings. Thus it is considered unlikely that patterns in the pairings of elements in Old English names reflect the elements' lexical meanings. 12 This assumption is not unassailable: although, for example, the precise interpretation of the name has provoked some scepticism, the interpretation of the name Gūthlāc as ‘belli munus’ (‘gift of battle’) by Saint Guthlac’s Anglo-Saxon hagiographer Felix demonstrates a syntagmatic understanding of a dithematic personal name; I have discussed the distinctive syntagmatic relationship of -arinn (‘altar’) with Álf- and þór- in Old Norse names above. 13 But resolving the difficulties of this approach is far beyond my current scope. Likewise, it is possibly of interest that elements such as ælf and òs, like for example æðel (‘noble’), occur only as modifiers, and never as generics: taking names as lexically meaningful compounds, this implies that a name-bearer might be like an ælf, but never be an ælf him- or herself. Meanwhile, certain name-elements were associated with certain degrees of social status, which in turn might in theory have some connection with their semantics. That ælf appeared in the names of kings and nobles is certain; how far down the social scale the element was used, or how widely among different aristocratic groups, is harder to ascertain. The prospects for studying such correlations systematically have


Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

now been improved inestimably by the initial publication of the Prospopography of Anglo-Saxon England. But to examine them in sufficient detail to contribute to our understanding of ælf would be an undertaking for another book.

Even accepting these constraints, however, it is possible plausibly to derive some semantic information from Anglo-Saxon personal names. The range of elements available for Anglo-Saxon dithematic name-formation was limited, and it is generally assumed that these name-elements lexically denoted things or attributes with positive cultural associations. It is agreed, therefore, that we are to at least some extent dealing with a semantically defined system, and its inclusion of ælf can be analysed from this perspective. The fact that ælf is a common initial element in Old English dithematic personal names such as Ælfrēd and Ælfrīc has long been understood to suggest a benign aspect for ælfe. This hypothesis can be tested with a systematic survey. The basis for Old English name-studies is still Searle's Onomasticon Anglo-Saxonicum, which is greatly flawed. But, supplemented with later works and used with due circumspection, it still gives a good idea of the range of name-elements available in Anglo-Saxon dithematic naming practices.

---

14 Clark, ‘Onomastics’, 457–8; cf. Kitson, ‘Anglo-Saxon Personal Names’, 97. North, Heathen Gods, 54, has suggested that ælf occurred in names to ward off the threat of demonic ælfe. The distinction between seeking a deity’s support and seeking to avert his or her displeasure is admittedly blurry, but North’s idea does not account for the absence of names of words for monsters which certainly denoted threats, discussed below, and conflicts with the inclusion of börr, alfr, ãss, etc. in pagan Scandinavian personal names, where these denote primarily beneficent forces. In any case, this study shows that ælf and its reflexes retained positive connotations in many speech-communities throughout medieval English, so its retention in names need have involved no serious semantic conflict. For the lack of change in Norse personal names, and the argument that Christianisers were not interested in this aspect of culture, see John Kousgård Sørensen, ‘The Change of Religion and the Names’, in Old Norse and Finnish Religions and Cultic Place-Names, Based on Papers Read at the Symposium on Encounters between Religions in Old Nordic Times and Cultic Place-Names Held at Åbo, Finland, on the 19th–21st August 1987, ed. Tore Ahlbäck (Åbo: Donner Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History, 1990), pp. 394–403, at 394–7.


elements, since *ælf* does not occur finally, establishing an inclusive list of Old English words which could denote animate beings and which occur as prototemes in Anglo-Saxon personal names. I divide it for convenience into five semantic groups, marking words which occur as prototemes in Anglo-Saxon names less than ten times in Searle’s *Onomasticon* with an asterisk (*) as a crude indicator of rarity (most are either substantially more or less common than this). Words which may not belong in the category in which they are placed, or in the survey at all, are marked with a question mark (?) and where necessary discussed in the footnotes:

**Person:** ?ār* ('messenger'),19 beorn ('man'), bregu ('lord'), cwēn ('woman'), ?cyn(e),20 ?frēa* ('lord'),21 ?frēo ('lady'),22 gīsl ('hostage'), ?gyst* ('guest'), gum ('man' < *guma*), hæl* ('man' < *hæle*), ?helm ('protector'),23 hyse* (young man'), lēod ('man'), mæg ('kinsman'), mann ('person'), ?rinc* ('man'),24 scealc* ('man'), þegn* ('thegn'), weard* ('guard'), wine ('friend').

**People(s):** Angel,25 ?Cent* (< *Cantiaci*),26 cynn ('family'), Dene, dryht ('warband, people'), folc ('army, people'), ?folþ* ('retinue' < *folgoþ*),27 Gēat*,28 ?hād* ('rank; tribe'),29 here ('army'), hlōþ* ('company'),30 nōþ* ('warband'),31 Peoht, Seax,32 Swæf,
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

þēod (‘people’), ?Wealh,33 Wendel*,34 Wern.


Supernatural being: ælf, god (‘god’),40 ōs, ?regen (‘gods’),41 ?rūn* (‘otherworldly female’).42

Unclassified: wiht (‘being’),43 wyrm (‘worm, snake, maggot, dragon’).44

Many details of this selection are problematic. Nevertheless, some useful points emerge, and are not blurred by my inclusion of dubious elements. Of the words denoting beings used as protothemes in Old English dithematic names, most lexically denote people or peoples and so are self-evidently semantically

33 Unless ‘foreigner; slave’, in which case it belongs under ‘Person’ (see Ström, Old English Personal Names, 38).
34 Unless an eponymous ancestor.
35 Unless ‘beloved; precious’ or ‘brave, fierce’, in which case it should be excluded. As Kitson noted (‘Anglo-Saxon Personal Names’, 116), although Searle gave numerous references to Eofor-names, most come from Continental sources, in accordance with his exasperating inclusion of Continental names in (sometimes incorrectly) Anglicised form (cf. Insley, ‘Old English Personal Names’, 158–9). Colman, Money Talks, and Birch, Index Saxonicus, record no example of Eofor- or its variants.
36 This is probable but not certain (see Ström, Old English Personal Names, 14–15). Unless this is the cognate of the ethnonym Hun (see Ström, Old English Personal Names, 24–5; Colman, Money Talks, 103).
37 See Colman, Money Talks, 112.
38 <god> may at times represent gōd (‘good’); comparative evidence, however, puts it beyond doubt that at least some examples represent god (‘god’); Förstemann, Altdeutsches Namenbuch, i s.vv. goda, guda; Kaufmann, Altdeutsche Personennamen Ergänzungsbund, s.vv. göda, gūda; Mitterauer, Ahnen und Heilige, 222–3; cf. Colman, Money Talks, 98.
39 Unless in the meaning ‘advice’ or as an intensifier (Ström, Old English Personal Names, 32).
40 While transparent enough in synchronic terms, this name-element is rare on the Continent and absent from Scandinavia (where, however, the cognates are etymologically problematic, De Vries, Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch, s.vv. vætr and the words there cited), and other etymologies have been suggested (Ström, Old English Personal Names, 39). It seems hard to believe, however, that it was not understood as the word wiht in synchronic use (cf. Kitson, ‘Anglo-Saxon Personal Names’, 118).
41 The place of wyrm is problematic because it may have been taken to denote an animal (‘maggot, worm, snake’), a supernatural being (‘dragon’), and possibly even a one-time man (assuming, through comparison with Norse evidence, that the wyrm in Beowulf was once the ‘last survivor’ who speaks in lines 2208–93. The argument was made most forcefully by Raymond P. Tripp Jr, More about the Fight with the Dragon: ‘Beowulf’ 2208b–3182, Commentary, Edition and Translation (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983), but has since regained a degree of favour: see Christine Rauer, Beowulf and the Dragon: Parallels and Analogues (Cambridge: Brewer, 2000), pp. 39–40 and references there). On wyrm and its cognates in personal names more generally, see Müller, Studien, 64–7, 147–8.
The earliest Anglo-Saxon evidence

appropriate to anthroponyms. Meanwhile, the commoner animal-names seem to reflect the animals’ cultural prestige in early Germanic-speaking cultures. Besides these words, we find ælf, òs, god, and, if understood in Old English to denote gods, regen. This distribution is identical, cognate for cognate, to that of words for supernatural beings in kennings for men in skaldic verse and related evidence discussed in chapter 1: ãss, álfr, goð and regin. Likewise, the numerous other Old English words for monsters such as þyrs, eten, püca, dweorg or mære are absent from the Anglo-Saxon name-stock, as are their cognates from the kennings. So precise a correlation is impressive, presumably reflecting both similarities in belief and the systemic similarity between dithematic kennings denoting men and lexically meaningful dithematic personal names. The parallel extends to Old Norse dithematic personal names, in which ãss, guð and regin are common initial elements (for example, Ásmundr, Guðrún, Rognvaldr), and álfr respectably well attested (for example, Álfhildr), and from which monster-words are generally excluded.

These considerations suggest the existence of a Germanic naming-system whose protothemes included the etyma of ælf, òs, regen and god, whose mythologically significant collocation in Old Norse poetry is therefore attested for the culture of Common Germanic-speakers. The exclusion of words for monsters from Old English and Norse personal names might not be so old: the German and East Germanic material attests to a scattering of names whose first elements are thought to be cognates of Old Norse purs and maybe risi (‘giant’) and giýgr (‘ogress, witch’). The sparse attestation of these elements hints that this was a dying tradition or the product of sporadic innovation, but they also imply that the exclusion of monster-words from the Old English and Old Norse dithematic name-systems was not inevitable. This encourages the supposition that name-elements reflect the synchronic meanings of their lexical counterparts. Even so, the value of the onomastic evidence for Anglo-Saxon culture is open to question. The fact that ælf and òs remained in the naming-system after the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons may simply reflect conservatism, as with the retention of Wealh- after wealth (‘foreigner’, later ‘Welshman, slave’) had become pejorative: the social significance of repeating name-elements within a family apparently outweighed the importance of reacting to gradual changes in their lexical meanings. Although new elements were added to the system, such as Peoht- (‘Pict’) and Trum- (‘strong’, a Brittonic loan), and although some seem to have been dropped, such as -ides (‘lady’), several elements which had been lost from the common lexicon survived throughout the Old English period (for example, -flæd, Tond-), presenting a real

45 See Müller, Studien, esp. 195–212.
46 On which see Barley, ‘Perspectives’, 18–24; cf. Schramm, Namenschatz und Dichtersprache, 106–19 et passim.
47 See Lind, Norsk-isländska dopnamn, passim.
48 Förstemann, Altdeutsches Namenbuch, i s.vv. gug, risi, thursja; Kaufmann, Altdeutsche Personennamen Ergänzungsband, s.vv. gug, risi, thursja.
possibility that the presence of ælf in the personal name system merely reflects the semantics of a long-distant time. A further correlative is required.

MORPHOLOGY

Ælf was a long-stemmed masculine i-stem. In prehistoric Old English, most long-stemmed masculine i-stems, including the monster-words þyrs and wyrm (shown to have been i-stems in proto-Old English by the i-mutation of their root vowels), and possibly ent, were transferred to the a-stem declension, so taking the nominative/accusative plural inflexion -as, producing the attested Old English plurals þyrsas, wyrmnas and entas. Besides ælf, the only long-stemmed masculine i-stems to retain the old nominative/accusative plural -e were plural names of peoples (for example, Myrce, ‘Mercians’, Seaxe, ‘Saxons’); the plural denoting ‘people’, ælde; and the suffixes denoting ‘dwellers’, -sæte and -ware. They were joined by loans such as Beornice (‘Bernicians’) and Ægypte (‘Egyptians’). Through this re-organisation, the i-stem declension appears to have become a declension exclusively for words denoting people or peoples.

The presence of ælf in this declension of ethnonyms militates for a semantic association of ælfe with humankind. This detail not only parallels the use of ælf in anthroponomy, but also my argument that álfar and human ethnic others were potentially members of the same early-medieval Scandinavian conceptual category, which I labelled ‘otherworldly beings’. This is not the only possible inference: ælf may be a member of this declension by metaphorical linking (possibly on the basis of mythology) rather than because it is a prototypical example of a human group. Even so, the possibility even of metaphorical association with words for people and peoples, contrasting with the exclusion of words for monsters from the declension, is strong evidence for ælf’s semantics.

This evidence would relate to the period when the morphology of the long-stemmed masculine i-stems was re-organised – after Old English separated from the Continental West Germanic dialect continuum (since these dialects did not reorganise the long-stemmed masculine i-stem declension) and after the onset of i-mutation (since words moved out of the declension, like þyrs, show i-mutation). The situation before the morphological change is barely


52 Campbell, Old English Grammar, §610; Joseph Wright and Elizabeth Mary Wright, Old English Grammar, 3rd edn (London: Oxford University Press, 1924), §385.


54 On Continental West Germanic see Wilhelm Braune, Althochdeutsche Grammatik, 14th rev.
The earliest Anglo-Saxon evidence represented in our texts, if at all, so it must have ended by the time Old English was first being written, around the second half of the seventh century.\(^{55}\) It is also of interest that ælf seems to have had a familiar partner in the long-stemmed masculine i-stem declension: ōs. Ōs is attested only in the nominative singular (as a name-element, and once as a rune-name which, however, is interpreted as though it were the Latin word meaning ‘mouth’) and in the genitive plural form ēsa in Wið færstice. Old Icelandic áss is etymologically an athematic stem; if ōs was too, then it should not have exhibited the i-mutation apparent in the genitive plural form ēsa in Wið færstice. This form would most obviously be explained by assuming that, in the plural, ōs had been moved to the long-stemmed masculine i-stem declension. Possibly an i-stem variant of ōs existed in North-West Germanic; otherwise it is plausible enough that Old English-speakers transferred ōs in the plural to the long-stemmed masculine i-stem declension because of its association with ælfe and ethnonyms.\(^{56}\) If this inference is correct then not only Anglo-Saxon names, but also Old English morphology show an association of ælf with ōs. There is a textual correlative for this argument, first noted by Grimm, in the fact that ōs occurs in Wið færstice in alliterative collocation with ælf.\(^{57}\) However, although Harley 585 shows no obvious Scandinavian influence, the case for the influence of Norse vernacular poetry on Old English has enough support that we must take seriously the idea that the formulaic collocation of ōs and ælf in Wið færstice might be borrowed.\(^{58}\) But the collocation of ēse and ælfe in Wið færstice at least shows the longevity of an association attested in naming-practices inherited from Common Germanic.

The Old English reformation of the long-stemmed masculine i-stem declension affords secure evidence that the lexical associations and semantics attested for ælf in early Norse poetry and Old English personal names were current in early Old English, and we may be reasonably confident that ælf had at this time no less positive connotations than ālfr did when the relevant skaldic and Eddaic poetry was being composed.

---


\(^{57}\) Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, i 25; cf. ii 460.

\(^{58}\) The word fled at the end of the charm, if we do not emend, would seem least unlikely to be from Norse, but this is hardly a reliable point (Doane, ‘Editing Old English Oral/Written Texts’, 144). For Norse influence on Old English poetry see for example Jonathan Watson, ‘The Finnsburh Skald: Kennings and Cruces in the Anglo-Saxon Fragment’, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 101 (2002), 497–51 (with further references at 498 n. 2); Richard Dance, ‘North Sea Currents: Old English–Old Norse Relations, Literary and Linguistic’, *Literature Compass (Medieval)*, 1 (2003–4), <http://www.blackwell-compass.com/subject/literature/>. 

---

63
PLACE-NAMES

The evidence of personal names and declension-change also receives some slight support from Old English place-names containing ælf. This support can only be of the most fragile kind, because ælf is extremely difficult to detect reliably in place-name evidence; ós, indeed, lacks any convincing attestations. The key problem here is that Old English included the monothematic personal names Ælf (probably used as an abbreviation of dithematic names in Ælf-) and Ælfa (probably originally a hypocoristic form of dithematic names in Ælf-). Even when an Old English document attests to a place-name which seems to contain ælf, then, there is always the possibility that it actually contains a personal name. These problems are compounded by the fact that in later evidence the range of possibilities expands even further: some names which in later texts look like potential ælf-names come from later English elf, others from dithematic names like Ælfsǣg, Æanwulf and the Norse Eilafr.

Three place-names seem reasonably reliably to contain ælf. One is ælfrucge, in Kent, occurring in a fifteenth-century copy (unfortunately a poor one) of what seems to be a genuine charter of 996 (S877). Here we probably have ælf plus hrycg (‘ridge’), with some post-Anglo-Saxon interference in the spelling. Crucially, place-names in the south of England whose first element was a personal name usually formed it in the genitive case (which in this case would have been *Ælfes-) – so *ælfrycg is reasonably likely to contain the common noun ælf. The second name appears in the form ylfing dene in Berkshire (putatively ‘ælf-place valley’, where -ing is a suffix used to form place-names), in a boundary clause of a genuine charter of 956 (S622), attested in twelfth- and thirteenth-century manuscripts. The key evidence here is that Ælf-names never otherwise appear in Anglo-Saxon writing in the form Ylf(-). Post-Old English evidence shows that ylf-pronunciations of personal names did exist in speech alongside Ælf-spellings, so ylfing could still have originated as a personal name. But if so, the scribe from whose work our manuscripts derive chose, uniquely, not to write it in the conventional fashion. Finally, Elveden, on lands in Suffolk belonging to the monastery of Bury St Edmunds known as the Liberty of St Edmund, appears in the Domesday Book with the forms Eluedenā, Heluedana, Heluedona and Haluedona. These could reflect ælf or a personal name, but the anonymous Miracula sancte Wihtburge, probably composed in Ely around the mid-twelfth-century, mentions a cleric...

59 For this section see further Hall, ‘Are There Any Elves?’.
63 See Appendices 1 and 2.
The earliest Anglo-Saxon evidence

‘ex rure . . . quodam beatis regis et martyris EDMUNDI quod lingua uallem nunpharum interpretatur anglica’ (‘from a district pertaining to the blessed king and martyr Edmund, which in the English language is called the valley of the nymphs’). This location seems not hitherto to have been identified, but in view of the association of ælf with nympha in Old English glosses on Latin texts discussed in the next chapter, it is hard to doubt that it is Elveden. Although the Miracula might simply reflect the folk-etymologisation of a place-name, it is a clear testimony to the name’s twelfth-century synchronic meaning, and does encourage the supposition that we are dealing etymologically with an ælf-name.

These names cannot tell us much in themselves. But a wider analysis of other Anglo place-name evidence for non-Christian supernatural beings does show that they are consistent with patterns which are themselves consistent with the arguments above. In the first place, the five or so other medieval place-names which might plausibly derive from ælf – even though they might equally derive from other sources – also have second elements which either, like ælfrucge, denote hills (Eldon Hill, Derbyshire; Eluehull, Cumberland; Elvendon Farm, Oxfordshire), or, like ylfing dene and Elveden, end in -denu (‘main valley’; helfesdene, Kent; Alden, Lancashire). If any of these do derive from ælf, then they indicate a consistent set of topographical associations. This fits, moreover, with the localisation of elven in the Middle English South English Legendary, which seems to be a good source for later elf-beliefs and is quoted accordingly below. These faint hints as to the topographical associations of ælfe in Anglo-Saxon place-names are fairly consistent with the associations of place-names containing the personal names of traditional Anglo-Saxon gods. These include two in -denu – Wōdnesdene (now Hursley Bottom, in Wiltshire) and Frīgedene (now Friden, Derbyshire) – while Gelling’s recent opinion has rehabilitated the valley Fryup in Yorkshire as a probable candidate for *Frígehōp (‘Frīge’s remote, enclosed place’). Meanwhile Tysoe in Warwickshire is apparently from *Tīwes hōh (‘Tīw’s spur’) and provides a parallel for ælfrucge. How significant this correlation with potential ælf-names is is hard to say; god-names are also often associated with -feld (in early Old English ‘open, unobstructed space’) and -lēah (‘forest, wood, glade, clearing’).

That what correlations we have are not merely the product of chance, however, is at least suggested by a survey of etymologically English words for supernatural beings securely attested in Old English boundary clauses. These


66 See pp. 140–2.


68 Gelling, ‘Further Thoughts’; Wilson, Anglo-Saxon Paganism, 13–16.
words all denote monstrous beings, and are generally compounded with place-name elements denoting quite different landscape features from those found with ælfe and gods’ names. Leaving aside the problematic pucelancyrce (which resists identification as anything other than ‘little goblin’s church’; S553), we have enta(n), scuccan hlæw (‘hill, burial mound’; S465, 970; S138); entadc (‘waterfilled) ditch, dyke’; S962); entaddic (‘(waterfilled) ditch, dyke’; S962); grendles mere (S416, 579); grendeles, pyrs pyt (‘(waterfilled) pit’; S255, 222); pucan wylle (‘pond, lake, pool, wetland’; S106, 508); and grendes gate (‘gate’; S1450).69 The place-names in -hlæw overlap with place-names containing god-names (for example, Thunoreshlæw, Kent), but otherwise it seems clear that monsters are associated with depressions and water features, whereas gods tend to be associated with open land, groves, hills and valleys. Needless to say, a thorough and critical investigation of later evidence for such words in place-names would augment this material. But even if we do not accept the ælf-names as reliable evidence, there is sufficient evidence to support the distinction drawn above between ælfe and ēse on the one hand and monsters on the other in early Anglo-Saxon culture. It also hints that these distinctions were mapped on to the environments in which Anglo-Saxons lived.

Pushing these observations further would be difficult, requiring fuller gathering of data, and much more detailed considerations of precisely what kinds of associations we have here, of how far our tiny datasets are comparable, and of what biases they may contain. The material does advert, however, to the final source to be considered in this chapter: Beowulf. Although my comparison here of place-names containing words for gods and words for monsters is new, the correlation between Beowulf’s portrayal of Grendel’s mere and the toponymic associations of monsters has long been noted. 70 Beowulf provides a vital literary insight into Anglo-Saxon constructions of space, and, moreover, one which explicitly involves ælfe.

INTERPRETATIONS, AND BEOWULF

Combining the evidence of Old English morphology and personal names, and the earliest Old Norse evidence, we find a fundamentally consistent set of associations for ælf and alfr: a lexical collocation with òsláss (and to a lesser extent god/god and regen/regin), suggesting that the words denoted significantly similar beings; a more general association with the denotation of people and peoples, which suggests that ælfe/álfar and ēse/æsir were like humans in some crucial respect(s); and a semantic contradistinction to the words denoting monsters which aligns ælfe/álfar, ēse/æsir and humans in a systematic opposition to monsters. Place-name evidence also supports the idea of a strong distinction between gods and monsters in Anglo-Saxon

---

69 Translations based on Gelling and Cole, The Landscape, passim.
The earliest Anglo-Saxon evidence

world-views. This system seems likely to have existed in the common ancestors of Old English and Norse, so we must infer that Anglo-Saxons brought it with them when they migrated to Britain. At any rate, it was certainly current in Scandinavia in a formative period of poetic language around the ninth century, and in Anglo-Saxon England in a morphologically formative period around the sixth. The Old English material adduced so far is neatly susceptible to the same componential analysis as I have applied to the Norse material, though the validity of the precise features used is so far justified largely by comparison with Norse:

\[
\begin{array}{ccccc}
\text{ælde} & \text{ēse} & \text{ælfe} & \text{þyrsas, entas} \\
\text{SUPERNATURAL} & - & + & + & + \\
\text{MONSTROUS} & - & - & - & +
\end{array}
\]

Figure 4. Componential analysis of Old English words for beings

This can again be expressed as a semantic field diagram (Figure 5).

One corollary of this, consolidated by textual evidence considered below, is that it is unlikely that ælfe in early Old English were considered particularly
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

small, invisible or incorporeal.71 Although it is not conclusive, the early Old English evidence suggests corporeal anthropomorphic beings mirroring the human in-groups which believed in them. This prospect is eminently well paralleled in medieval north-west Europe by the evidence for álfar, the medieval Irish aes side, the inhabitants of the medieval Welsh Annwn, medieval Latin fatae and Old French fées, Middle English elves, and the Older Scots elvis.72

A more profound corollary is that ælfe should be seen as components in early Anglo-Saxon discourses of group identity. Identities in the post-Roman world have enjoyed much recent attention, but the evidence presented here affords some unique new perspectives.73 Likewise, the study of monsters in medieval thought, and their relationships with identity, is now well established, but this research has been largely limited to written intellectual traditions whose significance for the less learned sections of early-medieval society, and especially for pre-conversion society, is questionable.74 The present study, however, provides a viable set of non-literary, early evidence. Additionally, models of early-medieval constructions of group identities are generally predicated on processes of inclusion: groups, in these models, are


formed through individuals’ shared characteristics. In earlier scholarship, ancestry and language were emphasised; more recently, material culture and shared origin-myths have gained prominence. But my evidence suggests another model, of identity based on exclusivity: individuals were members of a given group because they were not from outside it, in specific and historically traceable ways.

Developing this observation demands a wider investigation of the roles of belief in constructing group identity than is possible here, though in some respects I return to it in my analysis of ælf and gendering in chapter 6 below. However, we do have one Anglo-Saxon text which explicitly situates ælle in a wider discourse on the relationships between men and monsters in the world: Beowulf. Moreover, this source is probably relatively early, dating from the eighth or ninth centuries.75 As Neville has emphasised regarding Old English poetry, Anglo-Saxon literature offers little in the way of explicit cosmography; what there is is directly based on Christian theology.76 Beowulf, however, is rich in implicit cosmology, which corroborates, elaborates and complicates my lexically based reconstruction of the relationships between men and monsters in sixth-century Anglo-Saxon culture.

There is one (certain) attestation of ælf in Beowulf, in the explanation of the origins of Grendel in lines 102–14, at the end of fitt I:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{waes se grimmga gæst} & \quad \text{grendel hāten} \\
\text{māre mēarcestapa} & \quad \text{sē þe móras hēold} \\
\text{fen ond faesten} & \quad \text{fifelcynnnes eard} \\
\text{wonsæli wer} & \quad \text{weardode hwile} \\
\text{siþðan him scyppend} & \quad \text{forscrlen hæfde} \\
\text{in cāines cyanne} & \quad \text{þone cwealm gewræc} \\
\text{ēce drihten} & \quad \text{þæs þe hē ābel slōg} \\
\text{Ne gefeah hē þære fēhōe} & \quad \text{ac hē hine feorwræc} \\
\text{metod for þy ðāne} & \quad \text{mancyne fram} \\
\text{þanon unþydras} & \quad \text{ealle onwōcon} \\
\text{eotenas ond ylfe} & \quad \text{ond orcnæs} \\
\text{swyerce giγantæs} & \quad \text{þā wið gode wunnon} \\
\text{langæ þræge} & \quad \text{hē him ðæs lēan forgeald} \\
\end{align*}
\]


76 Ed. Fr. Klaeber, Beowulf, 3rd edn (Boston: Heath, 1950), 5; collated with Kemp Malone (ed.), The Nowell Codex: British Museum Cotton Vitellius A. XV, Second MS, Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile, 12 (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1963), f. 132. A case can be made for an attestation in line 1314, where the manuscript form alfwalda has hitherto been emended to (e)alwalda (‘all-ruler’; see Birte Kelly, ‘The Formative Stages of Beowulf’ Textual Scholarship:
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

That fierce spirit/guest was called Grendel, the famed border-walker, he who occupied waste-lands, the fen and the fastness, the homeland of the giant-race – the ill-blessed man inhabited them for a time, after the Creator had condemned him; the eternal Lord avenged that killing on the kin of Cain, because he [Cain] slew Abel. He did not profit from that feud, but the Measurer banished him for that crime, from humankind. Thence all misbegotten beings spang forth, eotenas and ælfe and orceas, likewise gīgantas, which struggled against God for a long while. He gave them repayment for that.

This passage presents a binary opposition between men and monsters like that between Mannheimar and Jõtunheimar in early-medieval Scandinavia. Grendel is emphatically from beyond the in-group of the Danes (and human society generally): he has kin but no lineage; he is associated with Cain’s transgression of core social customs of reparation (cf. lines 134–7, 154–8); and is from a place apart from the in-group’s (cf. esp. lines 1345–79). Grendel’s depredations, unlike Óðinn’s in Grímnismál or Völundr’s in Völundarkviða, seem not to be provoked by a misdeed on the part of his victims (unless indirectly as a divine response to the Danes’ pride), and they are directed not at an individual, but at society as a whole. Because Old English hām did not undergo the semantic extension of Old Norse heimr from the older meaning ‘settlement (and hinterland)’ to ‘world’, Norse compounds like Jõtunheimar


On lineage see E. G. Stanley, ‘A Very Land-fish, Languageless, a Monster’: Grendel and the Like in Old English’, in Monsters and the Monstrous in Medieval Northwest Europe, ed. K. E. Olsen and L. A. R. J. Houwen, Mediaevalia Groningana, n.s. 3 (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), pp. 79–92, at 79–82. Charles Donahue, ‘Grendel and the Clanna Cain’, Journal of Celtic Studies, 1 (1950), 167–75, and James Carney, Studies in Irish Literature and History (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1955), 102–14, have both suggested that Beowulf lines 111–13 were based on two related passages from the Irish tract Sex aetates mundi, apparently a translation from a Latin text, first attested in the eleventh-century manuscript Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson B. 502. If this were correct, then Irish counterparts for the unty ¯dras in Beowulf could be identified (the likely counterpart to Ælfe being Iuchorpain). However, Carney, Studies, 106–14, saw the inspiration for the Irish passage in Isidore’s Etymologiae (XI.iii, De portentis) and, as Orchard, Pride and Prodigies, 71, implied, this could be taken as the direct inspiration for both Sex aetates mundi and Beowulf. No secure conclusions can be drawn from these comparisons.

The Danes’ pride was argued for, for example, by Margaret E. Goldsmith, The Mode and Meaning of ‘Beowulf’ (London: Athlone, 1970), 83–96.
The earliest Anglo-Saxon evidence

and Álfheimar have no Old English cognates. But the closest Old English counterpart to heimr seems to be eard (‘habitation, habitat, region, land, etc.’); it is fitting, therefore, that Grendel’s territory is in fīfelcynnes eard (‘the dominion of the (water-)monster-race’) and that his mere is later described as ælwihta eard (‘the dominion of ?alien beings’, line 1500) – terms which seem likely to have contrasted with Old English middaneard (‘middle dominion’) in the same way as Jōtunheimar contrasted with Mannheimar. Appropriately enough in view of these correlations, Beowulf’s list of the untydras (‘misbegotten beings’) of Caines cynn (‘the kin of Cain’) with which Grendel is aligned also includes the Old English cognate of jōtnar, eotenas. This much, then, fits with the binary contrast between men and monsters posited above, and supports its validity regarding Anglo-Saxon culture.

However, Beowulf includes ælfe among the untydras, and its usage here is diametrically contrary to the early Old Norse and Old English alignment of álfar–ælfe with the human in-group against the monsters. Nor is it unique in early Old English. The evidence of our Anglo-Saxon medical texts for the demonisation of ælf is, I argue in chapters 5 and 6, more ambivalent than was previously thought. But besides wider comparisons, such as the Middle Dutch development of a general diabolical denotation for alf, an early diabolical meaning for ælf is attested in BL Royal 2 A. XX, which seems to have been made in the last quarter of the eighth century or perhaps the first quarter of the ninth in West Mercia, probably in or near Worcester, and known as the Royal Prayerbook. It is one of four early Anglo-Saxon prayerbooks, each with some textual interrelationships, containing mainly Latin prayers; its general theme ‘would appear to be Christ as the healer of mankind’, and its concern with physical healing is sufficient to suggest that it ‘might have functioned as a devotional, and practical, tool for a physician’. Ælf occurs here on folio 45v, in a unique oratio which invokes the power of the cross to guard the body ‘ab omnibus insidiis inimici’ (‘against all the wiles of the Enemy’). The prayer proceeds to a Greek liturgical passage and concludes with an exorcism.


81 Ed. Klaeber, Beowulf, 56; Cf. Roberts, Kay and Grundy, Thesaurus, §01.01.02 A dwelling-place, abode, habitation.


83 Brown, ‘Female Book-Ownership’, 56, 57; cf. Sims-Williams, Religion and Literature, 275–327; for contents see Doane, Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts, 52–9 [no. 283].
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

including the statement ‘adiuro te satanae diabulus aelfae, per deum uiuum ac uerum · et per trementem diem iudicii ut refugiatur ab homine illo . . .’. (‘I conjure you, devil of Satan, of (an/the) ælf, through the living and true God and through the quaking day of judgement, that he is put to flight from that person . . .’). Here, then, we have the word aelfae which, in the absence of any likely Latin, Greek or Hebrew identification, must be a Latinised form of ælf. Aelfae is integral to the text and unrelated to the tenth-century Old English glosses in the manuscript. Diabolus here is surely a vocative, and satanae a genitive. But it is not immediately clear whether aelfae is intended as a common noun in apposition to Satanae (‘I conjure you, devil of Satan, of an ælf’), or whether it is a vernacular synonym for Satanae (‘I conjure you, devil of the ælf Satan’).

If the former translation is best, the ending of aelfae would most naturally be identified as a regular first-declension feminine genitive-singular inflexion, in which case we might infer that it was intended to denote a female being – as in the fifteenth-century Anglo-Latin prayer against Elfæ from which I quote below. This interpretation would imply that not only Satan, but ælfe, were conceived to rule over diaboli. But this does not seem very likely, so aelfae was more probably intended as a synonym for Satanae; the genitive ending -ae in this interpretation was modelled on that of the irregular noun Satanas, so not implying that ælfe were female – on the contrary, the synonymy with Satanæ would imply that they were male. Either way, the Royal Prayerbook attests to the early association of ælf with Christian demonic beings, and probably its use specifically of Satan himself. It is hard to guess when the prayer took its present form – it could be as late as the manuscript itself.

Despite Beowulf’s many traditional traits, however, I do not think that these texts suggest the oft-positied Germanic tradition of ‘ambiguous’ or ‘amoral’ ælfe. Beowulf lines 102–14 present a subtle conflation of biblical, apocryphal

85 See p. 122.
The earliest Anglo-Saxon evidence

and patristic explanations for the origins of monsters. At a lexical level, it connects words of vernacular origin (eotenas and ælfe) with words which are, and probably were, obviously loans: orneas (< Latin Orcus ‘(god of the) underworld’) and, if the reading is correct – we owe the word to Thorkelin’s transcripts – gigantas (< Latin gigas ‘giant’ < Greek γίγας). While Beowulf line 112 may, then, attest to an established tradition of monstrous ælfe, there is no constraint upon us to assume so – and less again in the context of the Royal Prayerbook. Other Old English evidence, alongside later English and Scots material, emphasises that ælf never underwent as successful a pejoration as its Continental West Germanic cognates. Beowulf’s situation of ælfe in alliterative and semantic collocation with eotenas can be read rather as a self-conscious (and perhaps ostentatious) realignment of the ælfe, demonising them by association with monsters traditional (eotenas), Classical (ornæas) and biblical (gigantas). Nor was it done on a whim: Beowulf is, as Tolkien argued, predicated on a vision of the heathen past as a hopeless struggle against a diabolically dominated world. For its portrayal to work, it was necessary to rule out the traditional idea that humans might have had non-Christian supernatural support in their struggle.

It is evident that it did not take long for ælfe to be demonised in some traditions. The early evidence for this in Beowulf and the Royal Prayerbook may be compared with the later-eighth-century Old Saxon Catechism, whose language suggests ‘an Anglo-Saxon imperfectly acquainted with OS adapting a presumably OE text as best he could for OS addressees’: ‘end ec forsacho allum dioboles uuercum and uuordum, Thunaer ende UUôden ende Saxnôte ende allum them unholdum the hira genôtas sint’ (‘and I renounce all the Devil’s deeds and words, Thunaer and UUôden and Saxnôt and all those evil beings which are their companions’). With themes like these in early catechisms, it is no surprise that ælfe should have been aligned with the Devil. However, the implication here that conversion had swift and substantial effects on beliefs in ælfe comes with caveats. The first is that such catechisms – even where heard, understood and remembered – may not have prompted any paradigm shift in those catechised. Evidence for traditional Scandinavian beliefs suggests that an individual might seek the patronage of one god, and both criticise other gods and face their displeasure; transferring the concept to Anglo-Saxon culture, John inferred that ‘the nearest parallel to Woden in the modern world would be a Premier League football manager’. The Old

88 See Orchard, Pride and Prodigies, 58–85.
89 Cf. Holthausen, Wörterbuch, s.vv. orc, gigant.
90 As so often, Beowulf finds a neat parallel in Grettis saga, in Hallmundr’s inclusion of ‘álfakind’ in his poetic list of the monsters he has slain (ch. 62; ed. Guðni Jónsson, Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar; Bandamanna saga, Íslenzk fornrit, 7 (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Forntísfélag, 1936), 204).
93 Richard North, ‘Goð Geyja: The Limits of Humour in Old Norse-Icelandic Paganism’, Quaestio:
Saxon Catechism can be understood in the same way: the catechised transfers his allegiance to one god (admittedly Trinitarian in form) and denigrates the others (whose existence is not denied). These observations provide some context for the evidence to be considered below that the demonisation of ælfe was an extremely slow process.

CONCLUSIONS

It has proved possible reliably to reconstruct the earliest conceptual associations between humans, ælfe and monsters. Our earliest Old English evidence matches our early Scandinavian evidence neatly, providing good evidence for a tripartite conceptual system in which members of the in-group were aligned on the one hand with ælfe and pagan gods, against monsters on the other. Ælfe and monsters can be situated in early Anglo-Saxon world-views as important components in constructing group identity by exclusive means at a critical stage of the development of English ethnicity. These findings also provide us with a new opportunity to check on Beowulf's conservatism, and to investigate how the meanings of ælf could develop under the early pressures of Christianisation. Beowulf incorporates Romano-Christian materials into an existing binary paradigm dividing humans and monsters, but is innovative in situating the ælfe on the monsters' side of the arrangement. The tension between these perspectives will be apparent throughout the evidence presented in the following chapters of this book, but the continuation of the more traditional, more positive view of ælfe can readily be perceived. The first kind of evidence pointing in this direction relates to material linking ælfe with females and feminine traits.
Female Elves and Beautiful Elves

If asked to survey medieval English elves, scholars might reasonably look first to the Wife of Bath’s ‘elf-queene, with hir joly compaignye’ who ‘Daunce
ofte in many a grene mede’, or to Sir Thopas’s decision that ‘An elf queene
shal my lemman be . . . An elf queene wol I loue, ywys’. They would find a
precedent for Chaucer’s beautiful female elves in the early fourteenth century,
in the description in the Fasciculus morum of ‘reginas pulcherrimas et alias
puellas tripudiantes cum domina Dyana, choreas ducentes dea paganorum,
que in nostro vulgari dicitur elves’ (‘very beautiful queens and other girls
dancing with their mistress Dyana, leading dances with the goddess of the
pagans, who in our vernacular are called elves’); around 1300 in our earliest
attestation of elf-ring, ‘a ring of daisies caused by elves’ dancing’; and in the
late thirteenth century in the South English Legendary, which describes angels
who neither fought for nor against God and were banished to the earth:

ofte in forme of womman ·
in mony deorne weie
Me sicþ of hom gret companie ·
bope hoppe & pleie
Pat eleuene beop icaluped ²

often in the form of woman
on many a hidden path
men see a great company of them
both dance and play,
that are called eluene [following other MSS]

Parallels in Latin lead back into the twelfth century, along with Laʒamon’s
characterisation of the queen Argante as ‘aluen swiðe sceone’ (‘a very beautiful

1 Ed. Larry D. Benson, The Riverside Chaucer, 3rd edn (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 116,
214.
2 Respectively, ed. and trans. Siegfried Wenzel, Fasciculus morum: A Fourteenth-Century Preacher’s
Handbook (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), 578; T. Hunt,
Plant Names of Medieval England (Cambridge: Brewer, 1989), 87 (s.v. elferingewort); ed. C.
d’Evelyn and A. J. Mill, The South English Legendary, Early English Text Society, 235, 236, 244,
South-English Legendary or Lives of Saints I: MS. Laud, 108, in the Bodleian Library, Early English
Text Society, 87 (London: Trübner, 1887), 306–7, and lines 2749–54 of Robert of Gloucester’s
Series, 86 (London: HMSO, 1887), 196. For Robert’s use of the Legendary see Manfred Görlach,
Studies in Middle English Saints’ Legends, Anglistische Forschungen, 257 (Heidelberg: Winter,
Medium Ævum, 70 (2001), 1–18.
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

and ‘fairest alre aluen’ (‘the most beautiful of all aluen’); and they run on into the early-modern period when, for example, Milton wrote of

... Faery Elves,
Whose midnight Revels, by a Forest side
Or Fountain some belated Peasant sees,
Or dreams he sees, while overhead the Moon
Sits Arbitress, and nearer to the Earth
 Wheels her pale course, they on their mirth and dance
Intent, with jocund Music charm his ear. ...3

Nor need we take these descriptions merely as literary fantasies: at any rate, in 1598 an Aberdeenshire healer, Andro Man, was executed for, amongst other things, confessing to encounters with ‘the Quene of Elphen’.4

However, it has been traditional to characterise such ideas of elves as the product of post-Conquest ‘Celtic’ literary influence, directly on Old French and Anglo-Norman literature and, indirectly through this, on English.5 These seductive female elves are implicitly contrasted in this view with an Anglo-Saxon (or ‘Germanic’) tradition of mischievous or demonic sprite-like ælfe. I have shown already that early ælfe were probably human-like, providing a basis for reading more continuity between earlier- and later-medieval English beliefs. What this chapter tackles is a body of evidence, most of it chronologically intermediary between the early evidence discussed in the previous chapter and the medical manuscripts discussed in the next two, which relates to this issue, and particularly to ælfe’s gender. Our early Scandinavian evidence attests only to male álfar – albeit, in Völundr’s case, álfar of dubitable masculinity. Can we then indeed attribute beautiful female elves to post-Conquest cultural developments? Or can we project them back into early belief? Or does their later presence reflect change during the Anglo-Saxon period? I argue for the latter, these considerations underpinning my discussion of Anglo-Saxon gendering in chapter 6.

Two kinds of evidence are considered here. One is the poetic Old English word ælfscyne, literally ‘ælf-beautiful’. I start, however, by analysing two textual traditions of Old English glosses which use ælf as the basis for glossing Latin words for nymphs, the beautiful supernatural females of Classical


Female elves and beautiful elves

mythologies. Using gloss-evidence is especially tricky, and glosses have often been poorly handled in the past. It is, therefore, worth spelling out some methodological desiderata for their deployment:

1. Although glosses were intended as equivalents to their lemmata, this does not mean that the reverse is true: inversions like ‘Wælcyrge is . . . glossed with Bellona’ are misguided and misleading. Nor do glosses generally attempt to ‘define’ their lemmata: they gloss them.

2. The meaning of a gloss is not the only variable, since the glossator’s interpretation of the lemma cannot be taken for granted. A lemma’s source must be discovered, so that its original contextual meaning can be inferred. Fortunately, most sources have now been traced; but glossators and their copyists also mis- or reinterpreted lemmata.

3. The provenance and textual history of glosses must be established. This is especially difficult with glosses and glossaries, which redactors could freely excerpt, conflate or re-order, but no less important than usual: copies of a text must not be mistaken for independent evidence. Of course, where a redactor maintained a gloss while revising his exemplar(s), he may affirm its continued validity, but corrupt and meaningless glosses were repeated too often for us to assume this as a rule.

4. The occurrences of ælf in the glossaries are often in nonce-compounds, coined specifically as gloss-words, and may relate only indirectly to ælf’s everyday use. Such gloss-words afford quite different evidence from those reflecting everyday usage, and must as far as possible be identified.

5. Finally, one must also ask which Old English words glossators chose not to use to gloss a given lemma, and why. A gloss chosen out of desperation for an even vaguely appropriate vernacular term offers very different evidence from one selected as the ideal choice from a range of possibilities. Even with the Thesaurus of Old English, spotting absences in this way is extremely difficult. Fortunately, the material considered here affords unusual leverage on the problem.

Of the two gloss-traditions considered here, one certainly derives from the eighth century if not before, and combines the basic root ælf with a feminising suffix -en (earlier -inn < *-injō), used to form feminine derivatives from masculine nouns, to make the word ælfen. The other may also be eighth-century but could be later. It too uses ælf, but feminises it by transferring it to the feminine ó-stem declension, with the plural form ælfa. Crucially, the

---


two traditions were later conflated in the eleventh-century Antwerp–London Glossary, the morphological developments attested there providing major insights into the changing meanings of ælf.

THE ÆLFEN GLOSSES

The first of the two sets of Old English glosses which I examine uses the word ælfen. The lemmata of these glosses derive from Isidore of Seville's Etymologiae:


They reckon nymphae to be goddesses of waters, so called from clouds [nubes, but cf. nimbus 'storm(cloud)']. For waters [come] from clouds, whence [nympha] is derived. [They reckon] nymphae goddesses of waters, just like the spirits of water. But those who are nymphae they also call Musae, not without cause. For, in addition, [their] movements create music. There are varied terms for nymphae among pagans: for they call nymphae of mountains Oreades, of woods Dryades, of springs Hamadryades, of plains Naides and of the sea Nereids [naides BCT].

The earliest and most conservative manuscript of the glosses to this text is in Leiden, Bibliotheek der Rijksuniversiteit Vocius Lat. 4° 106, being a Continental manuscript of twenty-five leaves whose two main hands (in one of which the glosses are written) are agreed to be 'not later than the first half of the ninth century'. The manuscript seems certainly to have been at Fleury in the tenth century, and was likely enough produced there. The ælfen glosses occur together in a blank space on folio 10r which follows a text of the Latin riddles attributed to Symphosius (ff. 2v–8v) and the contents list (ff. 9r–10r) of Aldhelm's enigmata (themselves covering ff. 10v–25v):

Nymphæ . ælfenni eadem . & muse
Oreades düün . ælfinni .

Nymphae: ælfennæ, and at the same time musæ;
Oreades: mountain-ælfennæ;

Female elves and beautiful elves

Driades . uudu . aelfinne
Amadriades uater . aelfinñ
Maiides feld . aelfinne
Naiades sā . aelfinne

Dryades: wood-ælfenne;
Hamadryades: water-ælfenne;
Maides: open-land-ælfenne;
Naiades: sea-ælfenne

This faithfully glosses the BCT-texts of the Etymologiae, with the sole divergence of Maides for Naiades. The glosses were presumably added to elucidate Aldhelm’s ensuing mention of Castalidas nymphas in the preface to the Enigmata (quoted in the next section).

Despite the Continental origin of Leiden Voss. Q 106, the glosses are Old English. They must have been composed after the arrival of Isidore’s Etymologiae in Britain, by the late seventh century, glossing of which was under way at this time. As with the language of the Leiden Riddle, a later addition to the same manuscript, the orthography of the glosses in Leiden Voss. Q 106 is characteristic of the seventh and eighth centuries, showing <uu> for /w, ur/, <ae> for later <æ>, and <i> in unstressed syllables. The nominative plural inflection -e is non-West Saxon. These readings are supported by the second manuscript of the glosses, the First Cleopatra Glossary from BL Cotton Cleopatra A.iii (considered in more detail below), whose tranche of around two hundred Etymologiae-glosses includes the ælfen glosses, and whose linguistic features point to a seventh- or eighth-century Mercian provenance. The third manuscript of these glosses is the Antwerp–London Glossary, which I consider separately below on account of its special importance.

Commentators in recent decades have rightly been confident that ælfen was compounded with words for topographic features specifically to gloss Isidore’s terms, a reading consistent with the punctuation in the Leiden manuscripts, which emphatically separates the two elements of each compound: we need not postulate categories of wood-elves, mountain-elves and sea-elves in Anglo-Saxon beliefs. However, the element ælfen has hitherto been taken as a member of the common Old English lexicon: it is paralleled elsewhere in medieval West Germanic languages, where forms like elbinne are also used.
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

to translate *nympha*, and it is thought to be represented in Middle English, being enshrined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and *Middle English Dictionary* under the headword *elven*.19 This could encourage the reconstruction of a West Germanic *Aleβ(i)injȯ*, whose history would then extend from West Germanic into Middle English. However, Cooke has recently reassessed the evidence for a Middle English reflex of *ælfen*, finding all but one of the alleged examples simply to show the transference of *ælf* to the weak declension, a common development in Southern and Western Middle English, whereby plurals and some oblique singular forms emerged as *aluen(e)* or *eluente(e)*.20 The sole example accepted by Cooke as an attestation of Middle English *elven* is line 14,278 of Laʒamon’s *Brut*, ‘To Argante þere quene, aluen swiðe sceone’.21 Why he accepted it is not clear to me. Our manuscripts of the *Brut* are very irregular in their use of weak inflexions, and in theory *aluin* here could derive from *ælfen*. But it is surely better explained as a weak dative singular in apposition to Argante – thus ‘to the queen Argante, a very beautiful elf’, as I translated it at the beginning of this chapter – as with another innovative weak dative singular noun in line 11,272, ‘And foró he gon wenden; to Arðure þan kingen’ (‘and they set out to travel to Arthur the king’; < Old English *cyning*, dative singular *cyninge*).22 Other readings are possible, such as a weak genitive plural: ‘to the queen Argante, a very beautiful [woman] of the *aluen*’. But either way, Cooke’s acceptance of the line as evidence for a Middle English reflex of *ælfen* is less convincing than reading it to contain another example of a weak reflex of *elf*.

*Ælfen*, then, is attested in English only in the textually interrelated Anglo-Saxon glossaries just listed. Meanwhile, although there is no doubt that the West Germanic forms are potential cognates of *ælfen*, they would also be natural independent formations: the *-*injȯ suffix has remained the normal suffix for forming nouns denoting females from nouns denoting males throughout the history of Continental West Germanic. Certainly, it is not


20 William Cooke, “‘Aluen swiðe sceone’: How Long did OE *Ælfen*/Elfen Survive in ME?”, *English Language Notes*, 41 (2003), 1–6. This declension change is unsurprising, since the long-stemmed masculine *i*-stem declension (with nominative plural *-e*) to which *ælf* belonged was morphologically rather anomalous. That the weak declension was growing generally in spoken (Southern) Old English despite the conservatism of the written language is suggested by its popularity as a declension for loan-words, second only to that of the *a*-stem declension, as Helmut Gneuss, ‘Latin Loans in Old English: A Note on their Inflexional Morphology’, in *Language and History in Early England* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1996), chapter 6, argued. Other members of the declension occasionally exhibit weak forms already in early West Saxon (for example, *lēodan, seaxan, waran* for *lēode, seaxe, warœ*; Campbell, *Grammar*, §610.7. Moreover, the plural masculine *i*-stems were identical in non-West Saxon dialects to the feminine *o*-stem declension (to which the long-stemmed masculine *i*-stem *lēod* was being attracted already in Old English, cf. chapter 1 n. 95); as unstressed vowels collapsed in later Old English, this would often have become the case in West Saxon too. This is noteworthy because the feminine *o*-stems were particularly prone to transference to the weak declension: see for example S. R. T. O. d’Ardenne (ed.), *Be liflade ant te passiun of Seinte Iuliene*, Early English Text Society, 248 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 213–14.


unlikely that an Anglo-Saxon glossator seeking to feminise ǣlf should have utilised the suffix -en. Other Old English examples of the suffix are gyden (‘goddess’, < god ‘god’), mennen (‘handmaid, female slave’ < mann ‘person’) and mynecenu (‘nun’ < munuc ‘monk’). The last example seems to have been coined in the tenth century, demonstrating the long productivity of the suffix; likewise the unique mettena, which glosses Parcae in chapter 35 of the Alfredian translation of Boethius’s De consolatione philosophiae, seems likely to be a nonce-word. It is also worth emphasising that ǣlfen has no Norse cognate (contrast áss–ásynja): Scandinavians faced with terms such as Marie de France’s fée instead used – and arguably coined – álfkona (‘elf-woman’). That ǣlfen was indeed a nonce-word, formed by a glossator with no extant word suitable for glossing nympha and the like, is further suggested by the second textual tradition.

THE LANDÆLFE AND DÚNÆLFA GLOSSES

The source of the lemmata in this tradition is the invocation with which Aldhelm (d. 709/10) opened his Carmen de virginitate:

Non rogo ruricolas versus et commata Musas
Nec peto Castalidas metrorum cantica nimphas,
Quas dicunt Elicona iugum servare supernum,
Nec precor, ut Phoebus linguam servare supernum,
Dedat, quem Delo peperit Latona creatrix;
Versibus infandis non umquam dicere dignor,
Ut quondam argutus fertur dixisse poeta:
‘Pandite nunc Elicona, deae, cantusque monete!’

I do not ask country-dwelling Muses for verses and parts of lines, nor do I seek songs in metre from the Castalian nymphs, who, they say, guard Helicon’s celestial brow; nor do I beg that Phoebus, whom Latona his mother brought forth on Delos, grant my tongue loquacity of speech. I never deign to speak with vile verses, as once the clear-sounding poet is supposed to have spoken – ‘Throw open Helicon, goddesses, and bring song to mind!’

The earliest manuscript to contain the glosses is the tenth-century Cleopatra


Glossary (mentioned already as a manuscript of the ælfen glosses), probably compiled and written at St Augustine’s, Canterbury. The manuscript has generally been dated to the mid-tenth century, but Rusche has recently argued specifically for the 930s.26 Of the three different glossaries contained in the manuscript, the first and third attest to the glosses. The Third Cleopatra Glossary (folios 92–117) contains glossae collectae – interlinear glosses, in this case to Aldhelm’s Prosa de virginitate and Carmen de virginitate, extracted in sequence to form a glossary; despite its name, it or its exemplar was a source for the First.27 The Third Cleopatra Glossary includes ‘Ruricolas musas : landælfe; Castalidas nymphas : dūnælfa; Elica : swā hātte sīo dūn’ (‘country-dwelling Musae: landælfe; Castalian nymphae: mountain-ælfa; Helicon: so that mountain is named’).28 The First Cleopatra Glossary (ff. 5–75) partially repeats the Third with the entry ‘Castalidas nymphas : dūnælfa’.29 This gloss was to have a long history. It influenced the Latin of a medical text in the mid-tenth-century manuscript BL. Royal 12 D.xvii known as Leechbook III,30 and is attested in the Old English invocation based by Byrhtferth of Ramsey on a glossed text of Aldhelm’s like that in the Third Cleopatra Glossary.31 It appears in the Antwerp–London Glossary, considered below. It also recurs in the eleventh-century BL Harley 3376, the now-fragmentary ‘Harley Glossary’, in the modified gloss on Castalidas nymphas, ‘pā mānfullan gydena . l dūnelfa’ (‘those sinful godesses, or mountain-ælfa’), the whole gloss written above the lemma on folio 17r.32 The Harley Glossary shows alterations to and careful conflation of various sources, including texts related to the Cleopatra Glossaries: the use of gydena here seems to derive from a different gloss in the First Cleopatra Glossary, ‘Nymphas : gydena’ (cf. the once probably linked ‘Castalidas : pā dúñlican’), deriving from another glossary to Aldhelm’s Carmen de virginitate (numbered S12 by Kittlick).33 Why all texts apart from

30 See below, p. 106.
the Third Cleopatra Glossary give Castalidas nymphas: dúñælfa but not ruricolas musas: landælfe is not clear: ruricolas musas: landælfe could equally well have been added to the Third Cleopatra Glossary or dropped from the rest of the textual tradition. The glosses must originate between the composition of the Carmen de virginitate, and the earlier part of the tenth century. Linguistic evidence points to an eighth-century Anglian origin, but our glosses could be later additions to this tradition.\(^{34}\)

I have been careful to cite the plural dúñælfa in its manuscript form. Although the sole attestation of landælfe uses the -e plural proper to the long-stemmed masculine i-stem declension to which alf belonged, **dúñælfe does not appear: rather the form in all cases except the Antwerp–London Glossary (which witnesses another development again) is dúñælfa, with the West Saxon strong feminine -a plural. If dúñælfa does derive from an Anglian original, this West Saxon plural must be a later introduction by a Southern redactor. Even so, given its suitability and consistency, it is surely a deliberate declension-change. In Old English, feminine words for humans invariably denoted females, while feminine words for animals were almost as consistent.\(^{35}\) The innovation of -ælfa looks, then, to be a deliberate feminisation of the denotation of ælf, sharing its intent with the form elfen but not its means. Where landælfe fits into this is not clear: it could represent an original Anglian form (potentially feminine) which, by some slip, was not altered along with dúñælfa (and if so, the consequent semantic disjunction between gloss and lemma might explain its removal from the textual tradition), or a later addition to the tradition by a redactor who chose not to use the -ælfa form, perhaps because it was a neologism.

**FEMININE ÆLFE, FEMALE ELVEN?**

It appears that two glossators (or conceivably one glossator of wavering determination) were faced with words denoting the nymphs of Classical mythology, and both opted to gloss them with alf. However, the glossators and/or their redactors were dissatisfied with using alf alone, and found ways of feminising it. The difference between the strategies which they adopted strongly suggests that there was in eighth-century Old English no word with a female denotation corresponding in sense to nympha. This would be

---

34 Kittlick, Glossen, §§2.2, 14.3.2.

consistent not only with the fact that *ælf* is grammatically masculine, but with
the fact that the early attestations of Old Icelandic *álfr* seem consistently to be
associated with denoting males, while Old High German *alp* is likewise only
clearly attested to denote males.36 There is no need to doubt that the glossators
knew what nymphs were: youthful, female, non-monstrous minor goddesses
whose beauty was liable to attract the sexual attentions of gods and men. The
glossator of the *Etymologiae*, of course, had Isidore’s description before
him, and both Aldhelm and his glossators made extensive use of this text.37
Aldhelm’s invocation is ostentatiously modelled on classical ones, particularly
the opening of Virgil’s *Georgics*; he was familiar with the *Aeneid*, at least
parts of Ovid’s nymph-packed *Metamorphoses*, and other pertinent texts.38
Admittedly, the most prominent *nympha* known to the Anglo-Saxons must
have been Circe, the witch-nymph who turned Ulysses’s men into animal
forms, but her exceptional status will have been clear; it is unfortunate that
Circe’s name is nowhere glossed into Old English, and that chapter 38 of
the Old English translation of the *De consolatione philosophiae* calls her by the
generic term *gyden*.39 The recognition of *nymphae*’s non-monstrous character

36 *AHDWB*, s.v. *alb*. As for German words for nymphs, the principal gloss is ‘êkmagadi’ (*oak-
maidens’) for *dryadas* (*Die althochdeutschen Glossen*, ed. Steinmeyer and Sievers 1879–1922,
n. 580; cf. *AHDWB*, s.v. *èkmagad*). The early-medieval corpus was searched using Gerhard
Köbler, *Lateinisch–altniederdeutsches Wörterbuch*, Göttinger Studien zur Rechtsgeschichte,
Sonderband 14 (Göttingen: Musterschmidt, 1972) and Heinrich Götz, *Lateinisch–althochdeutsch–
neuhochdeutsches Wörterbuch* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1999).

37 For Aldhelm’s use see Nicholas Howe, ‘Aldhelm’s *Enigmata* and Isidorian Etymology’, *Anglo-
Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Studies and Texts, 98 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute
of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), 56–8; Rusche, ‘Isidore’s *Etymologiae*’. On Isidore’s informative
structuring of mythological hierarchy and divinity see Jane Chance, *Medieval Mythography*,

38 *Georgics* i.1–42, ed. and trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, *Virgil: Eclogues; Georgics; Aeneid I–VI*,
Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England, 8 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

39 Ed. Sedgefield, *King Alfred’s Old English Version*, 116, 195; Cf. *De consolatione philosophiae* 4,
metre 3, ed. Moreschini, *Boethius*, 111–12. Other texts mentioning Circe include the *Aeneid*
(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), n 316–30. These stories were well known:
see Susan Irvine, ‘Ulysses and Circe in King Alfred’s *Boethius*: A Classical Myth Transformed’,
in *Studies in English Language and Literature: ‘Doubt Wisely’*, Papers in Honour of E. G. Stanley,
Paul E. Szarmach, Basic Readings in Anglo-Saxon England, 7 / Garland Reference Library of
the Humanities, 1447 (New York: Garland, 2000), pp. 237–65 (first publ. Klaus R. Grinda,
‘Zu Tradition und Gestaltung des Kirke-mythos in König Alfreds *Boethius*’, in *Motive und
Themen in englischsprachiger Literatur als Indikatoren literaturgeschichtlicher Prozesse: Festschrift
zum 65. Geburtstag von Theodor Wolpers*, ed. Heinz-Joachim Müllenbrock and Alfons Klein
(Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1990), pp. 1–22); Aldhelm’s ninety-fifth *enigma*, ed. Ewald, *Aldhelmii
opera*, i 142, and the late-tenth- or early-eleventh-century gloss on it in BL MS Royal 12 C
xxiii studied by R. I. Page, ‘The Study of Latin Texts in Late Anglo-Saxon England [2]: The
Evidence of English Glosses’, in *Latin and the Vernacular Languages in Early Medieval Britain*,
84
Female elves and beautiful elves

is suggested by their pointed omission from the Liber monstrorum, produced in an intellectual milieu associated with Aldhelm's.\(^{40}\)

Nor was it in the interests of the original glossators to represent anything but the Classical mythological meanings of nympha. Aldhelm inverted Classical conventions by refusing the aid of musae and nymphae in composing his poetry, implying their worship to be unacceptable among Christians, while the later Harley version of the dūnælfa gloss explicitly calls the Castalidae nymphae 'mānfullan' ('sinful'). But for the pointed inversions of Aldhelm's invocation to be conveyed effectively, the vernacular glosses needed to represent the Classical semantics of the lemmata, so it is reasonable to take the glosses, in origin, to represent these meanings. Of the batches of Isidore glosses in the First Cleopatra and Antwerp–London glossaries deriving from S21, the ælfen glosses are almost alone in glossing lemmata which denote Classical mythological beings, so we have little other evidence for how the glossator who composed S21 tended to handle words for Classical mythological figures.\(^{41}\) But the glossator's intention was presumably the same as Isidore's: to explain Classical mythology to a Christian audience. As with dūnælfa and landælfe, then, we may infer that the ælfen-glosses understand their lemmata in their Classical senses.

Turning finally to my concern with what words Anglo-Saxons did not use in glossing, we have two other textual traditions of Old English glosses on or translations of words for nymphs. I have mentioned above the Aldhelm gloss 'Nymphas gydena', which may reflect an older Latin glossing tradition and recalls the decision by the Old English translator of the De consolatione philosophiae to call Circe a gyden. This shows that gyden ('goddess') could be used to denote nymphs; but the term is a general one which conveyed little detail about the lemmata in question. The other tradition, going back to the seventh century, glosses Echo, understood as the name of the nymph rather than the word meaning 'reflected sound', with wudumær ('wood-mær').\(^{42}\) Mær denoted monstrous female supernatural beings which assaulted people in their sleep; but in its original context (chapter 16 of Evagrius's Vita Sancti Antonii), Echo was used of demons, which is a sense quite different from how the words for nymphs are used in Isidore and Aldhelm. Echo: wudumær instead hints at the extensive lexicon of monstrous, dangerous and/or martial supernatural females available to Anglo-Saxons. Faced with Roman goddesses such as the powerful Parcae and the Furiae, the gods’ instruments of vengeance; or words for monstrous females such as incubae and strigae, they adduced besides

---

\(^{40}\) The word nympha appears once, in entry I.34 – but it is used, contrary to the reader's expectation, with the punning sense of 'spring': Hall, 'The Evidence for maran', n. 3.


\(^{42}\) ‘The Evidence for maran’, §5.
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

gyden words such as hægtesse, wælcyrige, burgrūne and wicce. The evidence for these glosses is too extensive and tangled for consideration here, and I have accordingly made an exhaustive survey elsewhere. The evidence for these glosses is too extensive and tangled for consideration here, and I have accordingly made an exhaustive survey elsewhere. Figure 6 is extracted from this, providing a visual summary of the core of the relevant material. It is focused on the Old English word hægtes(se), since that word has already made a prominent appearance here in Wið færstic, and it shows all the words which hægtesse is attested to gloss, and all of the words which, in turn, gloss those words in our corpus of Old English glosses.

Figure 6. Words glossed by hægtes(se), and words glossing those words

This diagram, if the term be pardoned, glosses over a range of complexities, but it will be clear that Old English was well endowed with words corresponding to Latin terms for mythological female shapers of fate, witches and violent, dangerous Furiae. Most of the Old English words are attested already in the eighth or ninth centuries. Wið færstic, of course, emphasises the point. This contextualises our evidence for glossators’ difficulty in finding glosses for words for nymphs, suggesting that traditional Anglo-Saxon mythological females had rather different characteristics. A wider context again for this

43 Alaric Hall, ‘Continuity in European Witchcraft Beliefs: Early Medieval to Early Modern’ for Changes of Meaning and the Meanings of Change, ed. Alaric Hall, Marianna Hintikka, Leena Kahlas-Tarkka, Roderick McConchie and Matti Rissanen (forthcoming); ‘The Evidence for maran’.

44 Cf. pp. 78–83.
Female elves and beautiful elves

apparent gap is suggested by the fact that whereas Parca, Furia, Incuba and Striga were all etymologically Latin, the words for nymphs were loans from Greek, once perhaps as unfamiliar in Roman culture as they were later to be in Anglo-Saxon culture.

The lack of an Old English word corresponding to nympha – or at least of a word which seemed fitting in the registers which the glossators drew on – does not necessarily mean that eighth-century Anglo-Saxons had no concept of female ælfe. But it does, at the least, suggest that female ælfe had a low cultural salience in early Anglo-Saxon England. Moreover, it is possible to show that this situation changed during the Old English period, and that by the earlier eleventh century, elf could denote females. The Antwerp–London Glossary (Antwerp, Plantin-Moretus Museum M 16.2 and its disiectum membrum BL Additional 32,246) consists of various glossaries written in the margins of the manuscript’s main Latin texts, among them a large Latin-English glossary organised by subject. This class-glossary was based either on Ælfric’s class-glossary or on some shared source, written by the second of the two glossing hands at Abingdon in the earlier part of the eleventh century and called article 6 by Porter and d by Ker.45 In a miscellany at the end of the glossary, preserved now in London, the redactor gathered a group of words for prophets, workers of magic and otherworldly beings, combining the ælfen and dūnælfæ traditions into the sequence ‘Oriades . muntælfæ . Driades . wuduelfen . Moides . feldelfen . Amadriades . wylde elfen . Naides . sæelfen . Castalidas . dūnelfen’.46

This text exhibits a striking morphological change: the form of ælfen attested in Leiden and Cleopatra is the grammatically expected plural ælfenne, but the form used in the Antwerp–London Glossary is elfen. This cannot reasonably be taken as a singular form: the glossator does not gloss plural lemmata with singular glosses.47 Nor is it likely to reflect some miscopying of the exemplar’s ælfenne forms, since the -en ending was extended to the inherited gloss Castalidas nymphas: dūnælfæ, giving the form ‘castalidas dûnelfen’. The only likely explanation for Antwerp–London’s elfen plurals is that ælfenne was deliberately altered to become a weak plural, because ælf had both joined the weak declension and become able to denote females. The emendation would have been facilitated by the phonological levelling of unstressed vowels and the shortening of unstressed long consonants widespread in eleventh-century English, which not only encouraged the identification of <-enne> with <-an>, but permitted their replacement with <-en>.48 The levelling of the endings of

---


47 Contra DOE, s.v. ælfen.

48 Hogg, Grammar, §§6.62, 7.80. The <-en>-spelling is surprising, as although it is consistent with early Middle English spellings of weak inflections and probably representative of eleventh-century phonology, it does not occur for etymological -an elsewhere in the glossary.
both ælfenne and dûnælfæ to -en would, by this reading, show the transference of words to the weak declension evident in Southern and West-Midland Middle English, and specifically in early Middle English attestations of elf. What is significant about this development for our purposes is that with it, the feminine marking of both ælfen and dûnælfa is lost: the weak plural ælfen in the Antwerp–London Glossary could denote females without any special feminisation. The development is emphasised by Laȝamon's characterisation of Argante as ‘fairest alre aluen’ and the description in the South English Legendary of female eluene quoted at the beginning of this chapter. The lexical gap which earlier glossators seem to have experienced had been filled by the earlier eleventh century, through the semantic extension of ælf from denoting males to denoting females.

Eighth-century Anglo-Saxons, then, had no vernacular word closely corresponding to Latin words for nymphs; the closest option was ælf, but that only denoted males. But by the earlier eleventh century, the meanings of ælf had extended to include a female denotation, later to be well attested in Middle English. Otherworldly, feminine supernatural beings similar to nymphs either did not exist for early Anglo-Saxons, or at any rate were not prominent in their ideologies – at least among the literate, probably aristocratic Anglo-Saxons who shaped our sources. But they were features of their belief a few centuries later. The rise of a female denotation of ælf appears concurrently, in the South, with the transference of ælf to the weak declension. But although this morphological change could have been a factor in creating the conditions for semantic change, it is not a sufficient explanation for it: other innovative early Middle English weak plurals like cnihten, kingen or brethren continued to denote males alone. The arrival of female elven in English culture must have involved other factors, linguistic and extra-linguistic. I will return to these factors in chapter 6. Here, however, I proceed to the other strand of our evidence for ælfe’s gender, the poetic word ælfscyne.

ÆLFSCYNE

The use of ælf as the basis for glossing words for nymphs might imply that ælfe shared the nymphs’ characteristic beauty. Certainly there are numerous examples of beautiful female elves in later English-language material: in addition to Laȝamon’s Argante, we are told by a fifteenth-century alchemical poet that

In þe cyte of Damaske [Damascus] was Albert dwellyn
And as he wente be weldernesse in a somerys morwenyng

Presumably, the reductor of the Antwerp–London Glossary, rather like the later Tremulous Worcester Scribe, copied -æn inflections in his exemplar conservatively, but when formulating his own weak plurals opted for a spelling more representative of his own speech (see Christine Franzen, ‘The Tremulous Hand of Worcester and the Nero Scribe of the Ancrene Wisse’, Medium Ævum, 72 (2003), 13–31), perhaps being encouraged in this by his exemplar’s spelling <-en>.

49 On which see Introduction, n. 8.
Female elves and beautiful elves

There he mette wyth Elchyʒel fayr e frē
de queen of elphys lond vnnyr an ev (yew) tre.50

Two centuries later again, Andro Man confessed the Quene of Elphen to be ‘verray plesand’.51 It is safe to assume that the seductive elves of the South English Legendary, the elf-queene sought by Sir Thopas, or Milton’s ‘Faery Elves’ were not bad-looking either. More strikingly, we have one Middle English attestation of elf as paradigmatic of (female) beauty: lines 5381–4 of The Wars of Alexander, an alliterative translation of the Historia de preliis Alexandri Magni composed in the north-west Midlands between about 1350 and 1450. At Alexander’s first meeting with Candace, the queen of Prasiaca, we are told that

Sire Alexsandire hire avises & all his hert liʒtis,
Him þoʒt hire like at a loke his lady his modire.
Scho was so faire & so fresche, as faucon hire semed,
An elfe out of anotheire erde or ellis an aungell.52

Sir Alexander looks at her and his whole heart leaps; she seemed to him alike in appearance to his lady his mother. She was so beautiful and so vivacious, she seemed like a falcon, an elfe out of another world or else an angel.

The last two lines render ‘Erat autem ipsa regina pulchra, formosa plurimum et decora’ (‘but that queen was beautiful, exceedingly shapely and decorous’), so elf was added by the English poet and its usage is presumably not influenced by Latin.53 Such material finds numerous parallels in later and cognate traditions, among them the Sǫgubrot af fornkonungum quoted in another context above, which states that the people of the Alfar ‘var miklu friðara en engi onnur mankind a Norðrlondum’ (‘was much more beautiful/handsome than any other human race in the North-lands’).54

How old or well established ideas like this were in Anglo-Saxon England, however, is less certain; it would be easy, for example, to attribute them to post-Conquest romance literature. Moreover, it is not clear how far a tradition of ælfe’s beauty may have encouraged the development of ælf’s female denotation and how far it might have resulted from that development. We have, however, another strand of evidence: the Old English compound ælfscy¯ne, occurring only in poetry, twice in Genesis A and once in Judith. This affords valuable evidence for the connotations of ælf. Various interpretations of ælfscy¯ne have been proposed. Stuart’s 1972 article argued for the meaning ‘inspired by God’, but, though tacitly reported by the Dictionary of Old English (s.v. ælfscy¯ne), this interpretation bears little resemblance either to the word’s literal meaning or to its contextual usage. We may also dispense with Häcker’s argument

51 Ed. Stuart, Miscellany, i 121.
53 Cited by Duggan and Turville-Petre, Alexander, 292 n. to lines 5383–4.
54 See p. 50.
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

that, taking ælf to have become semantically associated with engel (‘angel’) on the basis of medieval German personal names and the similarity of Snorri Sturluson’s ljósálfar to angels, ‘Ælfscinu may then describe Judith as angelic, i.e. “Beautiful and holy”, rather than “beautiful as an elf”, which would be more consistent with the character assigned to her by the Old English poet’. The proposed semantic association of ælf with engel is neither inherently implausible nor, as my quotation from The Wars of Alexander suggests, without English parallels. But it is insufficiently supported for Old English: the only angels with which ælfe are clearly associated are fallen ones. Less convincing handlings of ælfscyn e do exist.

Interpreting the primary evidence for ælfscyn e is affected by how the word ælfscyn e is thought to have related to the common Old English lexicon. The earlier of the two attesting poems seems certainly to be Genesis A, which on linguistic grounds seems to be of a date roughly similar to Beowulf. Judith, for its part, is generally thought to be a late-ninth- or tenth-century composition. Were ælf- a common element in Old English poetic compounds, it would be possible that two poets coined the same word independently, but since ælfscyn e is the only ælf-compound certainly attested in Old English poetry, this seems unlikely. More likely, ælfscyn e was a common (poetic) word, surviving only in the work of two independent poets. But it is also possible that it was coined by the Genesis A-poet – who relied on his audience to interpret ælfscyn e’s meaning – and borrowed directly by the Judith-poet, whose usage would reflect his reading of Genesis A. Though a shared oral-formulaic heritage has long been preferred as an explanation for shared diction between Old English poems, literary connections cannot be ruled out. Either way, however, we must both return to the literary contexts in which ælfscyn e appears, and take account of the meanings of its constituent elements in order to establish what we can both about its meanings, and about the meanings of ælf.

Both attestations of ælfscyn e in Genesis A describe the seductiveness of Abraham’s wife Sarah. The first occurrence is in lines 1822–9, when Abraham travels to Egypt because of famine in Canaan, and fears that the Egyptians will kill him for his wife:

59 The prospect of a literary connection between the poems could be supported by the fact that ælfscyn e is one of four compounds appearing only in these poems, while, as Cronan, ‘Poetic Words’, 49, noted, the two also uniquely share the simplex bælc (‘pride’). The other compounds are blæchlēor (Judith, line 128; Genesis A, line 1970), ealdorduguþ (Judith, line 309; Genesis A, line 2081), and toorthmōd (Judith, lines 6, 93; Genesis A, line 1502); cf. the similarity of Judith, lines 229–31 and Genesis A, lines 1991–3 noted by Griffith, Judith, 63 (envisaging these, however, to reflect shared oral-formulaic diction).
Then the lord, wise-minded man, began to instruct his wife with words: ‘After the Egyptians, many and proud, are able to look with their eyes upon your beauty, then the nobles of princes will expect, ælfscīne wife, that you are my bright consort; one of those warriors will want to take you for himself.’

This is based on the Vulgate’s ‘dixit Sarai uxori suae novi quod pulchra sis mulier et quod cum viderint te Aegyptii dicturi sunt uxor ipsius est’ (‘he said to Sarah his wife “I know that you are a beautiful woman and that when the Egyptians see you, they will say ‘she is his wife’”’, Gen. 12.11–12). The closest parallel for ælfscīne here is pulcher (‘beautiful’), though the correspondence is not necessarily direct. Abraham’s prediction proves correct, the Pharaoh being seized with lust, taking Sarah, and being punished in due course by God (lines 1844–72). This process is repeated by Abimelech the king of Gerar, who also marries Sarah. However, being informed by God of his error, he rectifies the situation and in lines 2729–35 says to Sarah,

ne þearf ðē on edwīt . ábraham settan .
dīn frēadrihten . þæt þū fleþtpaðas .
mæg ælfsciēno . mīne træde .
ac him hygetēonan . hwītan seolfre .
dēope bēte . ne cēara incit duguða .
of ðisse ēðyltyrf . ellor sēcan .
winas uncūдe . ac wuniað hēr .

‘Abraham, your lord and master, does not need to put you in reproach because you, ælfscīne lady, have trodden the paths of my dais; rather, rectify profoundly the insults to him with white silver. Do not choose, the two of you, to seek other companies, unfamiliar friends, elsewhere, outside this homeland, but dwell here.’

This renders Genesis 20.15–16, ‘et ait terra coram vobis est ubicumque tibi placuerit habita. Sarrae autem dixit ecce mille argenteos dedi fratri tuo hoc erit tibi in velamen oculorum ad omnes qui tecum sunt et quocumque perrexeris mementoque te deprehensam’ (‘and he said, “wherever it suits you to settle, the land about you is yours”. And to Sarah he said “behold, I have given a thousand pieces of silver to your brother. This will be for you as a veil of the eyes to all who are with you and wherever you go about; and remember that

you were seized’). Here, then, ælfscīne has no direct parallel.

Judith’s opening is lost, but ælfscīne is used, in lines 12–14, at the surviving text’s first description of Judith, as she proceeds to a feast held by Holofernes, king of the Assyrians. Holofernes is attacking the holy city of Bethulia, and Judith is on a divine mission to seduce and kill him:

gefrægen ic dā holofernes
winhātan wyrcean georne ond eallum wundrum þrymlíc
girwan up swæsendo to dām het se gumena baldor
ealle dā yldestan ðegnas hie ðæt ofstum miclum
rændon rondwiggende cōmon tō dām rican þeōde
fēran folces ræswan þæt wæs þy feorðan dōgore
þæs ðe ðæt hæþ feorðan dōgore
ides ælfscīn ðæt ærest gesōhte

Then Holofernes, I have heard, eagerly extended feast-invitations, and provided dishes with all sorts of wonders, and to this the leader of men invited all the most senior of his lords. Those shield-warriors accepted with great alacrity, they came travelling to that mighty king, to the ruler of the people. It was the fourth day when, clever in her planning, Judith, the ælfscīne lady, first sought him.

The Old English Judith sticks less closely to its scriptural bases than Genesis A, and parallels are less straightforwardly identified; they are discussed below.

Ælfscīne’s generic element, scīne, principally means ‘beautiful’ both etymologically and throughout medieval English. Like beautiful it is used in a wide variety of contexts, but almost invariably of women rather than men (except that it is often used of angels, which may afford a parallel to its association with ælf). As I have discussed above regarding Vplundarkviða, there is also a strong association of feminine beauty with lightness and brightness throughout the Germanic languages. Accordingly scīne connoted and sometimes denoted brightness in medieval English – connotations which have been emphasised because of the Norse ljósálfar. But were brightness the most important meaning of ælfscīne, one would have expected a generic primarily denoting this (for example, torht, beorht). Beauty, rather than brightness, is unambiguously the significance of ælfscīne in context: Sarah is a liability because she is pulchra (‘beautiful’); Judith is called ælfscīne when she steps forward to seduce Holofernes. Ælfscīne, then, denotes a quality of feminine or perhaps angelic beauty modified by ælf. Of the attested semantic relationships within Old English noun + adjective compounds, ælfscīne no doubt exhibits comparison

63 Ed. Weber, Biblia sacra, 1.28.
65 Bosworth and Toller, Dictionary, 1898, s.v. scīne; MED s.v. shēne; OED s.v. sheen; DOST, s.v. Scōhene.
66 See pp. 44–5. Cf. Roberts, Kay and Grundy, Thesaurus, §07.10 Beauty, fairness; cf. §03.01.12, Brightness, light.
67 For example, Bosworth and Toller, Dictionary, s.v. ælfscīnu, a doublet of the superior entry s.v. ælfscīne; Grimm, Teutonic Mythology, II 449; North, Heathen Gods, 53.
Female elves and beautiful elves

(cf. gærsgrehne ‘green as grass’; hrīmceald ‘cold as frost’). This strongly implies that ælfe were not only characterised by beauty, as frost is characterised by coldness, but that they were a paradigmatic example of beauty, as frost is a paradigmatic example of coldness.

However, commentators’ surprise at the comparison of biblical women with ælfe is not unjustified. Thun suggested that ‘a certain lack of reflection over the exact meaning of words belonging to poetical vocabulary may in the last resort account for the word’, but this should indeed be a last resort. In no case is ælfscyne necessary to the alliteration of the lines where it appears and alternative formulae were easy to come by. If ælfscyne was part of the common lexicon and not a coining by the Genesis A-poet, it might have been a bahuvrihi compound, its meanings detached from those of its constituent elements (just as bodice-ripper denotes a kind of novel, not a ripper of bodices). But in either case, it is too rare for this to seem likely. We are prompted, however, to seek more specific connotations for ælfscyne by comparison with similar compounds. Hrīmceald may tell us that frost is cold, but its function within the lexicon is to denote a specific severity of coldness. A plausible possibility has been suggested by several commentators. Swanton suggested that ‘the primary sense of Old English ælf has sinister connotations’, while North, apparently independently, took ælfscyne to mean ‘bewitchingly bright’. Tolkien seems to have had the same idea already by the 1920s, when he composed an Old English poem Ides Ælfscyne, inspired by later ballads, in which the poem’s protagonist is seduced and abducted by a supernatural ides ælfscīne. These readings suggest that someone who was ælfscyne was beautiful in a dangerously seductive way.

The women who are ælfscyne are not simply beautiful, but perilously so. In Genesis A, Sara’s beauty attracts lust which puts her desirers and her husband at risk. Abraham uses ælfscyne when describing the threat posed by Sara’s beauty; Abimelech calls Sara a ‘mæg ælfscīeno’ after discovering the dangers of divine retribution to which her beauty led him. Judith uses her beauty to seduce Holofernes and so assassinate him. The only other physical description of Judith before she decapitates Holofernes is that she is ‘bēagum gehlæste hringum gehrodene’ (‘loaded with circlets, adorned with rings’), which parallels the much more detailed description of Judith’s beautifying in Judith 10.3. This being so, ælfscyne is, in the surviving part of Judith, the only word certainly to parallel the Vulgate’s various mentions

---

69 ‘Malignant Elves’, 392.
of Judith’s beauty, increased by God ‘non ex libidine sed ex virtute’ (‘not out of lust, but out of virtue’); ‘cum vidissent eam stupentes mirati sunt nimis pulchritudinem eius’; ‘erat in oculis eorum stupor quoniam mirabantur pulchritudinem eius nimis’; ‘cumque intrasset ante faciem eius statim captus est in suis oculis Holofernis’ (‘when they had seen her they, wondering, were enchanted beyond measure by her beauty’; ‘stupefaction was upon their eyes, since they were marvelling so much at her beauty’; ‘and when she had entered before his person, suddenly Holofernes was captivated, through his own eyes’). In the Vulgate, then, Judith is jaw-droppingly beautiful through divine intervention; but the purpose of her beauty is not to reflect God’s glory: it is to provoke Holofernes’s sexual desire. It is hard to tell how much of this material finds representation in ælfsceâne. The Old English poem downplays Judith’s seductiveness, and to some extent indeed her femininity. However, the idea that ælfsceâne might connote entrancing beauty, perhaps also implying supernatural assistance, would fit the context admirably. The application to Judith of a word with such pejorative connotations is not an obstacle to this reading: as the Vulgate explicitly recognises, such entrancing beauty would in ordinary circumstances be condemned.

CONCLUSIONS

On the one hand, then, it is clear from the word ælfsceâne that by at least the ninth century, ælfe were paradigms of seductive, female beauty. This evidence fits nicely with the use of ælf as the basis for glossing words for nymphs, which were seductive, beautiful otherworldly females. Together, these sources support the arguments of chapter 2 for ælfe’s early anthropomorphicity, and to some extent with my characterisation of ælfe as otherworldly rather than monstrous; they emphasise that these characteristics continued in Anglo-Saxon beliefs despite the demonising representations in Beowulf and the Royal Prayerbook. However, ælfsceâne also affords fairly reliable evidence that ælfe’s beauty was characterised by a dangerous seductiveness; this is a theme to which I return in chapter 6, concerning the Old English medical texts connected with the word ælfsidæn.

The most intriguing outcomes of this chapter, however, concern ælfe’s gender. The evidence of our glosses is that the semantics of ælf could not comfortably include a female denotation in early Old English. The extension of ælf’s semantics to the denotation of females is attested only in the eleventh century. If this analysis is correct, it presents a striking example of change in Anglo-Saxon non-Christian belief after the conversion to Christianity, suggesting the vitality of such beliefs in Christian Anglo-Saxon culture. But the analysis is complicated by the fact that the word ælfsceâne associates

73 Jud. 10.4, 10.7, 10.14, 10.17; ed. Weber, Biblia sacra, i 702–3.
Female elves and beautiful elves

ælfe with feminine beauty well before the eleventh century. It is not clear how these different pieces of evidence should be squared. It is tempting to infer that a female denotation of ælf was a prerequisite for the formation of ælfscýne. If it were, then the likelihood that Genesis A was composed in the eighth or ninth centuries would mean that female ælfe existed in Old English – and in a conservative register at that – much earlier than their first clear attestation in the Antwerp–London Glossary. However, there is a degree of methodological security in taking the evidence at face value: that early, male Anglo-Saxon ælfe were in some significant respects effeminate. Ælfe’s beauty would be a motivating factor for the use of the word ælf in glosses on words for nymphs, and for the subsequent extension of ælf itself to include a female denotation. I return to these problems to assess relations between ælfe and gender in detail in chapter 6. But there is more evidence to be assembled first, both on this issue and on others. This evidence arises from our Old English medical texts.
Ælfe, Illness and Healing (1):
The ‘Elf-Shot’ Conspiracy

Medical texts comprise the Old English genre which attests most often to ælf. At the beginning of this book, I sketched the image extracted from this material in the early twentieth century, which characterised ælfe as small, mischievous spirits who caused illness by shooting arrows (a phenomenon called ‘elf-shot’). I have now also assembled the evidence for a quite different conception of ælfe: male, beautiful, human(-like), and otherworldly. It would be possible to square these conclusions with the medical texts simply by proposing that the medical texts exhibit the kind of demonisation of ælfe attested in Beowulf and the Royal Prayerbook. However, the need for a detailed and sustained reassessment of the medical texts, to see what evidence they really afford, is clear – and the resultant picture is both more complex and more interesting than what has hitherto been perceived. An important part of this revision has been done already: subsequently to her 1996 book, Jolly showed that the illustration to psalm 37 in the Eadwine Psalter, long imagined to depict ‘elf-shot’, is really a conventional depiction of demons, straightforwardly illustrating the psalm: ‘the later iconography of elves as delightfully mischievous little figures playing tricks on people has caused scholars such as Grattan and Singer to read an Anglo-Saxon elf into this picture of demonic affliction’.¹ The present chapter focuses, then, purely on texts.

Three Anglo-Saxon medical manuscripts attest to ælf, usually in somewhat peripheral contexts, suggesting a certain ambivalence about the appropriateness of the material.² I have discussed the late-tenth- or early-eleventh-century manuscript Harley 585 (in connection with Wið færstice), and return to Wið færstice at the end of this chapter; ælf occurs in Harley 585 once otherwise, in an attestation of ælfsiden considered in chapter 5. Likewise, I have discussed in chapter 2 the Royal Prayerbook’s earlier, demonising attestation of ælf. Falling between these manuscripts in date is BL Royal 12 D. xvii, which contains the collections known as Bald’s Leechbook (in two books) and Leechbook III.

The manuscript is handsome if plain, written by the scribe who entered the batch of annals for 925–55 into the Parker Chronicle.³ This suggests that the

¹ ‘Elves’, at 20, citing Grattan and Singer, Anglo-Saxon Magic, frontispiece.
³ See C. E. Wright (ed.), Bald’s Leechbook: British Museum, Royal Manuscript 12 D. xvii, Early
The ‘elf-shot’ conspiracy

manuscript was produced at Winchester in the mid-tenth century, the political bias of the Chronicle entries consolidating the obvious assumption of links to King Edmund’s court. Some of the contents of Bald’s Leechbook, however, show associations with the court of Alfred the Great, whose personal concerns with illness and vernacular writing provide a plausible context for the text’s original compilation. This seems to have been undertaken, with impressive care, by several compilers, to a large extent from existing sources; much of the content is translated from Latin, putting the text at the cutting edge of early-medieval Western medicine. Either way, the royal associations of both text and manuscript are sufficient to suggest the social circles to whose beliefs the material most reliably attests. The other text in Royal 12 D. xvii, Leechbook III, exhibits less Latin influence, and so may reflect traditional Anglo-Saxon medicine better, though this need not mean – as Cameron thought – that it is an earlier collection. There is no modern published edition of Royal 12 D.xvii, and since facsimiles are as accessible as Cockayne’s edition, where folio references are easily found, I cite from Wright’s facsimile of the manuscript. I have taken the usual editorial liberties of expanding abbreviations and normalising word-separation.

There are many ways in which this material could be presented. A remedy may be linked to another relevant text by shared vocabulary, to a further text by the history of its transmission, and another again by its manuscript context. I have grouped the texts in two ways. One group of remedies, from a range of collections, is connected by sharing the word ælfsidēn or its cognate sīdsa, or by being textually related to remedies which do. This group is of special interest, because sīden and sīdsa are cognate with the Old Norse seiðr, which denotes a kind of magic and has received much recent attention. Accordingly, I have drawn together this material as the focus of chapter 5. The other remedies are less entangled. These I discuss in this chapter in an order based on their date and manuscript attestations. Although they attest to a range of associations for ælfe, they are to a large extent connected by their relations to the historiographical construct of ‘elf-shot’, which affords the present chapter’s thematic thread.

The medical texts themselves are not the only material with a bearing


6 Cameron, Anglo-Saxon Medicine, 35–42.

7 Cockayne, Leechdoms, ii; Wright, Bald’s Leechbook; cf. Doane, Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts, no. 298.
on ælfe’s associations with illness. Some more tangential evidence derives also from glosses and a plant-name containing ælf-, which I have analysed in detail elsewhere, referring to the material here where it is relevant.8 Likewise, I only touch, for lack of space, on the associations with illness of ælf’s cognates and reflexes – though most of the known later-medieval English evidence is referred to here. I have reassessed potential early Modern Scottish comparative material elsewhere.9 Medieval German evidence appears only occasionally.10 However, it is important to appreciate that the associations of ælfe with illness seem to be part of a wider and presumably older tradition. Perhaps significantly, the evidence is mainly West Germanic. I look in detail at medieval Scandinavian material in the next chapter, but it is noteworthy that despite the wealth of Icelandic saga-evidence for witchcraft and illness, associations of álfar with illness are rare and sometimes have German origins.11 It may be that the extensive attestations in later Scandinavian folklore reflect the spread of German culture through the Hanseatic league.12

‘ELF-SHOT’ IN BALD’S LEECHBOOK II, GIF HORS OFSCOTEN SÎE

Ælf occurs in Bald’s Leechbook in three remedies. One, from Book I, uses the word ælfсидen and is accordingly considered in chapter 5. The others both occur in section 65 of Book II, occurring, towards the end of the text, on folios 106a–108a. One of these is our unique attestation of sıdså and is, again, considered alongside ælfсидen. As Nokes and I have independently argued, section 65 was probably added after Bald’s original compilation.13 Its remedies

---


13 Nokes, ‘Bald’s Leechbook’, 67–8; Alaric Hall, ‘Calling the Shots: The Old English Remedy Gif hors ofscoten sie and Anglo-Saxon “Elf-Shot”’, Neuphilologische Mitteilungen, 106 (2005), 195–209, at 196 n. 3; available at <http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/3052>., Jolly, Popular Religion, 151–4, considered these ailments an ‘odd collection’ (at p. 154), but the groupings may be more coherent than
are listed in the contents list to Book II on folio 64v:

Læcædom gif hors sìe ofscoten 7 wiþ utwærce . 7 gif útgang forseten sìe . 7 wiþ lenctenâdle . eft wiþ utwærce 7 wiþ unlybbum 7 wiþ þære geolwan âdle 7 gif men sìe færlice yfele 7 to gehealdanne fîchoman hâlo 7 wiþ gîçpan 7 ælue 7 wiþ londâdle 7 gongelwæfran bite . 7 wiô útsihte 7 hêafodealfâ .

Remedy for if a horse is ofscoten; and one for ðdysentery; and one if excrement is obstructed; and one for lenctenâdl; another for ðdysentery; and one for unlybban; and one for the yellow ailment; and one if the sudden evil be upon a person; and one to keep the body healthy; and one for scabs [perhaps an ailment such as psoriasis]; and [against an] ælf; and one for londâdl; and one [for] spider’s bite; and for ðdysentery [at any rate, some bowel disorder]; and head-salves.14

It is the first remedy in section 65, Gif hors ofscoten sìe, on folio 106r, that concerns us here:

Gif hors ofscoten sìe. nim þonne þæt seax þe þæt hæfte sìe fealo hryþeres horn 7 sien .III. ærene næglas on. Writ þonne þâm horse on þâm hêafe foran crîstes mæl þæt hit blêde . Writ þonne on þâm hricge crîstes mæl 7 on leoða gehwilcum þe þu ætfeolân mæge. nim þonne þêt winestre ðær þurh sting swîgende. Þis þu scealt dôn. genim âne girde slêah on þæt bæc þonne biþ þæt hors hâl. 7 âwrit on þæs seaxes horne þás word. Benedicite omnia opera domini dominum. Sý þêt ylfa þe him sìe þis him mæg tô bûte.

If a horse is badly pained [pfsocoten]. Take then a dagger whose haft is of fallow-ox’s horn and in which there are three brass nails. Write/inscribe on the horse, on the forehead, Christ’s mark, so it bleeds. Write/inscribe then Christ’s mark on the spine and on each of the limbs which you can grasp.15 Then take the left ear, pierce it in silence. This shall you do: take a staff; strike on the back; then the horse will be well. And write/inscribe on the dagger’s handle these words: blessing all the works of the Lord of lords. Should it be ælfe’s, which is on it [the horse], this will do as a remedy for it [the horse].

Historiographically, this remedy is crucial, as it has prompted most of the identifications of ‘elf-shot’ in our Old English corpus. Despite its obvious

at first they seem. Ælf may, in fact, be a connecting feature. Of the fifteen remedies listed, three concern bowel problems and one jaundice – itself associated with internal pains (see n. 47) – while gif hors ofscoten sìe, which mentions ælf, also concerns internal pains. Another is against an ælf (see pp. 120–1), while cutaneous ailments (cf. gîçdan) are associated with ælf (pp. 106–8). Remedies against a spider’s bite closely follow a series on fevers, madness and demonic and magical afflictions including ælfsegan in Book I of Bald’s Leechbook (ff. 50v–54r, nos 57–68; see further below, pp. 124–6). Although lungenâdl is not elsewhere associated with ælf, it is incorrectly listed in the contents as lenctenâdl, which is (pp. 121–3). These latter ailments relate fairly closely to the beneficial properties of jet as described in the following section, while, as Peter Kitson, ‘From Eastern Learning to Western Folklore’, in Superstition and Popular Medicine in Anglo-Saxon England, ed. D. G. Scrugg (Manchester: Centre for Anglo-Saxon Studies, University of Manchester, 1989), pp. 57–71 pointed out at pp. 60–1, the only remedy in the Old English medical texts to prescribe jet occurs in section 65, in the remedy Wið ælf.14

The fact that wiþ is absent before ælf might indicate that that remedy was viewed to be for a more specific form of gîçda, an interpretation also invited by the fact that the beginning of the remedy wið gîçpan on folio 107v is set into the margin and the beginning of the following remedies are not. However, these might respectively result from stylistic variation and the fact that the remedy wið gîçpan happened to start on a new line, whereupon the scribe of Royal 12 D. xvii set the first into the margin as a matter of course.

14 On this translation see Hall, ‘Calling the Shots’, 197 n. 6 (contra DOE, s.v. æt-fêolan §3a, following instead §1).
title, *Gif hors ofscoten sie*, given here and in the contents list, this remedy was entitled *Wið ylfa gescot* by Grendon and *Wip ylfa gescotum* by Storms. Moreover, the first clause, for which I suggest the literal translation ‘if a horse is badly pained’, was translated by Grendon as ‘if a horse is elf-struck’, by Storms as ‘if a horse is elf-shot’, and, circumspectly but in accordance with this tradition, by Jolly as ‘if a horse is [elf]shot [ofscoten]’. This translation has also entered the dictionaries. However, these readings derive from a misunderstanding of Cockayne’s translation ‘if a horse is elf shot’: Cockayne’s glossary entry for *ofscoten* shows that in fact he meant this as an idiomatic rendering meaning ‘dangerously distended by greedy devouring of green food’.

There is no good reason to link the verb *ofscēotan* to the agency of *ælfe*. Thun, stating what other scholars imply, deduced that ‘the mention of *ylfa* makes it seem likely that the elves were thought to be those who were shooting’. This inference is predicated on the idea that *ofscēotan* connotes the shooting of missiles, for which we must posit a source. However, although *scēotan* literally denotes thrusting or shooting, later in English it had specific medical meanings along the lines of ‘to afflict, cause pain; have darting pains’; the prefix *of-* would simply have an intensifying force. This putative meaning is not otherwise clearly paralleled in the Old English medical texts, though Leechbook III and Harley 585 share a remedy ‘wið scēotendum wenne’ (‘against a scēotend growth’), which seems likely to attest to *scēotan* in a similar sense, unless it is an early attestation of the sense ‘to sprout, to spring forth’.

As Cockayne realised, *Gif hors ofscoten sie* almost certainly concerns internal pains rather than a projectile wound, actual or metaphorical. Thun’s claim was also predicated on the idea that *ælfe* are integral to the remedy. It is the last sentence of the remedy, ‘Sý þæt ylfa þe him sīe þis him mæg tō bōte’, which actually mentions *ælfe*, providing the only support for reading ‘elf-shot’ into the text. This sentence is rather convoluted and it has hitherto been mistranslated. Cockayne offered ‘Be the elf what it may, this is mighty for him to amends’. This implies that an *ælf*, which might be one of various sorts, is somehow assailing the horse. Subsequent commentators have basically followed Cockayne. Grendon translated ‘Be the elf who he may, this will suffice as a cure for him’ and Singer ‘Be the elf who he may, this has power as a remedy’. Storms went further, offering ‘Whatever elf

17 *Popular Religion*, 152.
20 ‘Malignant Elves’, 385.
23 *Leechdoms*, ii 291.
The ‘elf-shot’ conspiracy

has taken possession of it, this will cure him.’ Jolly and, most recently, Pettit, have improved on Cockayne’s handling of ‘pe him sīe’ with, respectively, the more conservative translations ‘Whatever elf is on him, this can be a remedy for him’ and ‘Whatever kind of elf it is, this can be a remedy for it’. But all these translations mishandle the first part of the sentence – more because each translator has unthinkingly followed Cockayne’s error than because it is especially difficult – and we should instead translate, ‘If that [ailment] be ælfe’s, which is on it [the horse], this will do as a remedy for it [the horse].’ But since the alternative is so well established, it is appropriate to discuss the translations’ relative merits in detail.

The main clause of the sentence (‘pis him maeg tō bōte’) is hard to render idiomatically in English because of the usage of magan, but its meaning is not in doubt. But Cockayne clearly had difficulty with the subordinate clause (‘Sīe þæt ylfa þe him sīe’, translated ‘Be the elf what it may’). It might be possible to take him in Sū þæt ylfa þe him sīe reflexively to refer to the subject, producing a literal rendering along the lines of ‘Be that [creature] of ælfe, which he may in himself be’, but extracting such a sense is tortuous, and the available parallels dubious. Moreover, a much simpler reading is available, as Jolly’s translation suggests. Him would naturally be taken to refer to the indirect object of the sentence, as it does in the main clause (as in Cockayne’s ‘this is mighty for him to amends’), while clause-initial subjunctives like sū (third person singular present subjunctive of wesan ‘to be’) were used in inverted conditional clauses to express uncertainty (cf. ‘be he alive or dead…’). This suggests the reading ‘Be þæt ylfa, which may be on it [the horse], this will do as a remedy for it [the horse].’ Similar constructions are ‘gif hyt þonne sū þæt sīo wamb sy āþundeno, scearfa ðonne þā wyrt 7 lege on þā wambe’ (‘If it should then be that the stomach is swollen, scrape those plants and lay [them] on the stomach’) in the Old English Herbarium and ‘sū þæt sār þæ ¯ r hit sy, smīte mon ðā sealfe æ ¯ rest on þæt hēafod’ (‘Be the pain where it may, one should smear the salve first on the head’) in Lacnunga, and from the laws V Æthelstan ‘gif hit sy ȷegen ðe hit dō, sy ȷæt ilce’ (‘if it be a thegn who does it, be that [punishment] likewise’).

The subject of the conditional clause must be þæt. Cockayne tried to explain þæt ylfa as a partitive genitive (a construction along the lines of ‘one of the ælfe’), but faced difficulties because ælf is masculine and þæt is neuter

---

25 Anglo-Saxon Magic, 249.
26 Jolly, Popular Religion, 152; Pettit, Anglo-Saxon Remedies, ii 221 n. 583; cf. 252.
30 Ylfa can, if declining regularly, only be a genitive plural: see Appendix 1 below. Even if it shows the same transference to the feminine ð-stem declension as the form dunælf (see above, p. 83), a plural could not be the subject of the singular verb, which is, in any case, intransitive, leaving no function for þæt if ylfa were to be taken as the subject.
(we would have expected **sīe sē hē ylfa**). He therefore sought a parallel for reading the neuter pronoun to refer to the masculine *ylfa* in the construction *ic hit com.*31 This example seems of dubious relevance, but Cockayne’s interpretation might be viable insofar as neuter demonstratives are occasionally used of grammatically masculine nouns with asexual denotees, in which case we must suppose that *ælfe* were viewed as asexual in this text.32 But it would be much more plausible to take *þæt* to refer to the illness with which the horse is afflicted, with *ylfa* as a straightforward possessive genitive: ‘if that [ailment] be *ælfe*’s, which is on it [the horse], this will do as a remedy for it [the horse]’. This is unambiguously the case in ‘*sy* þæt sēr þær hit *sy*’, where *sēr* is the restatement of an antecedent. Hence the translation which I gave above: ‘Should it be *ælfe*’s, which is on it, this will do as a remedy for it’.

This means that the last sentence of *Gif hors ofscoten sīe*, the one which mentions *ælfe*, opens with a conditional clause, showing that *ælfe* are not necessarily involved in the illness at all. The remedy implies only that the ailment might in some way belong to *ælfe*, and advocates an extra measure for use should this be the case. This interpretation is further supported by the fact that after the striking of the horse, we are told ‘þonne biþ þæt hors hāl’ (‘then the horse will be well’), a closing-formula in the texts.33 The following note ‘*I* ñwët on þæes seaxes horne þæs word. Benedicite omnia opera domini dominum. *Sy* þæt ylfa þe him sīe þis him mæg tō bōte’ is an addition. This is consistent with the existence of three remedies for *gescoten* horses which do not mention *ælfe*.34 Several previous commentators, however, have interpreted these otherwise, Thun again making his inferences explicit. Having concluded that the *ofscoten* horse had been shot by ‘elves’ in the text which mentions them, he deduced that

the term *gescoten* in *Lacnunga* is a synonym of *ofscoten* in *Læceboc*. If we accept elves as being the shooting spirits in the two passages in *Læceboc* . . . it will seem highly probable that they were thought of as shooting also in *Lacnunga* .35

Subsequently, various other texts including neither *ælf* nor *scēotan* have, at times, been identified as remedies for ‘elves’, helping the idea of ‘elf-shot’ and other malicious actions by ‘elves’ to spread through the corpus.36 But this reasoning is inverted: the absence of *ælf* in all these texts militates against *ælfe*’s general presence, not for it.

What, then, can we infer from *Gif hors ofscoten sīe* about *ælfe*? A redactor of the remedy thought that one possible cause of a horse being *ofscoten* might be *ælfe*. This chimes both with the Old English compound *ælfisogoða*, considered

---

31 *Leechdoms*, ii 291 n. 2.
32 See Mitchell, *Syntax*, i §68.
36 See Hall, ‘Calling the Shots’, 201; a further example is Pettit, *Anglo-Saxon Remedies*, ii 300.
The 'elf-shot' conspiracy

below, and with the fact that Middle English and Older Scots attest to compounds of elf with a variety of words (including Older Scots schot) bearing meanings along the lines of 'sharp pain' and 'seized with pain'.\(^37\) Meanwhile, according to Martin Luther's Tischreden,

> Multa saepe dixit Lutherus de fascinatione, von herzgespan und elbe, et quomodo mater sua vexata esset a vicina fascinatrice, ita ut coacta esset eam reverendissime tractare et conciliare, den sie schoß ihre kinder, daß sich zu tode schrien.\(^38\)

Luther spoke very often about witchcraft, about pains in the diaphragm and 'elbe', and how his mother had been troubled by a neighbouring witch, so that she had been forced to treat her very respectfully and to conciliate her, because she 'schoß' her children, so that they screamed themselves half to death.

Schiessen is cognate with scēotan and appears here in collocation with both alp and another word denoting an ailment, sensed in the torso and literally called 'heart-strain'. Though shared collocations could reflect common innovations or cultural loans, this text does hint that the collocation of elf with scēotan and internal pain derives from the shared culture of West Germanic-speakers. Whatever the case, Gif hors ofscoten sīe seems to be an early attestation of a linguistic tradition which was to have a long life in English, associating elfe with causing internal pains. But precisely how elfe were involved in making a horse ofscoten is neither indicated by the remedy, nor, reliably, by its later analogues. Luther's text also raises the prospect of elben acting as agents for witches, a development which can probably be traced in witchcraft trials from early Modern English- and German-speaking contexts, and this would fit with some of our Scandinavian comparative evidence for ælfsīden considered below; in particular, our first attestation of elf-shot in English comes in a sixteenth-century manuscript of a literary curse directed by John Rowll against the thieves of his poultry around 1492–1503, in which he wishes them

> The mowlis {chilblains} and in þair sleep þe mare
> The canker {sore} also and the caterss {rheums}
> And never to be but {without} schot of blude {of uncertain meaning}
> Or elf schot þus to conclude
> and mony vther maletais {maladies}\(^39\)

Though not a serious curse, Rowll's text does effectively invoke elves against someone else: did others do the same in earnest? Earlier English evidence, however, is hard to come by. The idea of sending ylues to afflict an individual may underlie the verse lament of the hero Wade quoted in a sermon Humiliamini

\(^38\) Ed. E. Kroker, Tischreden, D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, 6 vols (Weimer: Böhlau, 1912–21), iii 131 [no. 2982b].  
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

sub potenti manu dei ut vos exaltet in tempore visitationis in the twelfth-century manuscript Peterhouse College Cambridge 255:

Summe sende ylues & summe sende nadderes. 
sumne sende nikeres the biden pates punien. 
Nister man nenne bute ildebrand onne. 

Some send elves and some send snakes; some send nikeres [water-monsters] which dwell by the water [reading pater]; no one is there but Hildebrand alone.

The implication here seems to be that some hostile force sent ylues to beset Wade, implying an ability to co-opt them into causing harm to members of the in-group. Though early and English, however, Wade’s complaint is too short and ill contextualised to be developed.

OTHER ÆLF-AILMENTS: LEECHBOOK III, FF. 123A–125V

Leechbook III is markedly more concerned with diabolical threats, ailments whose names contain ælf, and what Jolly termed ‘mind-altering afflictions’, than Bald’s Leechbook. These matters dominate sections 54–68 (ff. 122v–127r). (Ælf also occurs in Leechbook III, section 41, in the compound ælfśiden, but I consider this separately in chapter 5.) Within this sequence are three contiguous sections, 61–3, respectively concerning ælfcynn, ælfādl (apparently comprehending ælfsogoða) and wæterælfādl, as the contents list on folio 110v describes:

61. A salve against ælfcynn and against a nihtgenga, and for/against those people whom the/a devil has sex with. 62. A remedy against ælfādl; and also how one must sing over the plants before one picks them; and also how one must put those plants under an altar and sing over them; and also signs whereby [one can tell] if it is (an) ælfsogoða; and signs by which you can tell whether one can remedy it, and drinks and prayers against every tribulation of the Enemy. 63. Signs by which you can tell if a person is suffering wæterælfādl, and a remedy against it and a charm to sing over it; and one can sing the same over wounds.

40 The last letter is ill-formed and unclear.
42 For this translation of costung see Audrey L. Meaney, ‘The Anglo-Saxon View of the Causes of Illness’, in Health, Disease and Healing in Medieval Culture, ed. Sheila Campbell, Bert Hall and David Klausner (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 12–33, at 17–18. Cf. DOE s.v. costung §1; contra §2.b.ii and s.v. feond §3.a.iv.
The 'elf-shot' conspiracy

The first remedy, *Wip ælfcynne*, does not mention *ælfсидen*, but is textually related to remedies which do, so this too I consider in chapter 5. The contents list associates the *elf*-ailments here with diabolical harm, and specifically *fёndes costunga*, but the distinctions drawn in the passage also imply that the two things were viewed as at least potentially different. The phenomena which seem to be associated particularly with *elf* in these sections are nocturnal assaults by supernatural beings, internal pains and cutaneous ailments or wounds.

Ælfādl

After the remedy *Wip ælfcynne*, Leechbook III proceeds to describe three complex procedures ‘*Vvið ælfādle*’. As Jolly emphasised, these include liturgical elements, and their complexity attests to the potential seriousness of *ælfādl*; but they contain no further evidence for the nature of *ælf*, or for what clinical conditions *ælfādl* might denote.43 Semantic perspectives are more enlightening. *Ādl* was a generic term for illness; of the possible semantic relationships between the elements of *ælfādl*, much the likeliest is the common English pattern whereby the generic results from the determiner: thus *ælfādl* is probably simply a generic term, denoting any *ādl* caused by an *elf* or *ælf*.44 There is no evidence that the word’s meaning was divorced from that suggested by its constituent elements.

Ælfsogoða

Among the remedies for *ælfādl*, however, are ‘*tācnu be þām hwæþer hit sīe ælfsogoþa*’ (‘signs by which [to know] whether it is *ælfsogoða*’). This suggests that *ælfsogoða* was a type of *ælfādl*; it must also have been a type of *sogoða*. *Ælfsogoða* has puzzled lexicographers; the *Dictionary of Old English* offers ‘dis-ease thought to have been caused by supernatural agency, perhaps anaemia’, tacitly repeating a guess in Geldner’s *Untersuchungen zu ae. Krankheitsnamen* of 1908.45 But *sogoða* itself denoted internal pains, Clark Hall defining *ælfsogoða* accordingly as ‘hiccough (thought to have been caused by elves)’.46 Moreover, the unusually specific description of symptoms by which an *ælfsogoða* can be identified almost certainly includes jaundice, and since the causal association of jaundice with liver, pancreas and bile-duct problems tends to associate it with internal pain and digestive distress, the symptoms of *ælfsogoða* are consistent with the evidence for *sogoða*.47 *Ælfsogoða*, then, surely denoted

43 *Popular Religion*, 159–65. Cameron, *Anglo-Saxon Medicine*, 155, claimed that ‘*ælfadl* . . . for reasons already given, appears to have designated cutaneous eruptions of various kinds’, but I have not found those ‘reasons given’ in any of his works.
47 Leon Schiff, *The Differential Diagnosis of Jaundice* (Chicago: Year Book Publishers, 1946), 219–21,
internal pains (possibly of some specific sort) caused by ælfe, fitting nicely with the evidence of Gif hors ofscoten sie and its analogues.

That ælfsogoða did connote the involvement of ælfe, as its literal meaning would suggest, is shown by a Latin charm in one of the remedies, which begins ‘Deus omnipotens pater domini nostri jesu cristi. per Inpositionem huius scriptura expelle a famulo tuo . nomen . Omnem Impetuum castalidum’ (‘God almighty, father of our lord Jesus Christ, through the application of this writing expel from your servant, name, every attack of castalides’). Castalides here seems certainly to denote ælfe through an adaptation of the use of dūnælfα to gloss castalidas nymphas, discussed above in chapter 3, and it is striking that the exorcism shows such care to specify ælfe in Latin rather than simply demonising them with daemones or diaboli.48 This charm has also been taken as evidence that ælfe might possess the afflicted person, the charm being seen as an exorcism.49 This reading is possible but not required: ‘Impetuum castalidum’ could here mean any sort of attack (including magical ones). It seems to have been inferred from a second charm, following shortly after: ‘Deus omnipotens pater domini nostri jesu cristi per Inpositionem huius scriptura et per gustum huius expelle diabolum a famulo tuo . n.’ (‘God almighty, father of our lord Jesus Christ, through the application of this writing and through its tasting, expel the Devil from your servant, n[ame]’). This presupposes diabolical possession. But the impetus castalidum and diabolical possession could have been accorded separate charms precisely because they were distinct.

Wæterælfādl

The last in Leechbook III’s sequence of ælf-remedies, section 63, declares itself to be ‘Gif mon biþ on wæterælfādl’ (‘if a person is suffering from wæterælfādl [literally “fluid-ælf-ailment”]; f. 125rv). No semantic information is afforded for wæterælfādl by way of synonyms. It, like ælfsogoða, was probably a hyponym of ælfādl, being accorded a separate section simply because the section on ælfādl had grown so long. But we do have some idea about what ailment(s) wæterælfādl denoted. As Cameron emphasised, wæterælfādl might be understood in two ways: as wæterælf-ādl or as wæter-ælfādl.50 The first interpretation implies an ailment caused by a particular species of ælf (‘water-ælfe’); the second a specific variety of ælfādl (presumably involving symptoms associated with fluids). Both interpretations can be supported by reference to other compounds: wæterælfen occurs in the ælfen glosses discussed in chapter 3; ælfādl has just been discussed, and the use of wæter- as a modifier in Old English words for cf. 124–7, 177; Hall, ‘Calling the Shots’, 203–4; cf. Meaney, ‘Causes of Illness’, 20.


49 For example, Bosworth and Toller, Dictionary, s.v. ælf-sogoða; Jolly, Popular Religion, 163–4.

50 Anglo-Saxon Medicine, 155.
The 'elf-shot' conspiracy

illnesses is well attested.51 Most commentators have read waterelf-ādl.52 But water-ælfādl, favoured by Bonser and apparently Cameron, is much the more plausible alternative.53 I showed in chapter 3 that the various compounds combining ælfen with topographical terms are almost certainly ad hoc formations, and that this is probably the case for ælfen itself. Admittedly, the mention of castalides in the Latin charm against ælfsogoða emphasises the potential for glosses to influence Anglo-Saxon physicians, and there is some rather tangential early Middle English evidence for associating ælfe with bodies of water.54 But water-ælfādl remains much better paralleled, and it is unlikely that we should envisage an Anglo-Saxon tradition of wæterælfe. Wæterælfādl must be considered another hyponym of ælfādl.

The remedy seems to cater for some cutaneous disorder, since it seems to prescribe a poultice for application to what in a charm it calls benne, dolh and wund (‘wounds’, ‘a cut, wound, tumour’ and ‘a wound, sore, ulcer’): it may be possible to associate these specifically with chicken-pox or measles.55 If so, this could provide a basis for arguing that waterelfādl is a bahuvrihi compound, any associations with ælfe being forgotten; but, as with ælfsogoða, certain symptoms may simply have been taken as diagnostic of ailments caused by ælfe. Moreover, there is later and comparative evidence associating ælfe with cutaneous ailments – albeit less than there is for internal pains. The Life of Adame and Eve, attested uniquely in Bodleian Library MS Eng. poet.a.1 (the Vernon Manuscript), compiled around the 1390s, describing the fallen angels, comments that ‘If eny mon is elve-inome othur elve-iblowe, he hit hath of the angelus that fellen out of hevene’ (‘If anyone is elue-inome or elue-iblowe, he has it from the angels that fell from heaven’).56 There is too little context here to be certain what elue i-nome and elue i-blowe meant, but the Middle English Dictionary links elue i-blowe with the sense ‘to blow (infectious breath, poison) upon (sb.)’.57 If so, it may also have had a sense like blisted (‘blown upon malevolently’), as in the citation ‘ʒef a man be blowyn with a foul spiritus or a false blast þat he loke lyk a mesel in his face’ (‘if a man be blowyn by a foul wind/breath or an evil blast so that his face looks like a leper’s’).58 A similar

---

51 Bosworth and Toller, Dictionary, s.vv. wæterādl, wæterbolla, wætergeblæd, wætersēocnes.
53 Bonser, Medical Background, 162–3; Cameron, Anglo-Saxon Medicine, 41.
54 See Edwards, ‘Laȝamon’s Elves’.
55 Cameron, Anglo-Saxon Medicine, 154–5.
57 Sv. blouen (v. (i)) §2e. Elue i-nome is presumably to be understood in the same way as elf-taken ‘seized with pain by an elfelves’, for which see MED, s.vv. elf, täken §2b; OED, s.v. take §1.7; cf. Thomas, Religion, 725, on fairy-taken.
58 Cf. the collocation of the remedy ‘For a man or womman that is blisted with wikkede spiritis to do away the ache and abate the swellyng’, immediately preceding a remedy for elf-cake in a fourteenth-century manuscript, ed. G. Henslow, Medical Works of the Fourteenth Century (London: Chapman and Hall, 1899), 89.
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

collocation occurs in the Middle High German *Münchener Nachtsegen*, the hand dating from the second quarter of the fourteenth century:

Alb mit diner crummen nasen
Ich vorbithe dir aneblasen
Ich vorbite dir alb ruche
cruchen vn anehuccen\(^{59}\)

\(^{59}\) Lines 33–6; ed. Thedor von Grienberger. ‘Der Münchener Nachtsegen’, *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur*, 41 (1897), 335–63, at 337–8. On dating see Edwards, ‘Heinrich von Morungen’, 120. I am indebted to Peter Hasler and the other members of his University of Glasgow Middle High German reading group for assistance with the interpretation of this text.

The compound *alvskot(t)* could in Continental Scandinavia in the nineteenth century denote cutaneous ailments as well as internal ones, *elveblest* remaining the Norwegian term for hay fever rashes, while German traditions also associate *alpe* with cutaneous ailments.\(^{60}\) This material suggests that *waterælfædl* may have been part of a reasonably well-defined association of *ælf* with cutaneous ailments.

\[^{60}\] See above, p. 100; ‘Getting Shot’, 22–4; ‘Calling the Shots’, 202, 206.

\[^{59}\] Lines 33–6; ed. Thedor von Grienberger. ‘Der Münchener Nachtsegen’, *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur*, 41 (1897), 335–63, at 337–8. On dating see Edwards, ‘Heinrich von Morungen’, 120. I am indebted to Peter Hasler and the other members of his University of Glasgow Middle High German reading group for assistance with the interpretation of this text.


---

**WID FÆRSTICE**

\(\textit{Ælfe}\), then, might be identified as the cause of a variety of ailments, afflicting both people and animals. The best attested are pains within the torso. This reanalysis of our Old English *ælf*-corpus provides a new context for interpreting the text with which I opened this study, *Wid færstice*, and *Wid færstice* in turn provides a key to interpreting the cultural significance of *ælf* in medieval texts. Although we cannot be certain that its alliterative collocation of *ēse* and *ælfe* is a traditional Old English formula, since it might in theory be a loan from rather than a cognate of the Norse formula *asir ok álfar*, we now know at least that the conceptual collocation of *ēse* and *ælfe* was traditional. I have shown that in earlier Anglo-Saxon beliefs, *ælfe* were probably primarily or only male, which brings a special interest to the charm’s collocation of *ælfe* with the female *hægtessan*. Finally, I have argued that Old English *gescoten* and *gescot* could, as well as denoting shooting and projectiles, also mean ‘(pained with a) sharp localised pain’. These points and other observations adduced below help us to use *Wið færstice* to develop a uniquely powerful perspective on the potential roles of *ælf*-beliefs in Anglo-Saxon health and healing.

The new evidence concerning *Wið færstice* can be contextualised with thinking in medical anthropology, which has established clearly the power
The 'elf-shot' conspiracy

of ritual, particularly in manipulating social forces with a bearing on an individual’s health; of the diagnosing and concomitant naming of ailments; and of placebo and nocebo effects.62 These perspectives are gradually being absorbed into thinking on medieval charms.63 Less often noted is the capacity of psychological disorders to produce somatic illness: some societies, indeed, systematically conceive in somatic terms what Western clinical medicine would define as psychological disorders.64 The focus of our Anglo-Saxon medical texts on somatic diagnoses may disguise the treatment of psychological problems, for which the psychological treatments of charm, ritual and other manipulations of belief-systems were liable to be key elements in healing.

How old Ælfric’s is is hard to judge. Commentators once considered it incoherent and fragmentary, a perspective abetted by their insistence on dissecting it into ‘pagan’ and ‘Christian’ parts.65 However, critics of the 1970s and 1980s developed the early revisionism of Skemp to argue for its coherence of composition, a position which I accept, and will to some extent consolidate.66 Although its origins could be disparate, Ælfric’s is a coherent text. Bredehoft has recently identified its metre as an example of what he argued to be a distinctive tradition of ‘late Old English verse’, but even if – as he argued – this form was a more or less lineal successor to classical Old English verse, it is a form attested already by the mid-tenth century, in the charm in Gif mon hit on wateralfædl discussed above, and could be older.67 That Ælfric’s was composed before the end of the tenth century is hinted at by its alliteration of gyllende and gāras, showing the alliteration of palatal and velar realisations of early Old English /yl/, a practice which apparently declined during the tenth century, ceasing by the end; but this could arguably reflect the repetition of an inherited formula.68 Following recent datings of the manuscript, I work here on the assumption that we are dealing with a cultural artefact of the

64 Helman, Culture, 267–71.
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

late tenth century. Beginning by focusing on the details of the ailment and the mechanics of the healing process attested by Wið færstice, I proceed to assess how we should understand the mythological world which it invokes, first within the text and then in Anglo-Saxon society.

The ailment

Any assessment of Wið færstice – but particularly a medical anthropological one – is hampered by the fact that we do not know what range of symptoms færstice connoted. Sìce may have denoted something serious, and although fær- suggests both a sudden onset and acuteness, the pain may still have been chronic or recurrent.69 What is clear, however, is that Wið færstice’s central conceit is the conception of a violent, stabbing pain in terms of a projectile inflicted by supernatural beings. The concept of a supernaturally inflicted projectile lodged inside a patient is well paralleled anthropologically.70 Moreover Colgrave and Mynors suggested that Wið færstice has an Anglo-Saxon analogue, as early as 731, in book 5, chapter 13 of Bede’s Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum.71 Bede recounts, in a generally conventional but neatly poised exemplum, the death of an anonymous Mercian nobleman. Struck with a disease but too proud to repent of his sins, the man has a vision, in which two ‘pulcherrimi iuuenes’ (‘very handsome youths’) present him with a small book listing his few good deeds. They are followed by an ‘exercitus malignorum et horridorum uultu spirituum’ (‘army of evil spirits, their faces savage’), who present him with an enormous volume listing his many sins. Aware that the man’s soul is lost, the two youths disappear; ‘surgentesque duo nequissimi spiritus, habentes in manibus uomeres, percusserunt me, unus in capite et alius in pede; qui uidelicet modo cum magno tormento irrepunt in interiora corporis mei, moxque ut ad se inuicien moriar’ (‘and leaping forth, two very evil spirits, holding spikes in their hands, struck me, one in the head and the other in the foot. These, in a manifest fashion, crept with great twisting into the inside of my body, and as soon as they arrive, each in turn, I will die’).72 This element in Bede’s story is unusual, and derivation from traditional Anglo-Saxon culture is plausible. The Historia ecclesiastica was not uninfluenced by popular Christianity,73 while the anonymity of the exemplum’s protagonist may hint at a legendary origin. Bede’s construction of a fatal ailment as a supernaturally inflicted weapon suggests that Anglo-Saxon conceptions of illness as supernaturally inflicted weapons long predate our manuscript of Wið færstice. In this context, we can reread the role of the prose directive which follows the charm: ‘nim þonne þæt seax ādō on wætan’ (‘take then the knife; put it in the liquid’). It is impossible to be certain precisely what this phrase is intended to imply. A pragmatic reading, accepting the

69 See Introduction, n. 3.
71 Bede, 500 n. 2.
72 Ed. Colgrave and Mynors, Bede, 500; on uomer see n. 2; Pettit, Anglo-Saxon Remedies, ii 223.
The ‘elf-shot’ conspiracy

relevance of the prose recipe, would be that the healer should dip a knife into the concoction which he has just made, so as to apply it to the patient – at any rate all previous commentators seem to have thought that this seax is being used in healing. However, the determiner þæt in ‘þæt seax’ implies that reference has already been made to the seax. The only other seax which the text mentions is that forged by the smið: assuming textual cohesion, ‘nim þonne þæt seax ādō on wætan’ surely means that the healer is to draw the supernaturally inflicted seax from the patient, and put it into liquid. Although Glosecki did not interpret the direction in this way, he did adduce parallels for Wið færstice in North American shamanic practices of sucking magical projectiles from patients’ bodies, and many more comparisons could be adduced.

An earlier parallel again is Aldhelm’s description of Allecto, one of the Furiae of Classical mythology, in lines 2635–42 of his Carmen de virginitate, where she stands as a metaphor for the urge to fall into anger. Although his description is otherwise conventional, it concludes by saying

Haec solet ad bellum ferratum ducere contos
Horrida facturos animabus vulnera sanctis,
Nostras ni dominus mentes defendat inermes.

She brings iron-tipped spears to battle,
which would cause jagged wounds to holy souls,
if the Lord did not protect our defenceless minds.

Aldhelm did not derive this detail from his Classical sources, which have the Furies (and specifically Allecto) causing harm with their snakes. Doubtless part of his inspiration lay in the injunction in Ephesians 6.16 to stand, ‘in omnibus sumentes scutum fidei in quo possitis omni tela nequissimis ignea extinguere’ (‘in all matters taking up the shield of faith, with which you will be able to put out all the burning arrows of the most evil one’) – a metaphor which Insular writers made their own. But Allecto’s conti here differ from the biblical tela: her iron-tipped spears, understood as a cause of metaphorical wounds, are reminiscent of the īsenes dæl inflicted by the spears of the hægtessan in Wið færstice. Moreover, the Third Cleopatra Glossary – originating in the eighth century – glosses furiarum in this passage with hægtessa, while the mention of Allecto specifically is glossed with ‘wælcyрг, tessa’, where the tessa must either be a scribal corruption of an early form *haegtesae, or perhaps a unique English simplex attestation of hægtesse’s problematic second

74 Pettit, Anglo-Saxon Remedies, ii 259–61.
76 Ed. Ehwald, Aldhelm opera, 460.
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

element. It would be risky to infer a direct connection between Aldhelm’s poem and the beliefs attested perhaps three centuries later in Wið færstice, but the gloss at least uses the word hægtesse to denote a being very like those in Wið færstice, emphasising the charm’s deep roots.

Aldhelm’s metaphorical use of Allecto’s conti provides a context for focusing finally on the gescot which Wið færstice mentions. The charm leaves us in no doubt that it conceives of the cause of the patient’s færstice as a (supernatural) projectile. ‘Projectile’ is one of the prototypical meanings of gescot, so this may seem straightforward enough. But my argument that Old English (ge)scoten could mean ‘pained’ and gescot ‘sharp pain’ means that as well as denoting projectiles, ēsa gescot, ylfa gescot and hægtessan gescot could also denote in literal and technical language an ailment which I have shown above to be characteristic of ælfe. These observations add to our reading of Wið færstice the element of an elaborate play on words. The deployment of the polysemous scoten and gescot brilliantly removes, at a linguistic level, the distinction between metaphor and reality: the individual who is scoten with an internal pain is at one and the same time scoten with a (magical) projectile; the same play on words is again attested (this time in cursing) in early-modern Scotland. Færstice, of course, is itself polysemic in this context, being equally able to denote internal pains and wounds. We are dealing in Wið færstice with an approach to healing which not only deploys metaphor at a discursive level, but underpins it with polysemy at a lexical one. This analysis suggests that the remedy’s use of vocabulary helps to bind it into a coherent composition: the terms færstice, scoten and gescot are all polysemic, denoting not only projectile wounds but also internal pains, and are used to facilitate the text’s construction of an ailment as the product of a conflict with supernatural beings. Specifically, it renarrates the sufferer’s experience in martial and heroic terms. If recited only to victims of the illness, the charm had the potential to help them renegotiate their self-perception, but if intended for public performance, it could extend that renegotiation to the whole community. A similar renarration is apparent in Gif mon biþ on wæterælfādl, where the charm constructs what seems to be a cutaneous ailment in terms of benne and beadowrāda (‘wounds’ and ‘battle-bandages’). Just as it proved useful in early-medieval Christianity to posit Satan as the ultimate source of the arrows of temptation, positing supernatural beings as the source of the færstice introduced important new players into the narratives constructed by patients, healer and their communities.

Hægtessan, ælfe and the smiths

Ælfe are mentioned explicitly in Wið færstice only at the culmination of the charm, which is ‘tō bōte ēsa gescotes . . . tō bōte ylfa gescotes / . . . tō bōte hægtessan gescotes’ (‘as a remedy for the gescot of ēse . . . as a remedy for the

79 Ed. Rusche, ‘The Cleopatra Glossaries’; on provenance see p. 82. 
80 Hall, ‘Getting Shot’, 22.
The 'elf-shot' conspiracy

gescot of ælfe / . . . as a remedy for the gescot of hægtessan’). However, the hæg-
tessan mentioned there almost certainly correspond to the beings described
in the first ten metrical lines, raising the prospect that the ælfe might also have
counterparts earlier on.\(^{81}\) Denoted successively by hy (‘they’) and dā mihtigan
wīf (‘the powerful women’), the hægtessan ride loudly over a burial mound
or hill, throwing spears, to inflict, we may infer, what is called ‘īsenes dæl /
hægtessan geweorc’ (‘a piece of iron, / the work/deed of hægtessan’) a little later
in the charm. Besides the similarity to Aldhelm’s portrayal of Allecto, this
motif compares well with other instances in medieval north-west European
texts, both antedating and postdating Wið færstice, of martial supernatural
females riding out in groups and causing harm – arguably affording us
a glimpse into the non-intellectual cultural sources for witchcraft beliefs
attested in the early-modern witchcraft trials.\(^{82}\) This being so, one wonders
if the weapon-making smiðas (‘craftsmen’) which Wið færstice describes cor-
respond later to the ēse and ælfe.

The smiths were long interpreted as forces aiding the patient against the
hægtessan, mainly because of an assumed connection between them and
Weland (on whom see chapter 1 above) and a further assumption – contrary
to all our major sources – that the hero Weland would not be found harming
someone else.\(^{83}\) However, as Doskow pointed out, identifying the smiths as
a beneficial force

raises many more questions than it answers. Why should the description in
the first section of the attacking forces be interrupted by the introduction of an
allied force? Why should the pattern of identification of the sources of evil be
suddenly broken to identify an ally, the single smith, only to return to naming
evil powers after introducing the ally?\(^{84}\)

Doskow’s observations are also supported by a lexical detail: the smiðas of
Wið færstice are portrayed as forging ‘wælspera’ (‘slaughter-spears’), and
the word spere is, on the four other occasions when it occurs in the charm,
exclusively and formulaically identified as the cause of the ailment. Nor should
we be surprised to find smiths causing harm in (Christian) Anglo-Saxon
culture. As I have discussed above, the common assertion that smiths and
smithing were associated with magical power in early-medieval Europe is
ill-supported.\(^{85}\) But Judaeo-Christian traditions reproduced in Anglo-Saxon
England sometimes cast smiths in an unfavourable light.\(^{86}\)

---

81 Hauer, seeking to link the second half of Wið færstice’s charm intimately with the first, argued
that hy denotes the ēse mentioned later and dā mihtigan wīf the hægtessan (‘Wið Færstice’, 52).
But it seems unlikely that two groups are described in the first ten lines, not least because
‘þær dā mihtigan wīf / hyra mægen beræddon’ uses the demonstrative pronoun þā, implying
that the mihtigan wīf are figures which we should already know.

82 Hall, ‘Continuity’.

83 See Chickering, ‘Literary Magic’, 100–1; Abernethy, ‘Charms’, 105–7; a later example is
Glosecki, Shamanism, 134.

84 ‘Wið Færstice’, 324.


Tradition in Old English Literature, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England, 6 (Cambridge:
The fact that the smiðas are not explicitly called ælfe or êse can be explained on rhetorical grounds. The supernatural women at the beginning of the charm are at first denoted only by hy, and then by the more descriptive but still euphemistic mihtigan wīf, creating a tension which is only resolved by their specific identification as hægtesse in the charm’s nineteenth line. The smiðas can be seen as part of the same technique: a use of allusion in the first half of the text creating tension, emphasising the threat posed by the mysterious supernatural forces, which are unnamed and therefore outside human control, until the tension is resolved by their naming in a rhetorically powerful climax. This movement would parallel the charm’s progression from alluding to the ailment, to metaphorically describing a ‘wund swīðe’ (‘great injury’, line 12), to focusing at last on the patient’s own body, both the patient and his assailants being embodied precisely at the moment when they are exorcised. Linking êse and ælfe with the smiðas, then, increases the coherence of the charm.

These hints are arguably consolidated by a remarkable parallel in the Scottish witchcraft trials, in the four confessions to witchcraft of Issobel Gowdie, tried in Nairn in 1662. The evidence provided by Issobel in her sequence of four confessions is complex, and without doubt heavily influenced by seventeenth-century intellectual ideas about witchcraft. But Issobel also recounted material about Fearrie which commentators agree is too unusual to have come from her inquisitors; although there was a great gap of time and space between the writing of Wið færstice and Issobel’s confessions, charm-texts and related traditions were demonstrably transmitted across this gap with little alteration. At various times, Issobel confessed to riding through the air on straws with her coven; shooting her victims with ‘elf-arrow-heidis’ or ‘elf-arrows’ which she acquired from the Devil, in ‘the Elifes howsis’, the Devil shaping them ‘with his awin hand’ before passing them on for finishing to ‘Elf-boyes’; and visits to the king and queen of Fearrie. Drawing this material together to reconstruct a set of underlying concepts is problematic, but prominent in Issobel’s confessions is a conception of witchcraft involving groups of witches riding out, gaining magical projectiles from the elvis who manufacture them, and using them to shoot people. Besides the general similarities of this material to Wið færstice, Issobel portrayed one smith (in her account the Devil) in a group of smiths, as the charm does. The relevance of these parallels to the whole of the Old English charm consolidates literary

Cambridge University Press, 1993), 189–90.


The 'elf-shot' conspiracy

arguments for its coherence, and their existence shows that Wið færstice is not a unique imaginative blooming. Issobel’s use of elf links her narratives lexically to the history of ælf, and supports the inference on internal evidence that Wið færstice’s ælfe are identical with its smiðas.

INTERPRETATIONS

Wið færstice provides a paradigm for understanding how the attribution of ailments to ælfe – and to other supernatural beings – could have been significant in Anglo-Saxon culture. My discussion in this chapter has shown that the historiographical construct of elf-shot is ill-founded. What is clear, however, is that ælfe could cause a variety of ailments. This included cutaneous ones, but most prominent were sharp internal pains, which could afflict both livestock and people. One of the ways in which Anglo-Saxons could denote such pains was with the verb sceótan and the noun gescot, which had figurative senses, respectively along the lines of ‘to pain’ and ‘sharp pain’. What Wið færstice shows is that these words were at times incorporated into dramatic mythological narratives in which a gescot is metaphorically conceived in another of the word’s senses, as a magical projectile. This strategy gave the ailment an ultimate as well as a proximate source, and created a narrative in which the healer tackled the disease at its root – neither treating merely the symptoms nor merely defending the patient against supernatural assault, but mounting a dramatic counter-offensive. Moreover, Wið færstice re-narrates the situation of the patient as part of a heroic struggle in which he or she represents the in-group in opposition to external forces. A potentially debilitating ailment, potentially restricting the economic contribution of the sufferer to the community, is recast in martial, heroic terms as a wound. Although we lack such vivid evidence for other ælf-ailments, Wið færstice suggests the significance which identifying ailments’ sources as ælfe could have had in our other Old English medical texts – and so more widely in Anglo-Saxon culture.

Whether ælfe were ever supposed to use projectiles to cause illness is unclear: they are only attested in the hands of hægtessan; but the use of other martial metaphors for illness is apparent in Gif mon biþ on wæterælfādl. It is hard to judge how far the various herbal remedies for ælf-ailments may have been clinically effective. What is clear, however, is both that the psychological benefits of healing rituals can be significant in themselves and as facilitators of somatic healing, and that Anglo-Saxon diagnoses of somatic ailments may reflect psychological problems which would also be susceptible to ritual treatment. Wið færstice suggests the power which beliefs in ælfe and similar beings could have in Anglo-Saxon healing, and help us to understand the meanings of their association with ailments in the Old English medical texts.

One would like to use Wið færstice to situate the ælfe of the medical texts in relation to the models developed in chapters 2 and 3, whereby ælfe were characterised through linguistic and onomastic evidence as otherworldly beings – distinct from the human in-group in their supernatural character,
but associated with it in contradistinction to monsters – but through Beowulf as monsters themselves. Making distinctions of this sort is problematic, not least because it may be that while my models held in the relatively ideal world of myths, semantics and ideologies, their application to individual cases of supernaturally inflicted illness was less clear-cut. The prominence of female figures in Wið færstice is also a complication: as I have discussed regarding Scandinavian culture, the position of females could be ill-defined or systematically liminal in medieval patriarchal world-views. Moreover, it is possible that the hægtessan of Wið færstice were deemed potentially, like Issobel Gowdie, to be enemies from within the community. However, there is no question that Wið færstice constructs a strong distinction between in-group (the patient and healer) and harmful out-group (the supernatural beings). The hægtessan at least seem to be associated with the world outside human settlements, and possibly with a burial mound.

This binary reading is useful: drawing particularly on the insights of Hutton and Alver and Selberg, I have read this kind of distinction in the context of the Scottish witchcraft trials to have been a powerful means of promoting solidarity between the in-group on the one hand and on the other the patient and the healer – both, for their different reasons, potentially marginalised – and we might make similar inferences for Anglo-Saxons.

This being so, it is tempting to see Wið færstice as evidence for the success of the Beowulf model – for the alignment of ælfe with monsters and demons – or at least for the diminished relevance of more subtle distinctions within the world of supernatural beings in late Anglo-Saxon culture. However, other possibilities exist, and medieval comparative evidence considered in the next chapter in particular suggests how ælfe could be harmful but still not monstrous. Likewise, ambivalent and dangerous though they could be, the disir appear clearly in the early Scandinavian evidence on the human rather than the monstrous side of semantic fields. If they are to be read in terms of the models presented above of a tripartite division between the in-group, otherworldly beings, and monsters, then the hægtessan, ælfe and ëse in Wið færstice might be expected to have inflicted the ailment in response to some transgression by the sufferer. They would in this reading exist as


The ‘elf-shot’ conspiracy

an ordered threat to a transgressing individual. That a healer might want not only to identify an external source for a patient’s illness, but to identify a yet more fundamental cause in a social transgression by his or her client should not surprise us. Such processes not only added plausibility to the healer’s aetiology of an ailment, but tied healing practices into the wider negotiation and upholding of social norms. Medieval saints’ lives are replete with depictions of saints beginning healing by identifying a hidden moral transgression, and this reading also recalls the readiness of witnesses in early-modern witchcraft trials to expound their own misdemeanours towards the accused in order to support their claims that the accused had perpetrated witchcraft in revenge.

It is also worth, finally, noting two themes prominent in later beliefs concerning supernatural beings and illness or misfortune for which our Old English texts provide no evidence: changelings, and assisting witches. Although texts like Vǫlundarkviða and some of the comparative material considered in the next chapter afford circumstantial evidence for associating ælfe with socially unsanctioned pregnancy, no Anglo-Saxon comparisons emerge for the prominent later association of supernatural beings with changelings – replacing healthy children (or occasionally adults) with sickly or deformed ones – or even for harming children especially.91 Our Anglo-Saxon evidence is not without mention of malformed or ailing children, and though the silence concerning changeling lore still proves nothing, we should be cautious about assuming that it already existed in early-medieval culture.92 The idea that the children begotten on members of the in-group by otherworldly beings would be malformed is attested in England by the thirteenth century and exemplified by the Man of Law’s Tale, quoted below.93 Meanwhile, associations of supernatural beings with changelings in Europe are attested back into the thirteenth century, and in Antiquity; but such associations begin to be attested for elves only in the fifteenth century.94 Perhaps Anglo-Saxons had

---


93 See p. 140; cf. De nugis curialium ii.11, ed. James, Walter Map, 158–60; Þiðreks saga, ch. 169, ed. Henrik Bertelsen, Þiðriks saga af Bern, Samfund til Udgivelse af Gammel Nordisk Litteratur, 34, 2 vols (Copenhagen: Møller, 1905–11), 1 319–22; and the rise of elf as a term of abuse (see OED, s.v. elf §§2b, 3, oaf).

other traditional discourses handling babies’ malformity or failure to thrive. Comparison with Scandinavia suggests culturally sanctioned abandonment; if so, non-Christian changeling lore might have been a response to the strong Christian opposition to abandonment.\textsuperscript{95}


ÆLFŠÍDEN occurs in three different remedies, each in a different collection, though of these two must be textually related: one of the two remedies in Lācnunga which contain ælf (section 29, ff. 137r–138r); section 41 of Leechbook III (ff. 120v–121r); and a related remedy in Book I of Bald’s Leechbook (section 64, ff. 52v–53r). Unfortunately, the textual contexts of ælfsíden provide little unequivocal evidence for its meaning, while the word síden occurs only in ælfsíden. However, síden is almost certainly cognate with the Old Norse strong verb síða (to give a broad and advised translation, ‘work magic’), and its derivatives seiðr (the magic worked) and síði (the magic-worker): it derives from the infinitive stem of síða’s Germanic ancestor *síþanam, with the deverbal nominal suffix -en.1 Síða is, as a strong verb, a priori likely to have an Indo-European origin. It has phonologically and semantically convincing Indo-European cognates in Welsh hud (‘magic’), hudo (‘work magic, work by magic’) and Lithuanian saĩsti (‘interpret a sign, prophesy’).2 The word síða and probably its basic meaning originate, then, in a pre-Germanic ancestor found in other Western Indo-European languages. These words probably derive from an Indo-European root concerning binding.3 As with ælfādl, discussed in the last chapter, the determiner ælf- in ælfsíden probably denotes the source of the síden; if so, ælfsíden probably meant something along the lines of ‘the magic of ælfe’. Sídsa, also attested in an ælf-remedy (in Bald’s Leechbook II, section 65, f. 106r), is another cognate, with the deverbative suffix -sa, and is accordingly considered here too.4 I begin by analysing the texts which attest to sídsa and ælfsíden in detail, in ascending order of complexity; I then proceed to the textually related remedy Wið ælfcynne (Leechbook III, section

3 De Vries, Alttrudesches etymologisches Wörterbuch, s.v. seið; on the medieval association of binding with magic in the Germanic-speaking world see Flint, The Rise of Magic, 226–31 et passim. For other – unconvincing – etymologies see Dag Strömback, Seid: Textstudier i nordisk religionshistoria, Nordiska texter och undersökningar, 5 (Stockholm: Geber, 1935), 120 n. 2; Wüst, ‘Zusammenhang’; Glosecki, Shamanism, 97; Brit Solli, Seid: Myter, sjamanisme og kjønn i vikingenes tid (Oslo: Pax Forlag, 2002), 135.
4 On -sa see Krahe and Meid, Germanische Sprachwissenschaft, III §113.3.
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

61, f. 123). Having re-assessed our core Old English evidence for sīdsa and ælfsīden, I then broaden the scope to draw in a comparative context: primarily Scandinavian material concerning seiðr, but also medieval Irish and Middle English material. This allows us to develop a sense of the narratives with which ælfsīden is likely to have been associated in Anglo-Saxon culture – and their possible social meanings. Finally, I advert to hints that ælfe’s powers were not purely negative: the word ylīg in particular seems to indicate that the altered mental states which ælfe could inflict might be linked positively with supernatural, prophetic knowledge, suggesting another side again to the significance of ælfe in Anglo-Saxon culture.

TEXTUAL EVIDENCE

Bald’s Leechbook II, section 65, ff. 107v–108r: Wið ælfe wið uncūþum sīdsan
This remedy occurs in section 65 of Bald’s Leechbook II, a few remedies after Gif hors ofscoten sīe: ‘Wið ælfe wið uncūþum sīdsan gnīd myrran on wīn wið hwītes rècelses emmicel wið sceaf gagātes dæl þæs stānes on þæt wīn, drince .iii. morgenas nahtig oþþe .viiii. oþþe .xii.’ (‘Against an ælf [or ‘against ælfe’] and against unknown/strange/unusual sīdsa, crumble myrrh into wine and the same amount of white frankincense and shave a piece of the stone gagātes [jet] into that wine, drink [on] three mornings, fasting [at] night, or nine or twelve’). The main evidence here for the meanings of ælf is its collocation with uncūþ sīdsa. For the meanings of sīdsa, we have only the evidence of its cognates to go on. What is interesting is that the text includes uncūþ sīdsa without referring to some more ordinary sīdsa. While this may imply that a cūþ sīdsa would require a different remedy, a more elegant explanation would be to assume that the cūþ sīdsa was already implicit in the text in its mention of ælf, the text to be interpreted as ‘against an ælf (no doubt using sīdsa) but also against sīdsa of an unknown source’. If so, then sīdsa was connoted by ælf, but this inference is not secure enough to be relied upon. Kitson suggested that ‘the wine, myrrh and frankincense surely bespeak ultimate foreign origin for all that the “elf” may imply assimilation to native tradition’: we have here cultural elements drawn from ecclesiastical contexts being deployed here to meet problems denoted by older, vernacular words.  

Lācnunga, section 29, ff. 137r–138r
The first remedy attesting to ælfsīden, in Lācnunga, opens with ‘Þis is sē hālga drænc wið ælfsīðene wið eallum fēondes costungum’ (‘This is the holy/blessed drink against ælfsīden and against all the tribulations of the

5 Although uncūþum sīdsan is in the dative, the case taken by wið in Royal 12 D. xvii varies, such that ælfe could be an accusative plural.
Ælfsīden

Enemy').Ælfsīden is associated here with feōndes costunga, mirroring the identical association for the remedies wið ælfādl in Leechbook III (chapter 4). The pairing again suggests that the two threats were similar enough that one remedy could cater for both, but could hint at the same time that they were not synonymous. The remedy in Lācnunga almost entirely comprises liturgical ritual, which is consistent with other ælf-remedies, but there is no further indication of what ælfsīden might denote.⁸ The organisation of Lācnunga is too irregular for any secure inferences to be made from the manuscript context.

Leechbook III, section 41, ff. 120v–121r: lenctenādl, and eluesce wehte

Leechbook III’s remedy mentioning ælfsīden falls in section 41, which advertises itself in the contents list on folio 110r to be ‘Wiþ ealle feōndes costunga drenc 7 sealſ’ (‘A drink and a salve against all the tribulations of the Devil’); likewise the section opens with ‘Vvrc gōde drenc wiþ eallum feōndes costungum’ (‘Make a good drink against all the tribulations of the Devil’). The second remedy of those included in this section is slightly more limited in its application:

Wyrc gōde sealfe wiþ feōndes costunga . bisceop wyrt . elehtre . harasprecel . strǣawberian wise. sīo cluifihte wenwyrt eorðrima. brēmbeæppel . polleian . wermōd . gecnūa þa wyryt ealle āwylle on gōdre buteran wring þurh clād sete under wēofod singe .viii. mæssan ofer smire þone man mid on þa þunwonge. 7 bufan þam eągum 7 ufan þæt hēafod . 7 þa þrēost 7 under þam earmum þa þordan . Þēōs sealf is gōd wiþ æ ¯ lcre feōndes costunga 7 ælfsīdenne 7 lenctenādl.

Make a good salve against the tribulations of the Enemy: ?hibiscus, ?lupin, viper’s bugloss, strawberry-stalk, the cloved lesser celendine, eorðrima, blackberry, pen- nyroyal, wormwood, pound all those plants; boil in good butter; strain through a cloth; place under the altar; sing nine masses over them; then smear the person with it generously on the temples, and above the eyes and on the top of the head and the breast and under the arms. This salve is good against each tribulation of the Enemy and ælfsīden and Lent-illness.

As I discuss below, this must be textually related to Wið ælfcyne which occurs later in Leechbook III, and more distantly to the remedy Wiþ æ ¯ lcre lēodrūnan in Bald’s Leechbook examined next. The final sentence is most illuminating, associating ælfsīden not only with the now-familiar feōndes costung, but with lenctenādl (‘Lent-illness’). More clearly than in the Lācnunga text, these different sources of harm seem probably to be complementary rather than synonymous, as ‘æ ¯ lcre feōndes costunga’ (‘each of the tribulations of the devil’) ought to include all properly diabolical threats, lenctenādl occurring elsewhere without being associated with the Devil.

Lenctenādl affords additional perspectives on ælfsīden. It seems certainly to denote fevers, inferred by Cameron, mainly from the association with spring,

⁸ For liturgical content see Jolly, Popular Religion, 140–2.
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

to be forms of tertian malaria. The association is bolstered by the preceding section, a short remedy ‘Wiþ þon þe mon sīe mōnaþsēoc nim mereswīnes fel wyrc to swipan swing mid þone man sōna bið sēl . amen’ (‘For when a person is epileptic / made mad by the moon: take dolphin’s skin, make it into a whip, beat the person with it; he will be well immediately, amen’; f. 120r), while the next remedy in section 41 is ‘Gif þū wilt làcniæ gewitsēocne man’ (‘If you want to minister to a mentally ill person’). These contexts amplify Wyrc göde sealfē’s association of ælfsidæn with fever, insofar as both involve altered mental states. Some later English evidence points in the same direction. A short charm in the fifteenth-century BL MS Sloane 2584 begins ‘Contiuro vos demones & latrones elphos & morbum caducum vt non habeatis potestatem nocere hunc familiæ dei. N.’ (‘I conjure you, demons and thieves, elves and the falling sickness [i.e. epilepsy]’; ff. 73v–74r). This by no means equates elves and epilepsy, but does choose to juxtapose them and use the same charm for both. Likewise, in the roughly contemporary MS Sloane 963, the fragmentary folios 15r–16v present a series of charms prominently featuring demones and Elfæ (here Latinising with a feminine rather than a masculine form). Though no more explicit than Sloane 2584, one of the more prominent associations of these beings is with fevers: one charm is ‘vt maledicte Elfe vel febres non habeant potestatem’ (‘that neither cursed Elfæ nor fevers have power’; f. 15r) to harm; others are ‘oraciones contra omnes demones & contra . . . frigora & febres & elfas & omnia mala’ (‘prayers against all demons and against . . . chills and fevers and elfæ and all evils’; f. 16r) – including an effort to defend ‘ab potestate & vexacione & illusione demonum & elfarum’ (‘against the power and harassment and illusion of demons and elfæ’; f. 16v).

Another source of evidence for an association of ælfe with symptoms associated with fever can be adduced from outside the medical texts, from our unique Old English attestation of the adjective ælfisc, whose reflex elvish is well attested in Middle English, as is its counterpart and possible cognate elbisch in Middle High German. Old English ælfisc is attested, in Kentish form, only in a late-twelfth-century section of a German manuscript, Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 83.11 The word occurs on folio 397v in a note to chapter 52 of Fulgentius’s Expositio sermonum antiquorum ad grammaticum Calcidium, an explanation of the verb alucinare. Helm’s critical edition gives Fulgentius’s text as

Alucinare dicitur uana somniari tractum ab alucitas quos nos conopes dicimus, sicut Petronius Arbiter ait: ‘Nam centum uernali me alucitae molestabant’.

Alucinare [‘to wander in mind, speak while in such a state’] is said [when] foolish things are (day)dreamt. Derived from alucitae [attested only in this passage, and

9 Anglo-Saxon Medicine, 10–11.
10 Cf. Kieckhefer, Magic, 70.
11 Madan Falconer et al., A Summary Catalogue of Western Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library at Oxford which have not hitherto been catalogued in the Quarto Series, corr. repr., 7 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1895–1953), ii 98½–2 [no. 5194]). For this section see more fully Hall, ‘Elves on the Brain’ , pp. 224–33.
12 An apparently unique variant on alucinor, but doubtless of the same meaning.
Ælfsīden

assumed to have the meaning ‘gnats, mosquitos’ implied here], which we call
conopes [i.e. κώνωπες, gnats]. Thus Petronius Arbiter affirms: ‘for a hundred
alucitae would bother me in the spring’.13

However, Junius 83’s text is rather different, and the quotation from Petronius
corrupt:

alucinare dicitur uana somniare. tractum ab alucitis quos cenopos dicimus. sicut
petronius arbiter vernalia mā inquid mā lucite molestabant. Hos Galli Eluesce
wehte uocant.14

Alucinare is said [meaning] ‘to (day)dream foolish things’. Derived from alucitae,
which we call cenopi [not a real word]. Thus Petronius Arbiter said ‘vernal things
. . . would bother’. The Galli call these [the cenopi] Eluesce wehte [elfisc beings].

Our text, then, declares conopes to be called Eluesce wehte. Although conopes
means ‘gnat’, it is unlikely that the glossator understood this obscure (and,
in the manuscript, corrupt) word. Almost certainly he, like the Harley Glossator,
who glossed conopes with ‘alucinaria’ (‘hallucinations’) and ‘uana somniaria’
(‘foolish (day)dreams’), took conopes, not alucita, as the word requiring a gloss,
and took it to denote delusions and dreams rather than mosquitos.15 The
gloss Eluesce wehte probably interprets conopes in the same way, thus meaning
something like ‘delusory beings; delusions’.

Although the phrase eluesce wehte remains somewhat problematic, the
implication is that ælfë were sufficiently closely associated with causing delusion
that a derived adjective could be used with a meaning along the lines of
‘delusory’ by a glossator seeking to elucidate a Latin term. This conclusion is
supported by Middle English evidence, particularly the statement in a sermon
in Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodley 649 of 1421×22 that ‘non est fiducia nec
mundi stabilitas in mundi gloria: mundi honor est a sliper þinge and an elvich’
(‘there is neither assurance nor worldly stability in worldly glory: worldly
fame is a treacherous and “elvich” thing’), where elvich seems most unlikely
to mean ‘to do with elves’ or any such literal reading, but rather to mean
‘delusory’.16 Telling in itself, the evidence of eluesce wehte also emphasises
that ælfë’s capacity to inflict mind-altering ailments could be assumed in
discourses quite separate from medical writings. Further parallels to Wyrc
gōde sealfe are afforded by the gloss-word ylfig and the plant-name ælfþone
considered below, but these differ from ælfisc in appearing to attest to positive
rather than negative aspects of ælfë’s mind-altering powers.

Wyrc gōde sealfe associates ælfsiden both with diabolical malice and fevers,
but it is not necessarily identical with either. Wider evidence, however, does
consolidate the remedy’s implication that ælfë might be associated with
causing delusion or hallucination characteristic of fever.

13 Ed. Rvdolfvs Helm, Fabii Planciadis Fvlgentii V.C. opera (Lipsiae: Teubner, 1898; repr. Stuttgart:
14 Ed. Steinmeyer and Sievers, Die althochdeutschen Glossen, ii 162.
15 Ed. Oliphant, Glossary, 109 [C1979]; collated with MS, f. 45r.
16 Ed. Roy M. Haines, “‘Our Master Mariner, Our Sovereign Lord’: A Contemporary View of
Bald’s Leechbook I, section 64, f. 52v: the semantics of læodrūne and the association of ælfe with maran

Section 64 of Book I of Bald’s Leechbook contains, in the words of the contents list on folio 5r, ‘Læcédōmas wiþ ælcre læodrūnan ælfsīdenne þæt is féercynnes gealdor þ ðust þ drencas þ sealf þ gif sío ādl nētnum sīe. þ gif sío ādl wyrde mannan oðde mare rīde þ wyrde seofon ealles craftra’ (‘Prescriptions against every læodrūne and ælfsīden, being a charm, powder, drinks and a salve, for fevers; and if the illness should be upon livestock; and if the illness should happen to a person or a mære should ride and happen; in all, seven remedies’). The remedies themselves begin on folio 52v with ‘Wiþ ælcre yfelre læodrūnan wiþ ælfsīdenne þis gewrit’ (‘Against each evil læodrūne and against ælfsīden, this writing’). As I discuss in more detail below, the third of the remedies is, as Meaney pointed out, almost identical to a salve ‘wiþ nihtgengan’ (‘against a night-walkers’ – whatever this means) which comprises section 54 of Leechbook III (f. 122v), and the two of these are themselves reminiscent enough of Wið ælfcynne and Wiþ féonds costunga in Leechbook III to suggest further textual interrelationships.17 The section may have been part of Bald’s Leechbook at its compilation, but its unusual preoccupation with supernatural causes of illness can be taken to suggest that it is a later addition.18 Another context for section 64 arises from its manuscript context: it occurs in a sequence of remedies concerned with fever and mental illness: section 62 is ‘wiþ fēferādle’ (‘against fever-illness’); 63 ‘wiþ féondsēocum men’ (presumably ‘for a diabolically possessed person’, though conceivably ‘against a diabolically possessed person’); 65 ‘wiþ lenctenādl’ (‘against lenctenādl’); and 66 ‘ungemynde’ (‘for one out of his mind’). This provides a context of interrelated symptoms in which to understand ælfsīden, which are consistent with the evidence of the other attestations of ælfsīden, which I have just considered.

Within the remedy, meanwhile, the word læodrūne is also problematic, occurring in this form only here in Old English. Its second element has been understood to denote a female supernatural being – as in some words it assuredly does – but, reassessing the evidence, Fell argued that læodrūne is a variant of the poetic Old English lēoðurūn (‘sung mystery’).19 Her case has gaps, but these can be filled.20 Lēoðurūn denotes Christian holy mysteries, and Laȝamon’s læod-rūne prophecies. Its connotations do not appear to have been inherently negative: the potency of an yfel læodrūne perhaps lay in the cursing

17 ‘Bald’s Leechbook’, 239.
20 The first element is, on phonological grounds, ostensibly the intensifying prefix derived from lēod (‘man’; see Kastovsky, ‘Semantics’, 356–7) – so the MED, s.v. lēde §2c. But Fell’s connection with lēoðurūn, foreshadowed by Cockayne’s translations ‘rune lay’ and ‘pagan charm’ (Leechdoms, ii 11, 139), does work phonologically. For the variable loss of unstressed high vowels in relevant positions see Hogg, Grammar, §§6.21; -rūn~–rūne variation is common (cf. Campbell, Grammar, §§592e, 619.4); and there is some evidence for */(VV)ðr/ > /(VV)dr/ in West Saxon, accounting for the d of læodrūne: Campbell, Grammar, §422; Hogg, Grammar, §7.11.
power of ill-boding prophecies attested in comparable cultures.Ælfsiden presumably denoted something broadly similar to lēodrūne, a conclusion which is consonant with the meanings of ‘magic’ suggested for sīden by its Norse cognate seiðr. It might afflict both people and livestock.

Section 64 concludes with a remedy ‘Gif mon mare rīde . genim elehtran 7 gārlēac . 7 betonican . 7 rēcels bind on næsc hæbbe him mon 7 he gange inon pās wytre’ (‘If a mære should ride a person: take ?lupin and garlic and betony and incense; bind in fawn-skin; the person should have this on him and he should walk ?in these plants’ (i.e. ‘wearing these plants’, reading innon)). I have analysed our other Old English evidence for the semantics of mære elsewhere: the clearest evidence for its meanings is afforded by the seventh-century gloss incuba: mære. The lemma incuba is almost unique, which along with circumstantial evidence allows us confidently to source this gloss to a copy of Isidore’s Etymologiae related to the Anglo-Saxon epitome of Isidore’s Etymologiae edited by Lapidge, which gives incuba for Isidore’s incubus. Here, incuba denotes a supernatural being, implicitly female, which presses down on or rapes people. This is consistent with the cognate, later and etymological evidence for mære, and this kind of concept presumably underlies the riding mære in Bald’s Leechbook. What led to the inclusion of mære in section 64 is not clear on internal evidence. I turn to this question below, but here I wish to note comparative evidence which shows the collocation of ælf and mære to have been well established and widespread in the West Germanic-speaking world – associations no doubt underlying the equivalence of Modern English nightmare with German Alptraum (‘nightmare’, lit. ‘alp-dream’). To quote only from the most impressive example, the fourteenth-century Münchener Nachtsegen,

```
  alb vnde Ielbelin
  Ir sult nich beng’ bliben hin
  albes svestir vn vatir
  Ir sult uz varen obir dē gatir
  albes mutir trute vn mar
  Ir sult uz zu dē virste varē
  Noc mich dy mare druche
  Noc mich dy trute zciche
  Noc mich dy mare rite
  Noc mich dy mare bescrite
  Alb mit diner crumen nasen
  Ich vorbithe dir aneblasen...24
```


22 Hall, ‘The Evidence for maran’, §3.


24 Lines 23–38, ed. Grienberger, ‘Nachtsegen’, 337–8. Otherwise, see for English the South English Legendary, discussed below, pp. 141–2, and lines 65–9 of Rowll’s Cursing. For the Continent see the citations in Verwijs, Verdamin Stoett, Woordenboek, s.vv. ALF, (iii) MARE; Edwards,
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

*alb*, or also *elbelin* [little *alb*],
you shall remain no longer (reading *lenger*)
*alb*’s sister and father,
you shall go out over the gate;
*alb*’s mother, *trute* [female monster] and *mar*,
you shall go out to the roof-ridge!
Let the *mare* not oppress me,
let the *trute* not ?pinch me (reading *zücke*),
let the *mare* not ride me,
let the *mare* not mount me!
*Alb* with your crooked nose,
I forbid you to blow on [people] ..

As here, the German material also associates *mare* with the verb *riten*, suggesting the traditionality of this collocation in *Gif mon mare rīde.***

While this section of Bald’s Leechbook, then, tells us little that is concrete, it consolidates and extends the associations of *ælfādl* in ways which are well contextualised, providing an important basis for comparison with fuller narratives from other medieval cultures below.

Leechbook III, section 61, f. 123: *Wið ælfcynnne*

The word *ælfcynn* occurs only in section 61 of Leechbook III, at the head of the *ælfādl* remedies analysed in the previous chapter. Although it does not attest to *ælfādl*, it is, as I show below, textually related to remedies which do, and so it is appropriate to consider it here:

Wyrc sealfe wið ælfcynnne 7 nihtgengan 7 þām mannum þe dēofol mid hāmð. Ælfræde. Hanansprecel. Hæreðwyrt. Haransprecel. hāþbergean wīsan. croplēac. gārlēac. hegerifan corn. gypri. finul. Dō þās wyrtə on an fæt sete under wēofod sing ofer. VIII. messan. áwyl on buteran 7 on scēapes smerwe dō hāliges sealtes fela on aseoh þurh clāð. wæorp þā wyrtə on yrnende wæter. Gif men hwilc yfel costung weorþe oþþe ælf oþþe nihtgengan. Smire his andwitan mid þisse sealfe 7 on his éagan dō and þær him sê lichoma sār sīe. 7 rēcelsa hine 7 sēna gelōme his þing biþ sōna sēlre.

Make a salve against *ælfcynn* and a *nihtgenga* and for/against those people whom the/a devil has sex with: take ?hops, wormwood, ?hibiscus, ?lupin, vervain, henbane, hārewyrt, viper’s bugloss, stalk of whortleberry, ?crow garlic, garlic, seed of goose-grass, cockle and fennel. Put these plants in a vessel, place under


The only other Anglo-Saxon evidence for this sort of concept is a charm in a remedy ‘*Wið dweorg*’, which comprises section 93 of the *Lācnunga* (f. 167; ed. Gratton and Singer, *Anglo-Saxon Magic*, 160–2). The difficulties of this charm are legion, and some, particularly ambiguities of its syntax and its heavy emendation in the manuscript, have been glossed over hitherto (but see esp. Cameron, *Anglo-Saxon Medicine*, 151–3). But the charm definitely conceives of the ailment(s) in terms of a being (*wiht*) treating the sufferer as its horse (*hængest*). How fully it develops this concept is open to question, but it certainly shows that a vivid conceptualisation of a supernatural being riding a sick person like a horse may underlie *gif mon mare rīde*. 25
Ælfsïden

an altar, sing 9 masses over them; boil in butter and in sheep’s fat; put in plenty of holy salt; strain through a cloth. Throw the plants into running water. If any evil tribulation or an ælf or nihtgengan happens to a person, smear his face with this salve and put it on his eyes and where his body is sore / in pain, and burn incense about him and sign [with the cross] often; his problem will soon be better.

The unique compound ælf cynn offers no evidence in itself. Old English -cynn was productive and compounded with a wide range of words – words for people, peoples, monsters, animals, plants and diseases – and the Norse álfkunnr, álfkunnigr and álfakyn discussed in chapter 1 could be independent formations. However, it is at least clear that ælf cynn implies ælfe themselves, since the end of the remedy specifies the prospect of an ælf. Jolly asserted that ‘the salve works with incense and the sign of the cross to drive or smoke the elf out’, but while this inference of possession is possible, it is not to be assumed.

In Wið ælfcynne, ælf and ælf cynn are collocated with nihtgengan. Beyond its literal sense ‘night-walkers’ the meanings of this word are largely unknown; perhaps tellingly, when the word appears in chapter 1 of the Old English Herbarium (generally thought to have been composed in the late tenth century), it does so as a translation of ‘nocturnas ambulationes’ (‘nocturnal wanderings’), alongside ‘egeslicum gesihðum’ (‘terrifying visions and dreams’, translating ‘visus timendos’, ‘terrifying visions’).

The value of Wið ælfcynne is increased by its relationship with three other texts, already mentioned. I quote Wið ælfcynne once more, followed by its three relatives. Words shared between Wið ælfcynne and Wiþ fēondes costunga are emboldened; those shared between Wið ælfcynne and the other two are underlined.

26 DOE, s.v. cynn.
27 Popular Religion, 159.
29 Hæmð must be singular (the expected plural being hæmmah), precluding J. Crawford’s ‘elves and evil spirits of the night and women who lie with the devil’ in ‘Evidences for Witchcraft in Anglo-Saxon England’, Medium Aevum, 32 (1963), 99–116, at 110.
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

1. Leechbook III, section 61, f. 123r, Wið ælfcynne:

Wyrc sealf wið ælfcynne 7 nihtgengan 7 þām mannum þe déofol mid hēmð. genim ðowohumelan. wermód bisceopwyrt. elehtre. ðæþberge. áescþrote. beolone. hārewyr. haransprecel. hæþberge. wisan. cropleac. gārlæc. hegerifan corn. gyðriþe. finul. Dō þās wyrta on ān fæt sete under wēofod sing ofer viii. maessan awyl on buteran 7 on ðcæanes smerwe dō hālges sealtes fela on ðseoh þurh clāð. weorp þā wyrta on yrrnende wæter. Gif men hwilc yfel costung weorþe oþþe ælfe. nihtgengan. smiðe his andþlitan mid þisse sealfe 7 on his eågan dō and þær him sē lichoma sār sē. 7 rēcelsa hine 7 sēna gelōme his þing þiþ sōna sēlre.

2. Leechbook III, section 41, f. 120rv, Wiþ fēonds costunga:

Wyrc gōde sealf wiþ fēonds costunga. bisceopwyrt. elehtre. haransprecel. strēawberian wise. sīo cluifhtæ wenwyrt eorðrima. brēmbelæppel. polleian. wermód. gécnua þa wyrtæ ealle ðwyile on godre buteran wing þurh clāð sete under wēofod singe. viii. maessan ofer smiðe þone man mid on þa þunwonge. bufan þam éagum 7 ufæm þæt hēafod. 7 þa þrēost 7 under þam earmum þa sidan. þeos sealfe is gōd wiþ ælcre fēonds costunga 7 ælfsïdenne 7 lenctenādle.

3a. Leechbook III, section 54, f. 122v:

Wyrc sealf wið nihtgengan. wyl on buteran elehtrean. hegerifan. bisceopwyrt. rēademagþan. cropleac. sealt smiðe mid him biö sōna sēl.

3b. Bald’s Leechbook I, section 64, f. 52v (from Wiþ ælcre lēodrūnan 7 ælfsïdenne):

Sealf elehtre hegerife bisceopwyrt þā rēadan magoþan. armelu. cropleac. sealt wyl on buteran to sealfle smiðe on þæt hēafod 7 þa þrēost

Although some of the correlations noted are more striking than others, there is little in 3a which is not represented in 1. 3b’s greater divergence is consistent with its appearance in another collection; although it does not mention nihtgengan, it does parallel Wiþ ælfcynne insofar as all the remedies in the section from which it comes are ‘wiþ ælcre lēodrūnan 7 ælfsïdenne’. Both of these remedies are, then, for ailments associated with ælf. The comparison of 3b with the other texts is also strengthened by its description in the contents list (folio 5): ‘Lēacedōmas wiþ ælcre lēodrūnan 7 ælfsïdenne þæt is fēfercynnes gealdor 7 dúst 7 drencas 7 sealf 7 gif sīo ðádl nētnum sīe’ (‘remedies against every lēodrūne and ælfsïd, being a charm for fevers, and powder and drinks and a salve; and [one] if the ailment be on cattle’). Although it is not certain, it is likely here that fēfercynnes refers not only to the noun immediately following it, but to all four of gealdor, dúst, drencas and sealf. If so, then 3b’s function is to cure fever, which is similar to the power of 2 against lenctenādl. Although the verbal similarities between texts 1 and 2 are less extensive, the two remedies also share content without verbal similarity, in being concerned both with the Devil/devils, and both recommending the application of the salve to the face (respectively referred to with andþlwita and þunwong).

It is impossible to establish a traditional text-critical stemma for texts like these, because the variation between them is due to free recomposition rather than mechanical errors. This makes it hard to assign priority to one text. While it is possible to imagine two different redactors excerpting material from a text like 1, it is simpler to suppose that 1 is a conflation of 2 and 3a; but we cannot be certain. However, the texts do afford a nexus of interrelationships.
associating not only ælfsīden, fōndes costunga and lenctenādl, but also ælfceynn, ælf, nihtgenga and þā menn þe déofol mid hámp, and, by implication, féfercynn, lēodrūne and mære too. The implication that one man’s ælfsīden might be another man’s ælf suggests that ælfsīden did indeed imply the agency of ælfe. The list of associations for ælfsīden implied by these texts is, moreover, reminiscent of another list of ailments, in another remedy against nihtgengan / a nihtgenga from section 1 of Leechbook III (f. 111). Following a remedy ‘Wiþ swīþe ealdum hēafod ece’ (‘For a very old headache’) derived from the De medicamentis of Marcellus Empiricus, the text adds that the amulets which the remedy involves ‘bēoþ gōde wiþ hēafodece ð wiþ ēagwærc ð wiþ fōndes costunga ð nihtgengan ð lenctenādl ð maran ð wyrtforbore ð malscra ð yflum gealdorcraeftum’ (‘are good against headache and against eye-pain and against the tribulations of the Devil and nihtgengan / a nihtgenga and lenctenādl and maran / a mære and plant-restraint30 and enchantments and evil incantational techniques’).31 Whatever nihtgengan are, their company here is like that found in the cluster of texts relating to Wið ælfcynne: magic, fōndes costunga, lenctenādl and maran. Even the ēagwærc has some noteworthy parallels in later English elf-texts.32

Some conclusions so far

Elliptical though our texts are, they provide some reasonably clear evidence for the meanings of ælfsīden and sīdsa. Their denotations, admittedly, remain obscure; the collocation of ælfsīden with yfel lēodrūne, however, consolidates the implication of sīden’s cognates that it denoted some kind of magic. Ælfsīden might afflict people or livestock. Previous assumptions that it involved possession or some physical assault by ælfe are by no means ruled out, but are also without foundation. What we can say is that the ailments with which ælfsīden is particularly associated are varieties of fever, particularly lenctenādl. This is consistent with the meanings of the word ælfisc in its

31 For provenance see Grattan and Singer, Anglo-Saxon Magic, 37–8.
32 Wið ælfcynne has its salve applied to the eyes, and elfae seem to be associated with eye-pain in Sloane 963, mentioned above. On folio 14v a remedy ‘ffor akynge of eyen’ concludes a short collection of remedies. On the next folio (still within the same gathering), a different hand presents the series of orations which mention Elfæ, entitling it ‘Alud carmen pro eodem’ (‘another charm against the same’): it appears that the remedy ‘ffor akynge of eyen’ prompted someone to include these as remedies for that ailment, and the prospect that eye-pains were associated with attacks by elves would provide a neat explanation. They would perhaps relate to Annette Lassen’s argument for the association of good sight with power and masculinity in medieval Scandinavian culture: ‘Hōðr’s Blindness and the Pledging of Oðinn’s Eye: A Study of the Symbolic Value of the Eyes of Hōðr, Oðinn and Bórr’, in Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society: Proceedings of the 11th International Saga Conference, 2–7 July 2000, University of Sydney, ed. Geraldine Barnes and Margaret Clunies Ross (Sydney: Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Sydney, 2000), pp. 220–8; accessed from <http://www.arts.usyd.edu.au/departs/medieval/saga.html>, 20 May 2006; cf. Carolyne Larrington, ‘“What Does Woman Want?” Marx und Munr in Skírnismál, Álvismál’, in <http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/~alvismal/>, 20 May 2006.
Old English attestation. Like other assaults on the health by ælfe, ælfsīden is associated but not synonymous with diabolical tribulations, attesting again to the uneasy, incomplete alignment of ælfe with demons in ninth- to tenth-century Anglo-Saxon clerical culture. The association, through the related text Wīd ælfcynne, of ælfsīden with devils or the Devil having sex with people is a rare and intriguing one, but too ambiguous to develop. Ælfsīden is also associated with nihtgengan and with the riding of the sick by maran. These associations are more susceptible to analysis, since they have a ready range of comparisons in chronologically and culturally proximate sources. These provide a context for interpreting ælfsīden which is at once consonant with the comparative linguistic evidence that it denotes some kind of magic and with the evidence for ælfe as human-like otherworldly beings. I consider first Scandinavian, then Irish and then Middle English evidence, focusing in each case on a particular text: Snorri Sturluson’s account, in his Ynglinga saga, of the interactions between King Vanlandi and his one-time liaison with Drífa; the seduction of Cú Chulainn by Fand in the Old Irish Serglige Con Culainn; and the description of the elvene in the South English Legendary.

COMPARATIVE EVIDENCE

Seiðr

Scandinavian evidence is particularly significant, because it provides the nearest cognates for siden and sīdsa. I begin, therefore, by examining key features of seiðr and their potential relevance to the Old English material, before proceeding to examine one of our earliest narratives concerning seiðr. Seiðr has been discussed extensively in recent years, but not in an Anglo-Saxon context. The main intentions behind conducting seiðr seem to have been divination and the manipulation of targets’ states of mind to cause them harm or to facilitate their seduction. It has pejorative connotations throughout our evidence, and these should be explained purely as the result of Christianisation only with caution.


35 Strömbäck, Sejd, 142, considered divination ‘säson motsats till den föröande “svarta” sejden, vor seiđ’ (‘by contrast with destructive “black” seiðr, white seiðr’; cf. Raudvere, ‘Trolldömr’, 110–12; Solli, Seid, 129–30), but his later emphasis (Sejd, 192) that divination by seiðr also
A potentially important issue must be addressed before seiðr is considered in an Anglo-Saxon context: because aspects of seiðr are similar to those found in the shamanic practices of the Arctic regions, and because of a desire to redress long-term oppression of Sámi culture, it has often been argued that seiðr practices were borrowed into North Germanic-speaking cultures from the Sámi, whose shamanic traditions are attested for the Middle Ages and remained strong until recent times. If seiðr-practices were a post-migration period Scandinavian cultural loan, this would compromise the value of seiðr as comparative evidence for ælfsīden. However, I prefer Price’s balanced perspective, which emphasises the usefulness of Sámi and other circumpolar traditions as comparative evidence for the Norse material, and which accepts the possibility of contact, without denying the prospect of similar traditions in Germanic-speaking cultures. Linguistically, seiðr had deep roots in Germanic-speaking cultures, and indeed it now seems clear that its medieval Norwegian reflex was itself later borrowed into the Sámi languages, as *sejda, apparently denoting places where prophecy was sought from gods. The senses of seiðr may still have been influenced by contact with Sámi culture later; but if we find correlations between the meanings of seiðr and ælfsīden, there is no reason not to accept them to reflect the words’ shared etymology. It is also worth noting that although we cannot link them lexically with sīden, we have evidence for three concepts in Anglo-Saxon culture which are prominent in our prose accounts of seiðr: the capacity for the soul to wander apart from the body; the use of magic wands; and the practice of working magic from a high place.
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

As with so many aspects of early-medieval Scandinavian belief, it is Snorri Sturluson who provides the most explicit and influential comments on seiðr, in Ynglinga saga. The first comes in chapter 4:

Njörðr ok Frey setti Óðinn blótgoða, ok váru þeir dóar með Ásum. Dóttir Njarðar var Freyja. Hon var blótgyðja. Hon kenndi fyrst með Ásum seið, sem Võnum var tít. Pá er Njörðr var með Võnum, pá hafði hann átta systur sina, þý at þat váru þar log. Váru þeirra þorn Freyr ok Freyja. En þat var bannat með Ásum at byggva svá náit at frændsemi.40

Óðinn established Njörðr and Freyr as sacrifice-chieftains, and they were gods41 along with the æsir. Njörðr’s daughter was Freyja. She was a sacrifice-goddess. It was she who first acquainted the æsir with seiðr, which was customary among the vanir. When Njörðr was among the vanir, he was married to his sister, because that was the custom there. Their children were Freyr and Freyja. But it was forbidden among the æsir for people so closely related to live together.

Snorri’s prototypical association of the vanr Freyja with seiðr is admittedly poorly paralleled.42 But the explicit association of seiðr with the vanir is, in an Anglo-Saxon context, too striking to ignore. I have argued above on independent grounds that vanr and álfr were (partial) synonyms in early-medieval Scandinavia. If this is correct, then the fact that seiðr’s Old English cognates occur only compounded or in collocation with álfr affords a remarkable correlation with Snorri’s claim that seiðr was brought to the æsir by a vanr. Pressing this observation might produce circularity of argument, but it at least suggests that Snorri’s accounts of seiðr, and Scandinavian evidence for seiðr in general, may relate closely to Anglo-Saxon culture.

It is appropriate now to turn to medieval Scandinavian textual correlates for the Old English material. As I have mentioned above, medieval Scandinavian evidence associating álfr with causing illness is hard to come by. Of the three certain medieval Scandinavian references which I know, one, the Swedish Siælinna thrøst, is a direct translation of the Low German Der grossen Seelentrost, while another, a remedy ‘For elffwer’, appears only in a sixteenth-century Swedish medical text.43 The remaining reference is to

---

40 Ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Heimskringla, i 13.
41 Díar occurs only here and in Skáldskaparmál in prose, probably borrowed from stanza 3 of Kormakr Ogmundarson’s Sigurðardrápa, where Snorri took it to mean ‘gods’ (ed. Faulkes, Skáldskaparmál, 185). This is consistent with its Old Irish etymon, dí (‘God, god’): the common translation ‘priests’ is ad hoc.
42 Näsström, Freyja, 82–5; against the long-standing identification of the seiðr-working Heiðr in Völuspá 21 with Freyja see McKinnell, ‘Eddic Poetry’.
Ælfsíden

álfavolkun (‘illness inflicted by álfar’) in an Icelandic text. Two magical curses attested for the fourteenth century mention álfar, but not in contexts which clearly attest to them causing illness. One is in Bósa saga ok Herrauðs, from around the second half of the fourteenth century, in which the eponymous hero Bósi is rescued from a death-sentence by the töfrar (‘sorcery, charms’) of his friend Busla. The opening stanza of her second spell – the only stanza of the spell quoted – runs:

Tröll ok álfar ok töfrnornir,
búar, bergrisar brenni þinar hallir,
hati þik hrímpursar, hestar streði þik,
stráin strangi þik, en stormar æri þik,
ok vei verði þér, nema þú vilja minn gerir.

May trolls/witches and álfar and magic-nornir, dwellers (cf. haugbúar, ‘burial mound-dwellers’?), mountain-giants, burn your halls, frost-þursar despise you, horses bugger you, the straws sting you, and gales drive you mad, and woe befall you, unless you do my will.

Here álfar are invoked to cause misfortune, interestingly alongside various monstrous beings which in earlier evidence seem distinct from álfar and nornir; but illness is not prominent in the misfortune invoked. A similar text was found in Bergen, carved on a fourteenth-century rune-stave, seeking to seduce a woman through cursing. It concludes with letters without linguistic meaning, and the end of the stave has been lost, but the bulk of the text is a charm in Eddaic metre, which I somewhat tentatively translate:

Ríst ek bótrúnar,
ríst ek bjargrúnar,
einfalt við álfum,
tvífalt við tröllum,
þrifalt við þursum
... við inni skœðu
skag-valkyrju,
svá at ei megi
þó at æ vili
lævis kona
lifí þínu
... Ek sendi þér,
ek sé á þér

44 See DONP, s.v. Régis Boyer, Le monde du double: la magie chez les anciens Scandinaves (Paris: Berg International, 1986), 113–14, claimed, without giving a reference, that ‘une . . . croix de plomb porte une conjuration sans équivoque: contra elphos hec in plumbo scribe’ (one . . . lead cross bears an unequivocal charm: inscribe this in lead against “elphi”; cf. Lecouteux, Nains et elfes, 125). But he seems to have meant a lead plate from Odense, bearing a text which has a German manuscript version. Of these, only the manuscript says ‘contra elphos hec in plumbo scribe’ (Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1956–78), s.v. Blykors); whether this was the intended function of the Odense inscription is not clear.

Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

ylgjar ergi ok òpola.  
À þér renni òpoli  
ok ‘ioluns’ mór.  
Sittu aldri,  
sof þu aldri  

...  
ant mér sem sjalfri þér.46

I carve remedy-runes,  
I carve protection runes,  
once over by álfa,  
twice over by tróll (‘?magic-workers, trolls’)  
thrice over by þursar (‘?magic-workers, giants’)  

...  
by the harmful  
‘?skag’-valkyrja,  
so that you may have no power of action  
though you always want,  
?crafty woman,  
in your life  

...  
I send to you,  
I chant on you  
a she-wolf’s lust and restlessness.  
May restlessness come over you  
and a jotunn’s fury (reading iotuns).  
Never sit,  
ever sleep.  

...  
love me as you love yourself.

Unfortunately, the translation of við in the phrase við álfaum is problematic: it would normally be expected to mean ‘against’, but this seems not to make much sense here since the charm does not seek to protect its object from supernatural threats, but to coerce her. We either have two texts rather inefffectively stitched together or perhaps, as in my translation, an instrumental usage of við (admittedly better attested in prose).47 Important though these charms are, they do not afford close parallels to the evidence of the Old English medical texts.

Striking parallels do arise, however, from chapter 13 of Snorri Sturluson’s Ynglinga saga, built around stanza 3 of Pjóðólfgr Ór Hvini’s Ynglingatal:

Vanlandi hét sonr Sveigðis, er ríki tók eptir hann ok réð fyrir Uppsalaauð. Hann var hermaðr mikill, ok hann fór víða um lónd. Hann þá vetrvíst á Finnlandi með Snjá inum gamla ok fekk þar dóttur hans, Drífu. En at vári fór hann á bróð, en Drífa var eptir, ok hét hann at koma aprtr á þriggja vetrta fresti, en hann kom eigi á tíu vetrum. Þá sendi Drífa eptir Huló seidókuon, en sendi Visbur, son þeira Vanlanda, til Svíþjóðar. Drífa keypti at Huló seidókuon, at hon skyldi síða Vanlanda til Finnlands eða deyda hann at óðrum kosti. En er seidr var framiðr,

47 See on the one hand McKinnell, Simek and Düwel, Runes, 132; and on the other Cleasby and Vigfusson, Dictionary, A.III.2; Sveinbjörn Egilsson, Lexicon poeticum, s.v. við 1 §§B.1, B.7.
Ælfsíden

var Vanlandi at Uppsolum. Þá gerði hann þúsan at fara til Finnlands, en vinir hans ok rásamenn þonnudu honum ok sogðu, at vera myndi fjólkynngi Finna í fýsi hans. Þá gerðisk honum svefnþófugt, ok lagðisk hann til svefn. Þá er hann hafði lítt sofnat, kallaði hann ok sagðu, at mara trað hann. Menn hans fóru til ok vildu hjálpa honum. En er þeir tóku uppi til hófuðsins, þá trað hon fótleggina, svá at nær brotnuðu. Þá tóku þeir til fótanna, þá kafði hon hófuðit, svá at þar dó hann. Sviar tóku lík hans, ok var hann brenndr við á þá, er Skúta heitir. Par váru settir bautasteinar hans. Svá segir Þjóðólfr:

The son of Sveigðir was called Vanlandi, who received the kingdom after him and ruled over Uppsala-auðr [=the wealth of Uppsala]. He was a great warrior, and he travelled widely about the land. He accepted winter accommodation in Finnland with Snjá [=Snow] the Old, and there took his daughter, Drífa [=Sleet]. But in the spring he went away, while Drífa was left behind, and he promised to come back after three winters’ wait, but he did not come in ten years. Then Drífa sent for Hulð the witch [seiðr-woman], and sent Vísburr, her and Vanlandi’s son, to Sweden. Drífa struck a bargain with the witch Hulð, that she should enchant (síða) Vanlandi to Finnland, or otherwise kill him. Now, when the magic (seiðr) was done, Vanlandi was at Uppsala. Then he eagerly made to travel to Finnland, but his friends and counsellors forbade him and said that there would be an enchantment (fjólkynngi) of the Finnar behind his desire. Then he became drowsy, and laid himself down to sleep. But when he had slept a short while, he cried and said that a mara trampled him. His men went there and wanted to help him. But when they went to the head, then it/she trampled the legs, so that they nearly broke. When they went to the feet, it/she smothered the head, so that he died there. The Swedes took his body, and he was burnt by the river which is called Skúta. His monument-stone was set there. Thus, Þjóðólfr says:

En á vit
Víla bróður
vitta véttr
Vanlanda kom,
þás trollkund
of troða skylidi
líðs grimhildr
ljóna bága,
ok sá brann
á beði Skútu
menglótuðr,
es mara kvalði.48

But to a meeting
with Vili’s brother [=Óðinn]
the ?demon of magic
brought Vanlandi,
when the ?witch-born
Grimhildr of ale [=dis]49
had to trample upon
the enemy of men [=warrior],

49 Some commentators read líðs (‘of the warband’; for example, McKinnell, Meeting the Other, 96). But both this reading and the edition’s líðs suggest a valkyrie-kenning. I assume that this reading has hitherto been avoided because of an unwillingness to equate a monstrous female supernatural being with a valkyrja, but the negative side of valkyrjar’s propensity to inflict slaughter is emphasised Helgakviða Hundingsbana I, stanza 38, ed. Neckel, Edda, 136.

135
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

and he burned
on the bank of the Skúta,
necklace-generous,
whom the mara killed.

Since it is not certain that Snorri was any wiser than we are about the story to which this verse originally alluded, we can rely only on the verse itself as evidence for ninth-century beliefs. It is problematic, but seems clearly to portray Vanlandi to have been trodden to death by a trollkund being, a mara. This affords an early and respectably close analogue to the Anglo-Saxon conception of maran riding the sick discussed above. What is really useful here, however, is Snorri’s thirteenth-century prose. McKinnell has read this as an example of a narrative pattern repeated several times in the saga and elsewhere.50 My considerations do not aim to contradict McKinnell’s analysis, but (drawing in the next section on different comparative evidence) do have a different focus, producing some slightly different conclusions from his approach (which need not, however, be mutually exclusive).

Characteristically of Old Icelandic saga-writing, Snorri’s account of Vanlandi’s death is ambiguous: a bargain is struck with a seiðkona for Vanlandi’s seduction or, failing that, his murder; subsequently, a mara attacks him. But it is also characteristic of Old Icelandic saga-writing that the narrator’s juxtaposition of events and the speculations of his characters are sufficient to imply that Vanlandi’s death was not only the seiðkona’s doing but that she herself was, in some sense, the mara which attacked him.51 Snorri attests, then, to the idea that the trampling and suffocating mara might be a seiðkona who had changed her form through seiðr. In Bald’s Leechbook, meanwhile, it seems evident that riding by a mare was a possible manifestation of ælfsiden. The correlation is striking. Admittedly, Snorri’s narrative does not mention álfar. But this should not obscure a deeper correlation: as I have discussed above, Finnmar such as Drífa could occupy much the same space in medieval Scandinavian world-views as álfar (chapter 1); the point is emphasised by the fact that the story of Vanlandi and Drífa shares much with that of Helgi Hálfdanarson and an álfkona in chapter 15 of Hrólf’s saga kraka.52 Snorri’s story

50 Meeting the Other, 62–80.
52 Helgi has sex with a woman who proves to be an álfkona; before she leaves, Helgi agrees to collect the child which he has just begotten the next year. He does not, and three years later, the girl is instead delivered to his door. This is similar to the story of Vanlandi and Drífa, though admittedly in Hrólf’s saga kraka it is the otherworldly woman who visits the king, not the other way round. Helgi is not killed, but the girl is later instrumental in the death of Helgi’s son Hrólf kraki (cf. Völund’s revenge on Nóðuðr). This story is innovative in the Hrólf kraki tradition and possibly as late as the seventeenth century, the date of our earliest manuscript (D. Slay, The Manuscripts of Hrólf’s saga kraka, Bibliotheca Arnamagnæana, 24 (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1960), 4–15; for other versions see Valgerður Brynjólfsdóttir, ‘A Valiant King or a Coward? The Changing Image of King Hrólf Kraki from the Oldest Sources to Hrólf’s saga kraka’, in Fornaldarsagornas struktur och ideologi: Handlingar från ett symposium i Uppsala 31.8–2.9 2001, ed. Ármann Jakobsson, Annette Lassen and Agneta Ney, Nordiska texter och undersökningar, 28 (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, Institutionen för Nordiska Språk, 2003), pp. 141–56, at 142–4), but it still shows the transferability of the concepts of Finnmar and álfkona.
Ælfside

of the fjólyngi Finna may be a good representative of the kind of narrative which might have been attached to ælf, underlying the Old English collocation of ælfsīden with mære.\(^{53}\) That this should have been the case is suggested further by a text, closer to Anglo-Saxon England in time and, for what it may be worth, in space, concerning the otherworldly beings par excellence, the early Irish Æs side.

Serglige Con Culainn

The narrative in question occurs as section 8 of Serglige Con Culainn, conventionally translated as ‘The Wasting Sickness of Cú Chulainn’, though serglige might perhaps be rendered – less literally but more idiomatically – as ‘love-sickness’ here. Its primary manuscript, Lebor na hUidre, is a complex compilation written and altered during the eleventh and possibly the twelfth centuries. Lebor na hUidre seems originally to have contained one version, known now as A, but the pages containing the first half of this were subsequently replaced with new ones by a revising scribe. On to these he copied another version – a conflation of an A-text with a different recension known as B – and also erased and rewrote passages in the second half of the original Lebor na hUidre text. The material judged to derive from B exhibits linguistic features pointing, amongst later ones, to the ninth century, while the language of A seems to be eleventh-century.\(^{54}\) A has long been considered the earlier version of the story nevertheless, but Carey has recently argued that B is the earlier version.\(^{55}\)

The following text is thought to derive from B – so whatever the priority of A and B, it probably derives from around the ninth century. Cú Chulainn is by a lake at the autumn festival of samuin, when two birds land there, linked by a

---

\(^{53}\) The identity of the mæra–mære with a shape-changing witch is not clearly paralleled in medieval English, so I have excluded it from consideration here. However, it is suggested by the synonymy of mære with wyche (‘witch’) attested by the Promptorium parvulorum, from the 1440s: ‘Mære, or wyche. Magus, maga, sagana’, ed. Way, Promptorium parvulorum, 11.326. The idea is well attested later in English tradition (see Owen Davies, ‘Hag-Riding in Nineteenth-Century West-Country England and Modern Newfoundland: An Examination of an Experience-Centred Witchcraft Tradition’, Folk Life, 35 (1997), 36–53), the earliest clear example coming in Shakespeare’s 2 Henry IV, composed in the late 1590s, the Hostess threatens Falstaff by warning that ‘I will ride thee o’ nights like the mare’ (II. i. 85–6; ed. W. J. Craig, Shakespeare: Complete Works (London: Oxford University Press, 1905), 445). Although the Hostess does not threaten to become a mære as such, the threatened situation is similar to that of Hulð with the mæra.


\(^{55}\) ‘Serglige Con Culainn’, 81.
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

gold chain. They sing, and almost everyone present falls asleep. Cú Chulainn, having recently captured enough birds to give two to each woman present apart from his wife, ill-advisedly shoots stones and a spear at the birds, but for the first time in his life, his projectiles miss.\(^5^6\) The text continues:

Dotháet Cú Chulaind iar sin co tard a druim frisin liic, 7 ba holc a menma leis, 7 dofuít cotleud fair. Co n-accai in dá mnaí cucai. Indala n-ai brat úaine imbe. Alaili brat corcra cócidiabail im sùde. Dolluid in ben cosin brot úáine chucai, 7 tibid gen frís, 7 dobert bém dind echfeisc dó. Dotháet alaili cucai dano, 7 tibid frís, 7 nod slaid fón alt chétna. Ocus bátar fri ciana móir oca sin. i. cechtar dé imma sech cucai béus dia búaal domar marb acht bec. Lotir úad íarom. Arigsitar Ulaid uli aní sin, 7 asbertatár ara ndúscide. ‘Acc!’ ol Fergus. ‘Náchi nglúasid res atchí.’\(^5^7\)

Cú Chulainn went then and put his back against a pillar stone, and he was downcast, and a sleep fell upon him. He saw two women come towards him. One wore a green mantle; the other a purple mantle in five folds. The woman in the green mantle came to him and laughed at him, and struck him with her horse-whip. The other came to him, too, and laughed at him, and struck him in the same way. And they continued for a long time, each of them in turn coming still to beat him, so that he was almost dead. Then they went from him. The Ulaid observed that, and they said that he should be wakened. ‘No’, said Fergus. ‘Do not disturb him. It is a vision that he sees.’

These two women are doubtless identical with the two swans which appeared earlier.\(^5^8\) Cú Chulainn subsequently awakens, but is mute and too weak to move. A year later, after a visit by Óengus, the son of Áed Abrat, the king of the áes síde, Cú Chulainn regains some of his strength and returns to the stone. There he meets the woman in green who explains that Fann, the daughter of Áed Abrat, has fallen in love with him.\(^5^9\) The rest of the story concerns Fann’s wooing of Cú Chulainn and the subsequent struggle for Cú Chulainn between Fann and Cú Chulainn’s wife.

Various aspects of Cú Chulainn’s serglige are paralleled in early Irish and perhaps Welsh sources, but what interests me here are the similarities with Snorri’s account of the death of Vanlandi.\(^6^0\) An otherworldly woman (Drífa in Ynglinga saga, Fann in Serglige Con Culainn) seeks to woo a man of the in-group (Vanlandi, Cú Chulainn) through female otherworldly emissaries, who exhibit magical powers of shape-changing (the seiðkona Hulð, the bird-women). The emissaries are effectively rebuffed: Vanlandi resists his urge to go to Lappland, while Cú Chulainn shoots at the birds. Punishment

---

\(^5^6\) Ed. Dillon, Serglige Con Culainn, 1–3.
\(^5^9\) Ed. Dillon, Serglige Con Culainn, 3–5.
follows, in which the men unexpectedly fall asleep and are assailed by the wooing women. In the Norse text, Hulò turns herself into a *mara* and tramples Vanlandi; in the Irish text, the women beat Cú Chulainn with *echféasca* ('horse-whips'). In *Ynglinga saga*, Vanlandi’s punishment is death, whereas Cú Chulainn’s illness eventually speeds Fann’s wooing; even so, the perils of Cú Chulainn’s liaison are emphasised by the fact that when Fann leaves him, he falls into madness until his uncle Conchobor sends druids to give him a drink of forgetfulness.

These similarities allow us in the first instance to conclude that Snorri’s account of Vanlandi and Drífa is a narrative whose form is, in certain respects, reliably attested in the British Isles for the Anglo-Saxon period. This allows us to posit with greater confidence that Snorri’s own story has deeper roots, encouraging its use as a comparison for earlier Anglo-Saxon material. However, although it is not, of course, possible to identify lexical parallels, *Serglige Con Culainn* also deserves consideration as a direct parallel for the Old English medical texts. The use of such evidence in the past has presumably been discouraged on the one hand by the idea that beings like the *áes side* were distinctively ‘Celtic’ and so irrelevant to Anglo-Saxon belief, and on the other by the long-standing idea that there was no cultural contact between Ireland and England pertinent to medicine. Moreover, a special Hiberno-Scandinavian literary connection has often been posited, which might allow us to see Snorri’s story to reflect contact with Ireland rather than north-west European cultural continuity. However, relevant cultural contact and continuity between early-medieval English- and Irish-speaking cultures now seems less unlikely than it once did. Chapters 3–4 have shown that Anglo-Saxon *ælfe* were, at least in some strands of tradition, far more like the *áes side* than was once thought, and other commentators have likewise begun to identify similarities and historical connections between Anglo-Saxon and Irish society where once it was customary to look only to

---

61 Another parallel is chapter 12 of the probably fifteenth-century *Ála flekks saga*, ed. Åke Lagerholm, *Drei Lygisogur: Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjábanu, Ála flekks saga, Flóres saga konungs ok sóna hans*, Altnordische Saga-Bibliothek, 17 (Halle (Saale): Niemeyer, 1927), 105–6, in which Áli ‘lætr . . . illa í svefni, ok eru svefnfarir hans bæði harðar ok langar’ ('lies . . . restless in his sleep, and his sleep-journeys are both hard and long'); a *trollkona* besets Áli with an iron whip (*járnsvipa*), cursing him so that the injuries can only be healed by her brother. Lagerholm noted the comparison with both *Serglige Con Culainn* and *Ynglinga saga* (pp. lxvi, 106 n. to §§3–4), but *Ála flekks saga* does not share the other details.


Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

Germanic-speaking regions. It is also worth noting that a small amount of Irish material appears in Bald’s Leechbook and the Lācnunga, attesting to at least some relevant cultural communication concerning illness.

Serglige Con Culainn involves several motifs correlating particularly with our evidence for ælfsīden and for ælfe. Ælfsīden was caused by ælfe and specifically was associated with fever; this association connects more generally to an association of ælfe with causing delusions. Likewise, the specific effect of the actions of Fann’s emissaries is to cause Cú Chulainn to sleep and see a res (‘vision’). A possible outcome of ælfsīden seems to be that a mære might ride the victim; so although early-medieval visions involved saints and angels whipping the visionary reasonably often, the horse-whips used by Fann’s emissaries in Serglige Con Culainn to beat Cú Chulainn during his vision correspond to the English material particularly neatly. Finally – and this parallel stands for Drífa, but less prominently – ælfe seem to have been associated with dangerously seductive beauty, and Fann’s agents act in order to seduce Cú Chulainn, for a supernatural female whose seductive beauty is related prominently later in the text. We may plausibly – though tentatively – imagine that remedies ‘wið ælfcynne ðihtengana ðe dofol mid hæm’ or ‘wiþ ælcre leordrūna ðe ælfsīdenne’ were conceived in a culture in which illness might not only be caused by ælfe, but might represent attempts at seduction or revenge at rejection, effected through magic and perhaps including assaults in the form of maran.

The South English Legendary

That it would not be far-fetched to imagine themes like this in tenth-century England is emphasised by Middle English evidence. A few pieces of evidence associate elves with magic. Prominent among them is Chaucer’s use of elf in the Man of Law’s Tale: in an effort to convince her son King Alla that his wife and their new-born son should be abandoned, Donegild claims in lines 750–6 that

\[\ldots\] the queene delivered was  
Of so horrible a feendly creature  
That in the castel noon so hardy was  
That any while dorste {dared} ther endure {remain}.  
The mooer was an elf, by aventyre {strange event}  
Ycome, by charmes or by sorcerie,  
And every wight {person} hateth hir compaignye.67

The elf’s use of charmes and sorcerie here (in the context, moreover, of Alla’s

---

65 Meroney, ‘Charms’; Pettit, Anglo-Saxon Remedies, xxix–xxxi.
sedom) neatly parallel Ælfsidem. In the fifteenth century – with its dominant intellectual framework of book-based magic, we find a Latin narrative in a treatise on the Ten Commandments which tells of the ‘filius cuiusdam viri qui infirmabatur, quem pater duxit ad quemdam clericum in patria, qui habeat librum qui vocabatur an heluenbok, ut per eius benediccionem recuperat sanitatem’ (‘son of a certain man who became infirm, whom the father led to a certain cleric in that country, who had a book which was called an heluenbok [‘an elven-book’], so that he [the son] might regain his health through through his [the cleric’s] blessing’).\(^{68}\) The story explains that although the son was cured, the father went mad. As Wenzel suggested, the heluenbok seems surely to be a grimoire, and the implication is that elven- seemed an appropriate way of indicating the magical character of this book.\(^{69}\) We might also compare this material with the observation of Heinrich von Morungen, who died in 1222, that ‘Von den elben wirt entsehen vil manic man’ (‘Many a man indeed is enchanted by the elben’).\(^{70}\)

Most striking, however, is the South English Legendary, already mentioned above, composed in the Worcester/Gloucester area around the 1270s.\(^{71}\) The passage in question comes from a cosmography included in the account of the Archangel Michael. After describing how some evil spirits oppress sleepers as maren, it declares

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Þe ssrewen wolleþ ek ðe ðeperwile} & : \text{The evil creatures desire also at other times} \\
\text{mankunne to bi-traie} & : \text{to betray mankind,} \\
\text{A-líste a-doun in monnes forme} & : \text{alight down in human form} \\
\text{biníste & bidaie} & : \text{by night and by day,} \\
\text{And liggeþ ofte ði wymmen} & : \text{and lie often with women} \\
\text{ase hi were of fleiss & blode} & : \text{as though they were of flesh and blood;} \\
\text{Ac þe engendrure þat hi makeþ} & : \text{but the offspring that they beget} \\
\text{ne comp neuer to gode} & : \text{never come to good.} \\
\text{And ofte in forme of womman} & : \text{And often in woman’s form,} \\
\text{aday and eke nyȝt} & : \text{in the day and also night,} \\
\text{Hi letþe men hom ligge bi} & : \text{they let men lie with them} \\
\text{and bitraieþ hom outriȝt} & : \text{and betray them outright:} \\
\text{For hi wetþ uȝch beþþe men} & : \text{for they know which are the men} \\
\text{þat to folie habbéþ wille} & : \text{who have desire of folly.} \\
\text{Al one in som deorne stude} & : \text{Alone in some hidden place} \\
\text{hi stondeþ þanne wel stille} & : \text{they stand then very quiet/still,} \\
\text{And mani fol hom lip so by} & : \text{and many a fool lies with them thus,} \\
\text{in wode and eke in mede} & : \text{in the wood and in the meadow:} \\
\text{Ac þer nis non þat so deþ} & : \text{But there is none who does so} \\
\text{þat ne acoreþ þe dede} & : \text{that does not suffer from the deed:} \\
\text{Hore membres toswelleþ somme} & : \text{their penises swell up ?somewhat,}
\end{align*}
\]

Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

& somme ofscapeþ vnneþe and some [men] survive with difficulty,
and some dwindle completely away,
and they are brought to death.

A greater wonder it is, for sure,
how any escapes alive,
for a poisonous thing it is,
to a [male] lover or a woman.

And ofte in form of womman · And often in the form of woman
on many a hidden path
men see a great company of them
both dance and play,
that are called eluene [following other MSS].

who/which often come to town,
and by day they are often in the wood,
and by night upon high hills,
that are from among the wretched spirits
who/which were taken out of heaven.

And many of them yet
will come to rest on Doomsday;
but the evil spirits which exist at night,
and also by day,
tempt [us] with every wile:
they can betray people most.

Though different in important respects from the Scandinavian and Irish texts just discussed, this depicts schrewene in the form of women – who are identified with the dancing cavalcades of eluene mentioned at the end of the passage – waiting in hidden places and seducing men; the consequence for the men is a wasting illness (possibly specifically of the penis, the text is ambiguous).

Although this illness is not identified with the mare, it is juxtaposed with it in a way which suggests that the one idea led to the other. That Anglo-Saxons should have had similar conceptions regarding ælfe three centuries earlier, then, is entirely plausible.

Implications

These texts allow us to guess at how to interpret mentions of ælfsíden, but they also provide a context in which we can guess at what wider cultural meanings beliefs relating to ælfsíden may have had. Establishing this framework requires two stages. First I consider the meanings of the texts themselves: each is a cautionary tale, warning not only against the dangers of the otherworld, but also the dangers of acting unwisely towards its members. The next section addresses a key difference: the fact that the otherworldly beings in these texts are predominantly female, whereas I have emphasised our Old English evidence that early Anglo-Saxon ælfe were male.

The main implication of the South English Legendary is that malicious demons may come among humans and disrupt society with illusions and

by inflicting illness upon those deceived by their sexual temptations. But its condemnation of fallen angels is equivocal – some of the eluene, it seems, are not damned – and the text implies that a man who would have sex with the demons is a fol (‘fool’), putting responsibility on the deluded as well as on the demons. Serglige Con Culainn explicitly takes a similar demonising line, concluding with the comment,

Conid taibsiu aidmillti do Choin Chulaind la háes sídi sin. Ar ba móir in chumachta demnach ría creitim, 7 ba hé a méit co cathaigtis có córptha na demna frisna doínib 7 co tsaisfentais aibniusa 7 diamairt dóib, amal no betis co marthanach. Is amlaid no cretè dóib. Conid frisna taidsib sin atberat na hánéolaig side 7 áes side.73

That is the disastrous vision shown to Cú Chulainn by the fairies. For the diabolical power was great before the faith, and it was so great that devils used to fight with men in bodily form, and used to show delights and mysteries to them, as though they really existed. So they were believed to be; and ignorant men used to call those visions side and áes side.

These words, like the Anglo-Saxon medical texts, reflect a world in which traditional beliefs in otherworldly beings such as the áes side could neither be condoned nor abandoned.74 However, ‘this “rewriting” of the text’s meaning only barely contains its tensions and ambiguities: Serglige Con Culainn affords a nuanced investigation of the causes and consequences of sexual liaisons which transgress accepted social boundaries.75 Findon stressed the efforts of Church reformers in medieval Ireland to end traditional practices of polygamy as a context for Serglige Con Culainn, though it may, like the South English Legendary, target sexual promiscuity generally.76 Undeniably, the principal threat to social order comes from the otherworldly being, Fann (who is herself transgressing the bounds of her own society, in seeking a lover other than her husband, Mannanán mac Lir), while Carey has laid the foundations for positive readings of Cú Chulainn’s sickness.77 But Findon has argued persuasively that the text as we have it shows the disorder beginning within the in-group, principally in Cú Chulainn’s continual failure to act wisely. He is not unreminiscent, then, of the South English Legendary’s fol. Cú Chulainn loses the power proper to his aristocratic male status by mishandling Fann’s suit and so allowing himself to be subjected to an otherworldly female. In the words of his charioteer, Lóeg,

Mór espa do láech
laigi frí súan serglige,
ar donadbat genaiti
áesa a Tenmag Trogaigí,
condot rodbsat,
condot chachtsat,

75 Findon, A Woman’s Words, 133.
77 ‘Cú Chulainn’. 
condot ellat,  
eter brīga banespa.78  
It is a great folly for a warrior  
to lie in the sleep of a wasting-sickness,  
because it belies demons,  
peoples of Tenmag Trogaige,  
and [that] they have injured(?) you,  
and bound you,  
and afflicted(?) you,  
in the power of woman-wantoness.  

Lóeg’s criticisms chime, of course, with my reading in chapter 1 of Vôlundr in Vôlundarkviða as a figure shamefully disempowered by the swan-maiden who seduces him.

Unlike the other texts, Ynglinga saga does not orientate itself to Christian demonology, but it parallels Findon’s reading of Serglige Con Culainn nevertheless.79 Lönnroth remarked of female Finnar that ‘Several Yngling kings are bewitched by the wealth and beauty of such women . . . but a marriage with them will always turn out to be disastrous, since they are evil and practiced in the art of seiðr’.80 This is more or less correct, but in Vanlandi’s case, the disaster surely begins with Vanlandi’s own actions. Stepping outside the controlled space of his society, he rashly follows his erotic desires – the text does not imply that Drífa was the wooer – without respecting the consequences. Unlike the South English Legendary and Serglige Con Culainn, the death of Vanlandi does not seem to warn against extramarital liaisons per se: Vanlandi’s transgression is in breaking a promise. The consequence is that he is ignominiously murdered in his sleep by a woman using magic. This reading is paralleled by recent readings of the narrative of Helgi Hálfdanarson and the álfkona in Hrólf’s saga kraka.81 The story of Vanlandi and Drífa certainly implies that places and peoples from beyond the in-group are dangerous, but also that their threat is manifested in response to individuals’ impropriety. The prominence of these concerns is consistent with Clunies Ross’s argument

78 Ed. Dillon, Serglige Con Culainn, 11.
79 Contrast the Historia Norwegiae, also based on Ynglingatal, ed. Gustav Storm, Monumenta historica Norwegiae: Latinske kildeskrifter til Norges historie i middelalderen (Kristiania: Brøgger, 1880), 97–8 (cf. 213): ‘Svegthir . . . genuit Wanlanda, qui in somno a dæmone suffocatus interiit, quod genus dæmoniorum norwegico sermone mara vocatur’ (‘Sveigðir . . . begat Vanlandi, who died in his sleep, suffocated by a demon; that kind of demon is called mara in the Norwegian language’).
that Old Norse mythology foregrounds issues of procreation, marriage and women as tokens in inter-group exchange, and Bredsdorff’s demonstration of the prominence of men’s improper exercise of erotic desires as a cause of social disorder in the Íslendingasögur – not least in Egils saga Skallagrímssonar, also likely to be by Snorri.82

That Anglo-Saxons might take a similar attitude to men seduced by otherworldly magic-working females is hinted at by my reading of Völundarkviða in chapter 1, but is suggested more reliably by the Alfredian renderings of Boethius’s account, in the third metre of Book 4 of the De consolatione philosophiae, of Ulysses and Circe.83 As this story emerges in the Old English text, ‘Ulysses is a king who abuses his royal responsibilities: he abandons his kingdom to remain with Circe’.84 Although the only punishment he suffers in this narrative is the translator’s opprobrium, the attitude to Ulysses is not unlike the attitudes for which I have argued towards Cú Chulainn, Vanlandi and Helgi Hálfdanarson. Otherworldly females are a force for disorder, violating and even inverting the patriarchal power-structures of the societies in question – but this force operates only through men’s own destabilising passions.

It is striking that the closest parallels for our ælfsíden texts concern seduction. This correlates with the quite separate evidence of scholarly glosses and Old English poetry considered in chapter 3, which also link ælfe with seductive beauty, and to some extent with the centrality to our narratives about the Ælfr Völundr of his identity as a sexual threat to Bóðvildr; moreover, it hints at an Anglo-Saxon discourse concerning sex and gender absent from our mainstream evidence. A twofold interpretation emerges from the texts. The narratives comprise a discourse of gendering, elucidating the importance of power and independence to masculinity by showing the consequences of its loss to supernatural illness. This loss comes, however, with the abuse of power: it comes, in this model, to those who deserve it, both providing potential aetiologies of illness and upholding social order. This comparative context helps to demonstrate the plausibility of the similar readings which I have offered of Wið fjærstice, while emphasising the potential of supernatural beings to relate to ideologies of gender. In this latter respect, however, they are somewhat problematic.

Males and magic

A limitation of the texts just considered is that they concern female otherworldly beings, whereas I have argued above that ælf primarily denoted


83 Ed. Sedgefield, Boethius, 115–16, 193–7; Moreschini, Boethius, 111–12.

males – and indeed that early Anglo-Saxon belief systems may have lacked female equivalents of ælfe, which surely suggests that they had no close equivalent to figures like Fann. Indeed, medieval Irish, Welsh and French literatures are replete with seductive otherworldly females, but males are much rarer.85 When otherworldly males do appear, they generally succeed in having sex with women either by persuasion or brute force, and so without using magic or inflicting illness.86 One response to this would be to argue that our evidence for the insignificance of female ælfe in early Anglo-Saxon belief systems is chimeric, or that by the time of our medical texts, female ælfe had already become prominent, their late attestation in the glosses being an accident of our evidence. However, although it is risky to make inferences from sparse and problematic data like our Old English glosses, it is at least as risky to project belief-systems suggested by a generically limited range of narratives back across several centuries without consideration for which elements have reliable points of comparison in the earlier material. It is appropriate, therefore, to examine how else the disjunction in our evidence can be explained. For reasons of genre, the gender balance in our later texts may give a misleading impression of wider belief, and although it is not as neat as that adduced above, there is evidence for otherworldly males using seiðr to inflict illness – again, as it happens, in the course of seduction.

The preponderance of otherworldly females in our high-medieval evidence is almost certainly partly an artefact of our source material, and not representative of tradition more generally. Medieval otherworldly narratives, as McKinnell found in his study of Scandinavian examples, frequently involve cross-gender encounters, in which one of the characters represents the ingroup. Since ‘the representative of This World is nearly always male’, the otherworldly (or monstrous) party tends therefore to be female.87 The reasons for this are various, but doubtless relate to a predilection for male protagonists in medieval secular literature reflecting the patriarchal dominance of society, action and patronage, and its power to constrain the expectations even of female poets, audiences and patrons.88 When, in the Scottish witchcraft trials, we finally begin to glimpse English-speaking women’s narratives of encounters with elvis and fareis – admittedly through the haze of intellectual demonology – there is no shortage of male elvis; it is perhaps telling that our clearest high-medieval attestation of a male elf is put in the mouth of a woman, the Wife of Bath.

85 See Guerreau-Jalabert, Index, 64–5 [F234.2.5, F252.5(B), F301, F302]; Cross, Motif-Index, 255–8 [F300–4]; Harf-Lancner, Les fées, esp. 59–77; Gallais, La fée. Of the ‘fairy lovers’ cited by Cross [F301], Art mac Coin surely does not qualify, as he is a member of the in-group who must win a maiden from Tir Thairngaire (‘the Land of Wonders’; ed. R. I. Best, ‘The Adventures of Art Son of Conn, and the Courtship of Delbchæm’, Ériu, 3 (1907), 149–73).
86 For example, the Middle English Sir Degarré, ed. Anna Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, The Middle English Breton Lays (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), 105; also at <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/salisbur.htm>, accessed 11 October 2004; the Anglo-Norman Yonec, ed. Ewert, Maire de France, 82–96; Völundarkviða, discussed above, chapter 1.
87 Meeting the Other, 7.
88 See also McKinnell, Meeting the Other, 7–8, 78–80, 161.
There is no doubt that the practice of seiðr was ideologically linked with women in medieval Scandinavia. The principal evidence is again from Ynglinga saga, this time chapter 6. Snorri said of seiðr that ‘þessi fjolkynngi, er framið er, fylgir svá mikil ergi, at eigi þótti karlunnunum skamlaust við afara, ok var gyðjunum kennd sú íprótt’ (‘this sorcery, when it is performed, brings with it such great ergi that engaging in that did not seem to men to be without shame, and that accomplishment was taught to the priestesses’). As Dubois has pointed out, Snorri’s reliability here can be questioned, but his statement finds some earlier support. Loki accuses Óðinn in Lokasenna (admittedly by emendation) of working seiðr ‘sem völur’ (‘like prophetesses’), which he characterises as argr – perversely transgressive of gender norms. This, of course, could be Snorri’s source, but a post-conversion Danish runestone, Skern stone 2, dating from around 1000, curses as a síði (‘seiðr-worker’) anyone who breaks the stone. Although síði is not attested earlier, the Danish curse is in a tradition of cursing argskappr upon desecrators going back at least to the eighth century, being attested already in Sweden on the probably sixth-century Björketorp and Stentoffen stones. It might also be added that our Middle Welsh attestations of men performing hud also involve compromised masculinity.

Solli’s recent survey of likely reasons for seiðr’s associations with ergi includes a putative association of seiðr with sexual perversion and bodily transformation, the tendency for shamanic practices to involve systematic gender-transgression, and the likelihood that, to co-opt DuBois’s phrasing, in a culture in which keeping control of one’s wits and dealing in a forthright manner were both counted as prime features of masculinity, a complex ritual that entails public trance and possible underhanded manipulation of another’s will could only be seen as compromising of the masculine ideal.

These conditions may or may not have held in Anglo-Saxon culture. But it seems clear that two otherworldly males in Scandinavian beliefs did conduct seiðr, using it to inflict illness which allowed them to rape or seduce victims. Besides the evidence of Lokasenna, Óðinn is attested in stanza 3 of Kormakr

---

89 Ed. Bjarni Ádalbjarnarson, Heimskringla, 199.
92 Ed. Lis Jacobsen and Erik Moltke, Danmarks Runeindskrifter, 3 vols (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1941–2), cols 116–17 [no. 81].
95 Solli, Seið, 148–59; Dubois, ‘Seiðr’, 52.
Qgmundarson’s *Sigurðarkviða* to have worked *seiðr* upon Rindr. Combining this point with our other evidence for the seduction, principally Saxo Grammaticus’s detailed narrative in the *Gesta Danorum*, McKinnell has plausibly reconstructed a narrative in which this *seiðr* specifically involves Óðinn inflicting a fever while disguised as a woman in order to rape Rindr. *Skírnismál* offers another parallel, which may be particularly significant because it concerns Freyr, whom I have argued above to have been associated with the álfar. In *Skírnismál*, Freyr is struck with a love-sickness, which according to other sources leads him to give up his sword – both points which compromise Freyr’s masculinity. Freyr’s proxy Skírnir then seduces Gerðr by invoking a curse which is both generally similar to and verbally connected with the Bergen rune-stave, which is itself, presumably, evidence for men’s love-magic. Looking more widely, it is also worth noting that in Marie de France’s *Yonec* – from around the 1150s or 1160s, and set in Caerwent, affording a relatively early text with British connections – the otherworldly knight Muldumarec has to transform himself into the form of the lady whom he is attempting to seduce and then claim to be ill, so as to receive the sacrament and prove his Christianity, before he can win her. This is reminiscent of Óðinn’s putative infliction of illness on Rindr and his concomitant cross-dressing.

These texts do not contradict Snorri’s claim that it was demeaning to a man’s masculinity for him to conduct *seiðr*. To this extent, they still suggest that *seiðr* (and potentially, then, *sīden*) was women’s business. But they also show clearly that mythological otherworldly males might conduct *seiðr*, transgressing social norms to do so, and in Óðinn’s case suffering direct criticism for it. Moreover, these readings actually fit well with my argument that álfes were associated with seductive, feminine beauty: they provide a rich context for inferring that álfesīden carried similar connotations of male gender transgression to *seiðr*. I return to this prospect in the next chapter, linking this reading with the contrast in *Wið færstice* between the largely passive *sniðas* and the active, martial supernatural females.

**ÆLFE AND SUPERNATURAL POWER**

One last aspect of my comparisons between *ælfsīden* and *seiðr* demands consideration: the evident, if problematic, desirability of this magical power in medieval Scandinavia. This hints that it might be appropriate to consider whether *ælfes* were not merely sources of supernatural harm in Anglo-Saxon belief-systems, but sources of power. Ælfes’s capacity to induce mind-altering illnesses may have had a more positive aspect. We have no unequivocal

---

98 On lovesickness see Anne Heinrichs, ‘Der liebeskrank Freyr, euhemeristisch entmythisiert’, *Allvissmál*, 7 (1997), 3–36; on the sword see McKinnell, *Meeting the Other*, p. 65.
Anglo-Saxon evidence for this, but *elves* and *fairies* are clearly attested as sources of supernatural power later in English-speaking culture, so the idea deserves to be pursued. Moreover, we do have an early hint in the Old English word *ylfig*.

*Ylfig* is attested in a group of textually related glosses on Aldhelm’s *Prosa de virginitate* and additionally in the eleventh-century Harley Glossary, which not only includes the Aldhelm gloss, but also adds *ylfig* to another textual tradition. The problems of these glosses are intricate, and I have accordingly analysed the evidence in detail elsewhere. None of our surviving attestations was written before the eleventh century, but the Aldhelm gloss belongs to a textual tradition which goes back at least in part to the eighth century, and so may be old. *Ylfig* could have been a common Old English word or a gloss-coining redeployed by the Harley Glossator – two scenarios which could have profoundly different implications. Etymologically, *ylfig* would appear broadly to mean ‘engaged with an *ælf*’; its potential meanings and age are suggested by the word *gydig*, deriving from Common Germanic, whose first element is a phonological variant of *god* and so etymologically seems to mean ‘engaged with a *god*’.

*Gydig* is attested no earlier than *ylfig* and even more sparsely, but is well attested in Middle English, surviving today as *giddy*, and must on phonological grounds date back to prehistoric Old English. Attested in Old English only as a gloss on *lymphaticus* (‘diabolically possessed’), its primary meanings in Middle English were ‘insane, crazy; possessed by a devil’, which correlate precisely with the Old English and etymological evidence. The possibility that *ylfig* was not a gloss-coining but a member of the common lexicon is consolidated by the fact that it is unusual for the Harley Glossator to add vernacular words to his glosses. It thus seems unlikely that he would extend the use of a unique, vernacular gloss-coining.

There is a general prospect, then, that *ylfig* was a member of the common lexicon, denoting something along the lines of possession by *ælfe*. This is supported by the precise contexts of the gloss’s deployment. As a representative of the tradition of Aldhelm-glosses, I quote the *Prosa de virginitate* as edited by Gwara (and as translated by Lapidge and Herren), including the extensive glosses from Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, MS. 1650, Hand A of which is the relevant stratum:

> Anatolia uero in exilium [Hand A: on *wræcsīþ*] trusa signorum [Hand C: *uel*] miraculis crebrescente [Hand CD: *wīde springende*] praefatam sociam in uiurtutibus

---

101 ‘Elves on the Brain’, pp. 233–43.
102 Parallel Old English formations are *wērig* (‘weary, tired, exhausted’ < *wōr* ‘ooze, bog’); *sālig* (‘happy, prosperous’ < *sāl* ‘prosperity, happiness’). These suggest (‘like) one engaged with noun X’: ‘like one in a bog’, ‘one in good fortune’. The Old English root-vowel *y* of *gydig* must derive from the i-mutation of */yudīv/-, predating the Germanic lowering of */u. . .a/ > */o. . .a/ in *god* (< */yudīz/; see Campbell, *Grammar*, §§115, 572–3).  
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

aequiperauit; execrata etenim filium consulis inerguminum[a]
rigidis catenarum nexibus [Hand CD: bendum] asstrictum [i. ligatum] expulso
habitatore dicto citius curaut. Quo rumore [fama] clarescente [ł crescente] et laruatos
[Hand A: æfêrede; Hand C: inerguminos infirmos; Hand CD: dēofelsēoce] et comitiales
[Hand A: i. garritores, ylfie; Hand C: lunaticos, wansēoce] ac ceteros ualitudinarios
[Hand A: ādlie] pristinae sanitati restituit . . .

Anatolia, however, forced into exile and becoming famous for her miraculous
signs, equalled her aforementioned associate in virtue; for, having cursed the
son of a consul who was bound tightly by the rigid links of demoniacal chains,
she cured him (again) in the twinkling of an eye by expelling the demon who
inhabited him. As her renown became more illustrious, she restored to their former
health those possessed (with devils), epileptics and other diseased persons . . .

Here, then, ylfig, along with garritor, gloss comitialis. This is usually translated
– as here – with ‘epileptic’. This would fit Sloane 2584’s juxtaposition of elphi
with morbus caducus mentioned above. However, comitialis is an obscure
word, almost certainly taken by Aldhelm from the entry in Isidore of Seville’s
Etymologiae for ‘Epilemsia’, and interpreted by his glossators on that basis.105

According to Isidore, epilepsy

is caused by the melancholic humour – how often it may have overflowed and
been redirected to the brain. This is called passio [suffering] and caduca [(epileptic)
falling], because the epileptic [cadens aeger] suffers [patiatur] convulsions. These
indeed the common people call lunatici [those made mad by the moon], because
the attack of demons follows them according to the course of the moon. So also
larvatici. That too is the comitialian sickness [morbus comitialis], which is more
significant and of divine origin / to do with divination, by which those who
fall are gripped. It has such power that a healthy person collapses and froths.

However, comitialis is so used because among the pagans, when it had happened
to anyone on the day of the comitia [assembly for electing Roman magistrates],
the comitia were broken up. But the usual day of the comitia among the Romans
was during the Calends of January.

Isidore’s discussion is consistent with Aldhelm’s association of comitiales with
laruati (‘the demonically possessed’). Ylfig must, then, denote some altered
state of mind – possibly one which was ‘maior et divinus’. We may set this
alongside its pairing with the Latin gloss garritor. This word is even more
unusual than comitialis, but is a transparent deverbative formation from garrio

121. Gwara did not assign a hand to one stratum of the glosses in his edition, which do not
appear in Goossens’s edition, hence the lack of attribution here.

Ælfsiden

(I chatter, babble, prate'), meaning ‘babbler’. More precise connotations of this word as it was understood in Anglo-Latin, however, are suggested by chapter 44 of the Prosa de virginitate, which mentions ‘a pithonibus et aruspicius una falsitatis deleramenta garrientibus’ (empty gibberish of falsity from garrientes prophetesses and soothsayers’), suggesting that the root of garritor had (pejorative) connotations of prophetic speech. The evidence of the Aldhelm gloss is that ylfig not only meant ‘divinely possessed’, but specifically denoted possession leading to prophecy.

This evidence is consolidated by the other attestation of ylfig, on folio 76r of the Harley Glossary. This includes the entry ‘Fanaticus i. minister templi’ (‘Fanaticus: i.e. the priest of a temple’) with ‘futura praecinens . i ylfig’ (‘one foretelling things to come, or ylfig’) written above. Ylfig does not occur in the nearest relatives to this gloss, in the Corpus Glossary, so is probably an addition to the tradition by the Harley Glossator. In the Harley Glossary, only futura praecinens and ylfig gloss fanaticus as adjectives, and the lineation further allies them, so ylfig presumably means something like ‘foretelling the future’ rather than ‘priest of a temple’. The correlation between this entry and the Aldhelm gloss may not be independent: if the Harley Glossator took ylfig from the comitialis gloss he may have inferred an association with prophetic speech in the same way as I have. But the Harley Glossator had an extensive lexicon of mental illness to draw on, and moreover did not usually augment his sources with vernacular glosses: it looks like his choice was a careful and specific one. The parallel with gydig, the meanings of comitialis and garritor, and the Harley Glossator’s usage of ylfig all militate in favour of understanding ylfig as a common word meaning ‘one speaking prophetically through divine/demonic possession’.

It follows from these arguments that ælf was once sufficiently intimately associated with people predicting the future, and possibly with possession, that a derived adjective meant something like ‘predicting the future (through possession by ælfe)’. As historians of both epilepsy and nympholepsy have shown, such possession could have attracted a wide range of interpretations and social significations; in the Aldhelm gloss at least, ylfig denotes an undesirable situation. Nonetheless, the word points clearly to the prospect that the capacity of ælfe to induce altered mental states could have positive outcomes. A hint that similar ideas may have circulated in the early Middle English period is afforded by a gloss, probably made at Worcester, on section

106 Though see the Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources (London: Oxford University Press, 1975–), s.v. comitialis.
107 Ed. Gwara, Prosa, 11 625.
108 Ed. Oliphant, Glossary, 178 [F151]; collated with MS.
109 Ed. Lindsay, Corpus Glossary, 74 [F38], 75 [F78]; Bischoff et al., Glossaries, f. 28.
110 Roberts, Kay and Grundy, A Thesaurus of Old English, §§02.08.09.02 Epilepsy, 02.08.11.02.01 Insanity, madness.
16 of the eleventh-century text of the Old English Canons of Edgar in Bodleian MS Junius 121. The Old English reads:

And riht is þæt prēosta gehwylc cristendōm geornlice lære and ēlcne hēþendōm mid ealle ãdwæsce; and forbēode wyllweorōunga, and līcwīgelunge, and hwata, and galdra, and trēowwurōunga, and stānwurōunga, and ðone deōfles craft þe man dryhō þær man þā cild þurh þā eorðan tīhð, and ðā gemearr þe man dryhō on gĕares niht on mislicum wīgelungum and on friðsplottum and on ellenum, and on manegum mislicum gedwimerum þe men on drēogað fela þaes þe hī ne sceoldan.112

And it is proper that every priest zealously teach Christianity, and thoroughly eliminate every heathen practice; and forbid the worship of springs, and necromancy, and divination, and charms, and the worship of trees, and the worship of stones, and the Devil’s art which is performed, whereby one draws the children through the earth, and the errors which are performed on new year’s night in various spells, and in sanctuaries and among elder-trees, and in many and varied delusions, which people perform extensively, even though they must not.

The evidential status of this passage for Anglo-Saxon beliefs is problematic, but the passage itself is not my concern here. Rather, what is of interest is that the glossator glossed on ellenum (‘among elder-trees’) with ‘eluene’, misunderstanding ellen to denote elves. He apparently understood something like ‘and the error which is performed on new year’s night in various spells, and in sanctuaries, and among elves’. The fact that the glossator mistakenly used elf here suggests that he was influenced by presuppositions that elves might be plausible participants in the gemearr described. In view of the passage’s emphasis on magic and divination, moreover, he may have been encouraged in this by links between elves and divination. Unfortunately, neither Fowler, the text’s editor, nor Ker explicitly dated the hand of this glossator, but a date around the first half of the thirteenth century is implicit in their discussions; the glossator provides a hint that around this time, elves might have been envisaged to be involved in the un-Christian activities of Anglo-Saxon communities in ways other than causing illness.113

Either way, the prospect of ælfe providing prophetic information is well paralleled by a wide range of close comparative evidence. The idea of supernatural sources of special knowledge was familiar in Christian Anglo-Saxon society: it is ubiquitous in the saints’ lives and homilies produced or otherwise circulated in the region. It is not inherently unlikely, then, that certain Anglo-Saxons should have claimed supernatural sources for their powers. Serglige Con Culainn associates Cú Chulainn’s awakening from his serglige with his recitation of a brīathar-thecosc, preceptual wisdom which is uncharacteristic of Cú Chulainn himself in the story, and best explained as a beneficial side-effect of his side-inflicted illness.114 This story exhibits some striking parallels with the confessions of Elspeth Reoch, tried for witchcraft on Orkney in

113 Fowler, Wulfstan’s Canons, xiii–xiv; Ker, Catalogue, 412 [no. 338].
114 Carey, ‘Cú Chulainn’.
Ælfsiden

1616, and many of the people accused in the Scottish witchcraft trials were healers who, like Elspeth, had claimed elvis or fareis as the source both of illnesses and of their own powers. Somewhat as in Serglige Con Culainn, power from the fareis comes in some cases with a quid pro quo of harm to the healer’s livestock or to their own person. The early-modern Scottish situation is foreshadowed in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century literary texts such as the Semita recta Albertus peribet testimonium, The Wee Wee Man, Thomas of Erceldoune and Andrew Wyntoun’s Original Chronicle, which put prophetic or otherwise arcane information in the mouths of otherworldly beings, and in the trial in Somerset in 1438 of Agnes Hancock, whose powers came allegedly ‘a spiritibus aeris, quos vulgus “feyry” appellant’ (‘from the spirits of the air which the common people call feyry’). Thomas of Erceldoune also recalls Scandinavian comparanda: Thomas’s interrogation of his lady at their parting, in the face of her oft-repeated desire to leave, is strikingly reminiscent of Óðinn’s interrogation of the fulva in the Eddaic poem Baldrs draumar. Supernatural beings providing wisdom – whether prophetic, as in Voluspá, Baldrs draumar and Gripisspá, or concerning healing and protection, as in Sigdrífrumál – are prominent in Old Norse poetry; though usually female, they may be male, like Fáfnir in Fáfnismál or Óðinn himself in Grímnismál.

To what period’s beliefs ylfig attests is unclear, but together with these later texts it suggests that ælfe’s status as sources of supernatural power was firm in the Anglo-Saxon period. The existence of ælfe in this role after conversion need not merely represent inertia in belief: access to Christian supernatural power was jealously guarded by a limited group of ritual specialists – monks and priests – but other members of the Anglo-Saxon community might have wanted or needed to claim supernatural power, making non-Christian traditional sources a significant resource. Precisely who the people who drew on ælfe’s power might have been is hard to guess. Much has been made of an unusual female burial of perhaps the sixth century from Bidford-upon-Avon identified, plausibly enough, by its grave-goods as a ‘cunning-woman’, and for the association with female burials of objects identified as ‘amuletic’.

Likewise, a number of burials with grave-goods overwhelmingly associated with women have been identified on skeletal grounds as male, leading to speculation that early Anglo-Saxon culture included cross-dressing men, and that they might have been ritual specialists; the idea correlates to some extent with Bede’s description of the pagan Northumbrian ‘primus pontificum’ (chief of bishops) Coifi as being prevented by his station from bearing weapons and riding male horses, and with a thin scatter of other northern European finds and texts. 119 This could in theory provide a remarkable parallel for the evidence for ælfe’s own apparent combination of male sex, feminine traits and supernatural power. But the numbers of prospective ‘cross-dressing’ men in the archaeological record are small enough that they may merely reflect mis-sexing; Bede’s account could plausibly be viewed as invention; and neither the male nor female burials can in any case be associated with ælfe as such.

There is one hint at a lexical link between ritual specialists and ælfe in our evidence for the significance of the plant known in Old English as ælfþone.\textsuperscript{120} This word is attested only Bald’s Leechbook and Leechbook III, mainly in remedies for fever, madness, or ailments caused by ælfe. However, cognate evidence suggests that ælfþone denoted woody nightshade (L. solanum dulcamara). Meanwhile, Aldhelm’s riddle Elleborus, which, despite its name, almost certainly describes woody nightshade, shows that Aldhelm considered that the plant, while not entirely depriving people of reason, would make them insanus, and that his audience would recognise this phenomenon as characteristic of woody nightshade.\textsuperscript{121} It seems fairly unlikely that this cultural knowledge and Aldhelm’s decision to allude to it was founded merely on accidental woody nightshade poisonings: the prospect arises, then, that woody nightshade was deliberately consumed for its mind-altering qualities. It is also possible, then, that it bore the name ælfþone because it conferred powers somehow related to those of ælfe. However, this is not certain, as it is also used in remedies against ailments associated with ælfe, so it might be taken to have been named for its power against ælfe (cf. dweorgedwostle, used against fever). We do not, in any case, know who in Anglo-Saxon society consumed it (except that the effects were familiar to early West-Saxon monks).

Despite the manifest gaps in our understanding, however, the combined Old English evidence, contextualised by later material, suggests something of the potential significance of ælfe as a source of supernatural power, hinting at complex interrelationships between ælfe’s power to help and their better-attested power to harm. If my interpretations are correct, then ælf-beliefs potentially also afforded not only a means to renarrate illness to facilitate its curing, but a means of constructing certain kinds of ailment in a positive way, as sources of knowledge and power in themselves, or perhaps as quid pro quos for such power.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Ælfsidén and sidsa, then, were probably kinds of magic, closely associated with ælfe, just as the cognate Scandinavian seiðr was associated with the vanir. Ælfe evidently used this magic to inflict ailments, which tend to exhibit associations with fever and other mind-altering illnesses; it is associated further with nocturnal assaults by supernatural beings, among them the relatively well-understood maran. Although these illnesses were seen as similar to and associated with diabolical afflictions, the writers of our medical texts were evidently not confident that they were the same thing. Meanwhile, early-medieval Irish and slightly later Scandinavian narratives tell of anthropomorphic otherworldly beings seducing or trying to seduce members of the in-group.

\textsuperscript{120} Hall, ‘Madness’.
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

by magically inflicting altered states of mind, or otherwise inflicting ailments in the context of sexual contact. Both Irish and Scandinavian material affords close parallels for the assault of a *mære*. This is well paralleled by the description of *elves* in the late-thirteenth-century *South English Legendary*, emphasising its potential relevance to English culture. These texts parallel the prominent features of those Old English medical texts mentioning *ælfsiden*, and our evidence for *ælf* generally: anthropomorphism, seductiveness, and magically inflicted fever and hallucination.

The idea that *ælf* in the medical texts were like Judaeo-Christian-Mediterranean demons, incompatible with beautiful anthropomorphic beings, is not disproved by this comparative material, and could indeed have held for some Anglo-Saxons. But I have shown that it is unnecessary: causing illness or altered mental states is a core part of the narratives of the otherworldly beings Drífa, Fann, Skírnir and Óðinn. These texts also emphasise the extent to which such traditions could be maintained among the Latin-literate, clerical elite in Christianised medieval societies. *Serglige Con Culainn’s* effort to incorporate its *síde* into Christian constructions of the supernatural world conspicuously fails to convince; the unresolved tensions between Christian and traditional belief which it shows for medieval Ireland offers a paradigm for the uneasy pairings of *ælf* with *döfol* or *fōond* in the Old English medical texts. Admittedly, most available medieval comparisons for *ælfsiden* concern female otherworldly beings, but I have identified enough similar narratives of males to show that we should not necessarily assume that *ælfsiden* must have been conducted by females. The prominence of females does, however, contextualise my discussion in the next chapter of *ælfe*’s gendering, and the potential significance of the rise of a female denotation of *ælf* during the Old English period.

These comparisons provide plausible models through which we can interpret both *ælfsiden* and the place of *ælf* in Anglo-Saxon conceptions of illness which are broadly consistent with those outlined for prehistoric Anglo-Saxon culture in chapters 2 and 3. Although a threat to members of the in-group, the otherworldly beings in my comparative texts seem to threaten only individuals, mainly in response to those individuals’ transgressions. In this way, they do not threaten society as a whole and, moreover, help to uphold its values and structures by punishing those who transgress them. There is also reason to think that *ælfe*’s powers to inflict altered mental states could be constructed not only as powers to harm, but as positive and useful, suggesting that *ælfe*’s interventions in society were not merely negative. *Ælfe* may, indeed, have had a role in wider Anglo-Saxon constructions of magic or supernatural power. The word *ylfig* suggests that at some stage in Anglo-Saxon culture, possession by *ælf* was a source of prophetic knowledge with sufficient cultural prominence to be lexicalised, and similar beings certainly had similar roles in early Irish literature and in later English society.
Anglo-Saxon Myth and Gender

This book has focused primarily on reconstructing Anglo-Saxons’ beliefs concerning ælfe. In this process, I have sought to preserve evidence for variation and change, but also to use comparative material to show that our disparate Anglo-Saxon data may be surface manifestations of more cohesive underlying concepts. I have also been able, at various stages, to suggest how beliefs concerning ælfe may have been important in the construction of social identity, health and healing. One theme, however, relating both to questions of cohesiveness and of the relationships between belief and society, has been left to one side as I have accumulated the scattered evidence for it: ælfe’s gender, and particularly their feminine characteristics. It seems that early Anglo-Saxon ælfe were prototypically male – my key arguments here being in chapter 3 – but that they were associated with traits which Anglo-Saxons considered effeminate. In chapter 1, I reassessed the evidence for Völundr, a Scandinavian álfr with Anglo-Scandinavian connections, arguing that his masculinity is compromised throughout Völundarkviða, and specifically that his white neck connotes feminine beauty. In chapter 3, I showed that Anglo-Saxon ælfe were paradigmatically associated with seductive, feminine beauty, and in chapter 5 that they were intimately linked with sīden, whose Scandinavian counterpart seiðr could not be conducted by men without compromising their masculinity and which was itself associated with seduction. Gender issues prove prominent in comparative medieval texts relating to otherworldly beings. What, then, does ælfe’s effeminacy mean? Moreover, by the eleventh century, ælf seems comfortably to have denoted females as well as males, a development which also demands interpretation. This chapter draws these issues together to make a more integrated case for change in Anglo-Saxon non-Christian beliefs, and some more specific suggestions as to how these beliefs may have related to Anglo-Saxon society. I read ælfe’s effeminacy as part of a systematic gender inversion in early Anglo-Saxon mythologies. This approach helps us to key the textual and linguistic evidence for ælfe into a wider history of Anglo-Saxon society and cultural change.

The prospect of using the evidence for ælfe as evidence for the history of Anglo-Saxon gendering is daunting, not least because it involves projecting closely reasoned conclusions drawn from difficult evidence into another evidentially problematic, and ideologically charged, area. In some other fields – such as medieval Scandinavia or the ancient Hellenic world – nineteenth-century historians’ assumptions about gendering eventually proved
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

incompatible with the primary sources, and were duly revised.¹ But the Anglo-Saxon written sources challenge traditional assumptions less obviously, and our perspectives on women’s positions in Anglo-Saxon culture are concomitantly limited.² Serious efforts have begun in recent years to redress this, but the historiography is in a process of transition, meaning that although I have shown above that stories of otherworldly beings in Scandinavia and Ireland related to discourses of gender, there is no firm framework in which to assess new Anglo-Saxon evidence.³ Recent work has adduced under-used texts such as penitentials, and utilised cultural and critical theory to try to penetrate the ideologically dominant discourses of Anglo-Saxon writers to assess what they conceal and reveal about the constructions of gender which they sought to control. What the evidence assembled above allows us to do is return to issues of Anglo-Saxon gendering from a new standpoint. I neither claim nor intend to offer definitive or exclusive interpretations of the data. Rather, the evidence for ælfe encourages us to ask new questions and to seek new answers.

The key text for trying to interpret ælfe’s femininity is inevitably Wið færstice, which situates ælfe in a comparatively fully articulated system of belief. Wið færstice shares this only with Beowulf, but unlike Beowulf is unlikely to represent a detached theologising of mythological material. It is a practical text, whose expressions of mythology are directed not to shaping belief, but to facilitating

healing by working with and within a belief-system. *Wið færstice* juxtaposes *ælfe* with armed and violent women, *hægtessan*, who are well paralleled in early-medieval north-west European evidence.4 *Wið færstice* ostentatiously inverts everyday Anglo-Saxon gendering. Weapon-bearing was associated with masculinity, and freedom, at profound and ideological levels.5 This is not to say that all men could bear weapons, or that weapon-bearing was in practice characteristic of all males; but the fact that in *Wið færstice*, it is women who bear and use weapons represents a striking transgression of gender norms. Admittedly, if we are to identify the poem’s *smiðas* with the *ælfe*, then *ælfe* are associated with a distinctively male activity – but the contrast between the male smiths and the female warriors does not flatter the smiths’ masculinity. That this juxtaposition was not unique to the charm is suggested by a similar juxtaposition in Issobel Gowdie’s seventeenth-century confessions to witchcraft and by hints that *áfar* and *disir* were also systematically juxtaposed as male and female counterparts in Norse traditions.6 We do not simply have evidence, then, that in Anglo-Saxon belief *ælfe* were effeminate: we also find them juxtaposed with *hægtessan* who are in important respects masculine, arguably as co-authors of supernatural harm, in what is conceivably a structured pairing.

We can interpret this contrast between effeminate *ælfe* and martial *hægtessan* as a feature in a system of belief, whereby otherworldly beings were believed to transgress the gender boundaries experienced in everyday life. These otherworldly beings, then, were not an idealised image of society or a straightforward model of proper behaviour. But nor were they monsters – though there may, of course, have been a degree of ambiguity about these categories. Rather, we may understand *ælfe* and *hægtessan* as society’s mirror-image: in the mirror, we do not see ourselves distorted, but we do see ourselves, on one axis, inverted. Brief though *Wið færstice*’s portrayal is, this reading provides a powerful paradigm for interpreting the effeminacy of *ælfe* and, of course, the martiality of *hægtessan*.

---


5 The gendering is clear in early Anglo-Saxon burial assemblages, weapons correlating with male skeletons and weaving-kit with female – though not all burials are equipped with either: Stoodley, *The Spindle*, esp. 77–80. Likewise, Old English specified male *menn* with *wæpmenn* (*armed person*), as opposed to *wifmann* (*woman-person*); one’s patrilineal ancestry was the *sperhealf* or *sperehand* (*spear-side*), as opposed to *spinellealf* (*spindle-side*). A variety of sources point to the further ideological association of weapon-bearing with freedom: N. P. Brooks, ‘Arms, Status and Warfare in Late-Saxon England’, in *Ethelred the Unready: Papers from the Millenary Conference*, ed. David Hill, British Archaeological Reports, British Series, 59 (Oxford: BAR, 1978), pp. 81–103, at 82–3.

Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

It is worth noting that although the system which I read here cannot be neatly paralleled in later English evidence, it is reminiscent of later evidence concerning elves and elvis in the limited sense that Middle English and Older Scots evidence tends to make the Elf-Queen, Queen of Fearrie, or similar, the dominant power of her world, even when – as in The Wife of Bath’s Tale – it is evident that there were also male elves in her dominion. This female dominance of the other world inverts the usual patterns of rulership in medieval English and Scottish society. Accordingly, rebels in Kent around 1450 were styling themselves ‘servants of the queen of the fairies’. Item 9 of the indictment of Andro Man, an Aberdeenshire healer executed for witchcraft in 1598, reads

thow affermis that the elphis hes shapes and claythis lyk men, and that they will have fair coverit taiblis, and that they ar bot schaddowis, bot are starker {stronger} nor men, and that they have playing and dansing quhen thay pleas; and als that the quene is verray plesand, and wilbe auld and young quhen scho pleissis; scho mackis any kyng quhom scho pleisis, and lyis with any scho lykis.8

The evidence of Andro’s indictment is not without its complexities – but were these words put into his mouth by his prosecutors, they would surely have given a more conventional description of the Witches’ Sabbat.9 ‘Being bot a young boy’ sixty years before his trial, Andro had been born perhaps only ten or fifteen years after Martin Luther nailed up his ninety-five theses in 1517, and perhaps thirty before Scotland’s official reformation in 1560, and for present purposes his evidence makes the point clearly: the world of the elvis which he depicts here was like his own, but marked with a key gender inversion. His evidence implies major changes from the system which I read in our Anglo-Saxon sources, but it is one which maintains the principle of defining the gendering of the in-group by demonstrating what it was not.

Simple though my interpretation of Wið færstice is, it is important to be clear about what it assumes. Even the categories of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ gender in Anglo-Saxon culture are questionable. Clover has argued that in early-medieval Scandinavian cultures, before Christianisation and what she tentatively called ‘medievalisation’ prompted a departure on the long road towards the alignment of gender with sex, gender could better be divided into the two groups hvatr and blauðr. Hvatr meant ‘bold, independent, powerful, vigorous, sharp’ and blauðr ‘weak, soft, powerless, yielding’.10 The alignment had more to do with power and independence than biological sex, but aristocratic men dominated the hvatr group, and women the blauðr group. Although this approach is certainly useful, the terms masculine and feminine remain conventional in work on Anglo-Saxon gendering, and have generally proved appropriate labels for objectively observable groupings in

8 Ed. Stuart, Miscellany, i 121.
10 Clover, ‘Regardless of Sex’.
Anglo-Saxon myth and gender

Anglo-Saxon societies. But Clover’s article provides important caveats. More specifically – to recast a caveat from the Introduction – *Wið færstice* and my reading of it may be representative only of a limited section of society, which may or may not have successfully fostered its ideologies among other groups. *Wið færstice*’s concern with weapon-bearing looks male and aristocratic in its orientation. My assumption of symmetricality in male and female mythological gender transgression is reminiscent of Bynum’s argument that in later-medieval sources, men ‘use images of reversal to express liminality’, one of the main reversals being in gender. The male experience of liminality or crisis could involve adopting feminine traits. Moreover, men ‘tended to assume that reversal was symmetrical . . . men writing about women assumed that women went through sharp crises and conversions and that their liminal moments were accompanied by gender reversal’. This provides a neat parallel to my reading: male, noble Anglo-Saxons construed the liminality of the supernatural beings around their societies through gender reversal. In liminal space, males were seductively beautiful and worked magic, and females bore and used weapons. But Bynum also argued that women and other less powerful groups in fact did not experience liminality as gender reversal. If my model of a belief-system involving systematic gender inversion holds, then, it may do so only for the aristocratic men who created our sources.

These considerations suggest one way in which early Anglo-Saxon gender was maintained. But we can also detect change in this system. At some point in the early Middle Ages, female equivalents of male ælfe gained prominence in Anglo-Saxon belief-systems, attested first as equivalents of *nymphae*. Around the eighth century, at least in written registers, there seems to have been no common Old English word for a nymph-like female, or a female ælf. But by around 1200, Laʒamon’s female aluen enjoyed supernatural powers to shape the child Arthur’s future and to heal him in their otherworld over the sea. By the time when Edward I commissioned his own round table, elven-elves were seducing men and dancing through woods and meadows. How early this change began is hard to guess, but I have been able to demonstrate that it appeared in writing by the early eleventh century: we are dealing with a specifically Anglo-Saxon cultural development. It may also be added to the growing evidence that, contrary to older views, we are not to look to the Norman Conquest to explain major changes in English gendering.


13 ‘Women’s Stories’, 112–18.

Detecting whether there may be a link between developments in the gendering of ælfe and changes in Anglo-Saxon society is difficult. The history of Anglo-Saxon women is overwhelmingly the history of queens and nuns. Neither group need be very representative of women and femininity generally, and while their positions in Anglo-Saxon society changed over time, the reasons for this and so its significance for the history of gender relations are hard to disentangle.\textsuperscript{15} We also know too little about the origins of the female elven. Their emergence could represent the adoption of a popular belief by the aristocracy or of women’s belief by men; alternatively, they may have arisen as an innovation in aristocratic society, representing one of many strategies whereby this group effected social change. Nor – as is emphasised by the recounting of the stories about the áes síde in Ireland, discussions of elven in the \textit{South English Legendary}, and the prominence of ælfe in \textit{Wið færstice} – does the non-Christian character of these beliefs mean that churchmen were not involved in their development or propagation. However, obscure though the rise of female elven is, the prominence of otherworldly females across high-medieval Europe suggests that we are dealing with a general trend in, or an English alignment with, wider medieval European culture. Moreover, although the evidence is scanty, this seems likely to have been part of wider reshaping of beliefs. Two relevant developments may be hypothesised: the stripping of gender-transgressing features from male elven-elves, aligning their characteristics with masculine ones; and the decline in traditions of martial supernatural females. Our medieval evidence is too scanty for us to be sure of either of these developments, and the correlation of \textit{Wið færstice} with Issobel Gowdie’s seventeenth-century witchcraft confessions in particular show how slowly beliefs must have changed in some sections of society. However, Chaucer equated his one male elf with an incubus – an active, violent and demonic being.\textsuperscript{16} That male elves continued to cause ailments was consistent with the behaviour of indubitably masculine demons. Although the male elves which crop up in the Scottish witchcraft trials are sometimes dominated by their queen, they do not seem effeminate. This provides enough evidence to guess, at least, that late Anglo-Saxon, male ælfe were on a road to losing their more markedly feminine traits.

As for the weapon-bearing women, the words hægtesse, and to a lesser extent its partial synonym wælcyrige, were to have long histories in English, but are poorly attested in Middle English, so it is hard to trace changes in their meanings; their apparent decline may owe more to restructuring in the Middle English lexicon than to wider cultural change. However, although martial, otherworldly women did enjoy a long life in medieval literature

Anglo-Saxon myth and gender

– and only partly because of the revival of Classical traditions of Amazons – otherworldly females whose femininity is not compromised by weapon-bearing are far more prominent.17 The power of otherworldly females to seduce and patronise heroes suggested by Norse and Irish evidence for martial otherworldly females is still attested in high-medieval Britain. But while this assistance may constitute advice or magical objects (as with Rhiannon in the Middle Welsh Pwyll Penduetic Dyuet), finance (as with the anonymous otherworldly woman in Marie de France’s Lanval), or beneficial prophesying and healing (as with Argante and her elven in Lažamon’s Brut), it never extends to offering a helping hand in battle: the closest these otherworldly females come to gender transgression is in their occasional achievement of the sovereignty which all their sex, we are told, desire.18 We have just enough continuity of evidence in Ireland from early-medieval to modern times to trace how traditions of the valkyrie-like badb were absorbed into traditions of non-martial side-women there; some similar development must probably be assumed for Scandinavia.19 Perhaps the meyjar of Völundarkviða, whose lack of weaponry is probably one reason why they have so long been excluded from histories of Scandinavian supernatural females, lie at the cusp of this change in Anglo-Scandinavian aristocratic culture: they lack the ostentatious armaments of Eddaic heroines like Sigrún, their seductiveness consequently gaining a new prominence, but they retain their formidable power to protect men and determine the course of men’s actions.

It would appear, then, that in aristocratic discourses at least, the martial hægtessan of Wið færstice and our early glosses were gradually losing their prominence and significance in England during the medieval period. The decline of martial otherworldly females which I have sketched fits neatly with Clover’s hypothesis of a process of ‘medievalisation’ in gendering, whereby Europe’s Iron Age societies, to which gender transgression was ideologically important and empowering, developed into the medieval societies whose concern was rather to align gender with sex.20 If the Irish situation is anything to go by, however, these hægtessan did not leave a vacuum in belief systems: their place was taken by ideologically more acceptable replacements. In England, it is not unlikely that this replacement was the female elven. No

17 In addition to Icelandic literature, which may have been unusually conservative (see, for example, Carol J. Clover, ‘Warrior Maidens and Other Sons’, Journal of English and Germanic Philology, 85 (1986), 35–49; Kroesen, ‘Valkyries’), the story of the powerful, unmarried queen who kills her suitors or has them killed is prominent in the late-thirteenth-century Nibelungenlied (äventiuren 6–7; ed. Helmut De Boor, Das Nibelungenlied: Nach der Ausgabe von Karl Bartsch, 20th edn (Wiesbaden: Brockhaus, 1972), 60–85) and occurs in the Lai Doon, surviving in a late-thirteenth-century manuscript (ed. G. Paris, ‘Lais inédits: de Tyolet, de Guingamor, de Doon du Lecheor et de Tydorel’, Romania, 8 (1879), 29–72, at 61–4). On traditions of Amazons see Susan Crane, Gender and Romance in Chaucer’s ‘Canterbury Tales’ (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), esp. 18–26, 76–84; Helen Solterer, ‘Figures of Female Militancy in French Literature’, Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 16 (1991), 522–49. For non-martial, otherworldly females, see chapter 5 n. 85.

18 Wife of Bath’s Tale, lines 1037–40; ed. Benson, Riverside Chaucer, 119.


Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

longer expressing gender norms by mythological inversion, Anglo-Saxons increasingly construed femaleness by constructing paragons of femininity: beautiful, seductive, unarmed but magically empowered otherworldly elfen.

In this interpretation, Anglo-Saxon gender norms do not change substantially. Rather, the means by which they are constructed change. But a change in the means by which gender was constructed inevitably had effects on the ways in which gender could be performed. As I mentioned in chapter 5, magically empowered ælfe could have afforded a paradigm for men to adopt magic normally associated with women – but at present we have no reliable evidence to support this. But it is tempting to speculate that the putative displacement of martial hægtessan by female elfen relates to two other, slightly more traceable, developments in Anglo-Saxon culture: a decline in nuns’ autonomy and changing attitudes towards sexual behaviour. The power and autonomy of virgines – unmarried or once-married chaste women – in the early Anglo-Saxon Church is striking. Suggesting that this power was paralleled in non-Christian beliefs, and later curtailed, has unfortunate overtones of the narratives still circulating in Norse scholarship whereby mythological women are understood as echoes of some prehistoric matriarchy. But although the argument that martial females in Old Norse literature echo the (one-time) capacity of unmarried or widowed women in certain circumstances to become culturally male may hold water, we have no reliable evidence for Anglo-Saxon institutions of this sort. Archaeological evidence for weapon-bearing Anglo-Saxon women is fragile, though slightly better paralleled by textual evidence than the idea of men in women’s clothes. No simple cut-off for the


24 Clover, ‘Warrior Maidens’.

25 The perceived monstrosity of Grendel’s mother has often been played down, her violent avenging of Grendel being argued to owe something to older traditions permitting women to take vengeance in the absence of eligible males (for example, Christian Alfano, ‘The Issue of Feminine Monstrosity: A Reevaluation of Grendel’s Mother’, Comitatus, 23 (1992), 1–16; Chance, Woman as Hero, 99–107; Damico, Beowulf’s Wealththeow, 46); the subject matter of the Old English poems Judith and Elene and the aplomb with which the heroines take on martial masculine identities has also been attributed to the same origins (Damico, ibid., esp. 26–7, 34–40; Alexandra Hennessy Olsen, ‘Cynewulf’s Autonomous Women: A Reconsideration of Elene and Juliana’, in New Readings on Women in Old English Literature, ed. Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessy Olsen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 222–32).
prominent place of women in the early Anglo-Saxon Church can be argued: as Ortenburg emphasised, women without husbands have continued, as a rule, to have more power than married women in English cultures, and Foot has shown both that the decline in female religious life during the Anglo-Saxon period was not as extensive as it once seemed and that its causes and effects were probably complex.\(^{26}\) Despite all these caveats, however, it is possible that the power and independence of the armed supernatural females of which we have hints in Anglo-Saxon beliefs afforded mythological paradigms for certain independent actions by early Anglo-Saxon women, attested in the power of women in the early Anglo-Saxon Church, and that the diminution of nuns’ power is reflected in the rise of elven in Anglo-Saxon beliefs.

Turning to sexuality, we cannot tell how far martial, supernatural Anglo-Saxon females were also associated with seduction, but it does seem likely that their loss of martiality if nothing else encouraged a shift in emphasis towards seductiveness. It is difficult to guess how far women were seen as a sexual threat to men in early Anglo-Saxon culture. It is easy to suppose a general ideological trend in early-medieval Europe whereby women and sex were increasingly both seen as a threat and ever more intimately linked with one another, but hard evidence is thin on the ground.\(^{27}\) Felix, partly modelling his *vita* of the Anglo-Saxon Guthlac on Evagrius’s *Vita Sancti Antonii* in the eighth century, dispensed completely with the sexual temptations which Anthony endured.\(^{28}\) This might reflect incompatibility with a culture which did not expect women either to take the sexual initiative, or to pose a threat to men if they did; if so, it would be consistent with a pattern for which Cormak and Jochens have argued in early Christian Scandinavia.\(^{29}\) But Kurtz viewed it simply as an example of Anglo-Saxon prudishness, and he may have been right. Anglo-Saxon laws punishing only male seducutors, abductors or rapists need not suggest that women were not also punished for their parts in such events, merely that they were outside patterns of reparation; Edward and Guthrum’s proscriptions against *hōrcwenan* and the appearance of mutilation and the stripping of property for adulteresses in the law-code II Cnut could represent our first codifications rather than innovations.\(^{30}\) But, taken at face value, evidence of this sort does suggest a growing concern with formally regulating the roles of women in lay sexual activity.\(^{31}\) This can be paralleled, for example, by increasing opposition in Anglo-Saxon society to concubinage, which probably also reflects changing attitudes towards men’s

In the historical period, some female rulers oversaw if they did not lead military actions: see for example Stafford *Queens*, 117–20. Nevertheless, one hesitates to build an argument on such disputable ground.

\(^{26}\) Ortenberg, ‘Virgin Queens’, 68; Foot, *Veiled Women*, esp. i 61–84.

\(^{27}\) For example, Morris, *Sorceress or Witch?*, esp. 120–53.


sexuality. It seems likely that Christianisation introduced concepts of sin, and associations of sin with sexual behaviour, which had not previously existed in Anglo-Saxon culture and would both have encouraged the idea of female seductiveness as a spiritual threat to men, and the idea that male sexuality needed to be constrained. If so, then the rise of female elven in Anglo-Saxon beliefs may reflect new constructions of the danger posed by women and by male sexual desire to men's spiritual well-being – a purpose to which they were certainly put in the South English Legendary, paralleled in early-medieval Ireland by Serglige Con Culainn. Christianisation is unlikely, however, to be the whole story: thus, for example, the decline in gender-blurring images on Iron-Age Scandinavian small arts analysed by Wiker dates to around the sixth century, long before Scandinavia's conversion. Christianisation was only one of many forces behind Europe’s ‘medievalisation’, and may be as much a symptom as a cause.

There are, then, contexts in which we can understand the rise of female ælfe–elven, principally a drive in Anglo-Saxon culture over time more rigorously to align sex with gender. Their appearance may also relate to the gradual curtailment of women's power and independence, and possibly with more extensive study of Anglo-Saxon gender history, this idea will become testable. Difficult though it is, our evidence for ælfe provides a rare and valuable new perspective on an important and intractable area of Anglo-Saxon history.

34 ’Menneskelig identitet’.
Believing in Early-Medieval History

As I emphasised in the foreword to this book, it is the product of study in three different countries: Scotland, England and Finland. Working in Scotland was to work at a mid-way point between two extremes in folklore research, which provide a context for reflecting on how this book has used and developed existing paradigms for studying medieval beliefs. Despite the seminal importance of the English Folklore Society for the establishment of folklore as a discipline in Europe – such that even Finns today study folkloristiikka – folklore has never gained more than a marginal position in English academia, whereas Finland has been at the forefront of folklore studies since the nineteenth century.¹ The reasons for this must be numerous, but England’s nineteenth-century self-image as the acme of progress, and its concern to situate itself culturally in contradistinction to its colonies, contrasts with the concurrent nation-building in what was then the Grand Duchy of Finland, within the Russian Empire, which had no previous history of nationhood. Scotland, as I perceive it, offered an academic culture historically dominated by British / Southern English agendas, but shaped also by moves towards distinctively national agendas like those of Finland or (more self-consciously) Scotland’s neighbouring ex-colonies, Ireland and Norway. I have, of course, been at pains here to emphasise that the present study cannot claim to be a study of folklore in any obvious sense – our evidence for ælfe comes from educated and, by inference, probably generally aristocratic men – but historiographically the field has been perceived otherwise, and the position of folklore in English academia partly explains why ælfe have generally found only a marginal place in Anglo-Saxon historiography, and then usually only as a curiosity. One hundred and fifty years after Thomas Keightley’s admission that ‘writing and reading about Fairies some may deem to be the mark of a trifling turn of mind’, one notes a certain satisfying continuity with ælfes’s capacity a millennium before to destabilise the rational, masculine mind; but one also shares his concern.²

Medieval Europe, not being a well-represented field in Finnish source-material, has not attracted a great deal of attention from Finnish folklorists. Nonetheless, it is telling that the footnotes to a book about Anglo-Saxon beliefs lie thickest beneath its discussions of medieval Scandinavia. The willingness

of Scandinavian scholars to bring textual, archaeological and anthropological approaches together in the intensive investigation of non-Christian medieval Scandinavian beliefs has afforded a wealth of methodological and interpretative models, which have often inspired the directions taken in this study. But it would not be fair to reckon intellectual currents only in terms of nationalities; thus many of the scholars of medieval Scandinavian beliefs cited in this book are not themselves Scandinavians. Accordingly, despite the institutional disincentives to the study of folklore in Britain, one hopes that it is at least no longer necessary to justify the historical investigation of non-Christian beliefs in theory. I have emphasised here ælfe’s importance as mechanisms for the expression and operation of ideologies which structured Anglo-Saxon communities, and so for our understanding of broad and prominent historical issues. Likewise, ‘Beings neither angelic, human, nor animal’ now haunt even the New Oxford History of England, while the slow but sure emergence into the historical mainstream of another field whose thinking I have found stimulating, the early-modern European witchcraft trials, is well known.3 Although the rise of work on the witchcraft trials was originally motivated less by a disciplinary interest in the history of beliefs or world-views per se than by a traditional concern to explain the causation of certain prominent events on the landscape of the documentary record, its subsequent progress reflects wider changes in the historical discipline. These observations point to a further, more fundamental reason for the marginalisation of non-Christian beliefs in recent scholarship on Anglo-Saxon England: their marginalisation in the dominant textual culture of Anglo-Saxon society, and the consequent difficulty of accessing them through conventional methods. And if the documentary record for early-medieval non-Christian belief is a desert, then it is one strewn with the skeletons of past travellers and the beasts which carried their ideological baggage – amply so to warn off adventurers of any nationality.4

However, as Schmitt wrote of medieval popular belief in 1979, ‘it is not so much the documents that are lacking as the conceptual instruments necessary to understand them’, and for Anglo-Saxon England at least, his words ring true.5 Studies of beliefs – present and past – have tended to focus on narrative sources (Schmitt’s own being an example), and there is a dearth of narratives involving non-Christian supernatural beings in most of early-medieval Europe. There are good reasons for the emphasis on narratives: they are fundamental to human communication, probably to human cognition, and certainly to history-writing. It is interesting, then, that the extensive historiographical thinking which has surrounded this realisation in the last few decades has travelled under the banner of ‘the linguistic turn’. What historians usually

5 The Holy Greyhound, 171.
Believing in early-medieval history (if implicitly) mean by language in this phrase is not language itself, but the products of language: texts. To take one example, whose words stand as an excellent representation of the approaches which I have taken here to Anglo-Saxon beliefs about ælfe, Stuart Clark, in his Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe, wrote that the assumption that beliefs in witchcraft were essentially incorrect . . . has prevailed in witchcraft studies for so long because of an overriding, though largely unspoken, commitment to the realist model of knowledge. In this model, language is seen as a straightforward reflection of a reality outside itself and utterances are judged to be true or false according to how accurately they describe objective things. This kind of neutral reference to the external world is held to be the only reliable source of meaning and, indeed, the most important property of language. In consequence, it has been possible to account for witchcraft beliefs (like any others) in only two ways. First, they have been submitted, if only implicitly, to empirical verification to see whether they corresponded to the real activities of real people. With important exceptions, the answer has been ‘no’. The entity ‘witchcraft’ has turned out to be a non-entity, because for the most part it had no referents in the real world. Once tested in this manner, witchcraft beliefs have then either been dismissed out of hand as mistaken and, hence, irrational, or (and this is the second possibility), they have been explained away as the secondary consequences of some genuinely real and determining condition—that is to say, some set of circumstances (social, political, economic, biological, psychic, or whatever) that was objectively real in itself but gave rise to objectively false beliefs.6

Clark concluded that for the situation to change, a different notion of language will have to be considered—in particular, that it should not be asked to follow reality but be allowed to constitute it. Here, the object of attention would become language itself, not the relationship between language and the extra-linguistic world. And the aim would be to uncover the linguistic circumstances that enable the utterances and actions associated with witchcraft belief to convey meaning. This would not, of course, transform impossibilities into possibilities, or mistakes into truths. Rather—and this is the crux of the matter—these distinctions would themselves become irrelevant; the idea of making them would no longer itself make historical sense. Witchcraft’s apparent lack of reality as an objective fact would simply become a non-issue, and the consequent need to reduce witchcraft beliefs to some more real aspect of experience would go away.7

Where my approach differs from Clark’s is that, his emphasis on the word language notwithstanding, his book is in practice about texts. Whereas some commentary, then, would position current researchers ‘in the wake of the linguistic turn’, it might rather be said from the perspective of the present study that they are still awaiting the bowwave.8 For the study of early-

---

7 Thinking with Demons, 6.
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

medieval non-Christian beliefs, this wave should have the power to rock some well-moored boats: whereas we have few narratives relevant to this kind of enquiry, we have relatively rich lexical data.

The semantic field of the Old English word *ælf* is an Anglo-Saxon cultural category, whose relationships with other such categories can be mapped through primary evidence. Early-medieval evidence ought to foreground the point that to understand texts, we must understand their component words: early-medieval texts survive in languages which today are unfamiliar and fragmentarily attested; debate about words’ meanings is frequent in the contributions to literary and linguistic journals; and the dangers of leaning on modern native-speaker intuitions about meaning tend to be more readily apparent than for more recent sources. However, my reassessments here of scholarship on certain Old English texts have shown that scholars have often failed to take the critical attitude to translations and dictionary definitions which is required to understand the texts. This is not a disciplinary issue, whereby semantics are a matter only for the staff of English departments: primary language research demands a position at the centre of medieval scholarship generally, albeit that the monoglot character of British undergraduate history studies (and therefore teaching) would suggest otherwise. But my arguments go beyond this, to claim that semantics is itself a key to the historical study of past cultures. There is no need to restate the methodological considerations of my introduction, but it is worth emphasising that the approach to semantics which I have used here resists (on the whole) the convention of importing an analytical concept from our culture today and populating it with whatever primary data seem applicable. While this convention is not methodologically invalid in principle, I have shown that it has often gone awry. In particular, scholars have, in parallel to the students of early-modern witchcraft discussed by Clark, striven to distinguish between ‘real’ and ‘supernatural’ beings, when our lexical and, where we have it, literary evidence militates against this division. Indeed, despite its prominence in modern Western intellectual thought, it is a division which can restrict understanding even of twentieth-century Western culture. At any rate, liberating our thinking from this assumption is crucial to understanding early-medieval world-views. One suspects that similar reassessments await students of other areas of medieval culture who choose to reconstruct past categories more rigorously on the basis of primary (lexical) evidence. In particular, the corpus of Old High German is dominated by glosses on Latin texts; despite some remarkable past research on this material, it has much more yet to reveal about the world-views of aristocratic Germanic-speaking Franks.

It needs hardly to be added that our capacity for investigating the meanings of medieval words is growing dramatically, partly because of the growing

---

range of traditional resources such as dictionaries and manuscript facsimiles, but also because of electronic text corpora – the example most important to this study being the almost exhaustive Dictionary of Old English Corpus. Here I have emphasised the usefulness of this resource not for its main original purpose of facilitating breadth of lexicographical research on Old English words, but for promoting depth in their study. As I have sought to embed the history of *ælf* in the history of Old English, I have been able to reassess from scratch the meanings of more words, more thoroughly, than would once have been possible. Through this practice, it has been possible to embed the history of words more directly into the history of culture and society. The dominant method in modern semantic research – as in natural language acquisition – is to analyse words’ contextual meanings, and I have of course focused on this method; but I have also emphasised the amount and usefulness of data encoded in other linguistic characteristics of words, particularly morphology. This relatively holistic attitude to investigating semantics is undeniably partly a product of necessity, but it emphasises the power of holistic approaches to cast surprising light on the meanings of early-medieval words, and so on early-medieval culture.

As I confessed in my introduction, there is much about these methodologies which was well established already in the nineteenth century, so it is worth considering why they have been so long out of favour, and how this relates to my approaches. One factor has been the increasing dominance since the Second World War of Anglo-American research into early-medieval Europe relative to research produced in the German-speaking world: Anglo-American approaches to Old English literature generally were and remain self-consciously opposed to Teutonic philology. But in addition to this, a major reason why the lexical approaches to medieval belief so prominent in earlier research have not since been maintained is probably that in the wake of the Second World War, the National Romantic thinking that underpinned so much nineteenth-century research fell dramatically from grace. My introduction works to re-establish the methodological viability of lexical approaches to culture in a world whose discipline of linguistics would often be unrecognisable to nineteenth-century philologists, but it is worth emphasising some distinctions between National Romantic approaches and my own. At the centre of the National Romantic project was the linking of language to national character, with the concomitant idea that language-groups were to be equated with cultural groups (which should in turn either have nation-states tailored to them, or be shaped until they fitted the nation-states in which they found themselves). Some kind of link (though not necessarily a primordial

---


one) between language and culture is central to my arguments here, but I have also shown that this does not need to exclude other kinds of comparison across languages in early-medieval Europe. Accordingly, I have at various points envisaged a north-west European cultural zone rather than an area segmented along the lines of linguistic groups such as Germanic, Celtic or Romance, building my arguments here on narrative rather than linguistic approaches. But the basis for these comparisons in Anglo-Saxon evidence remains detailed semantically oriented analysis, making use of comparative evidence from dialects closely related to Old English. Indeed, I have been able, by combining these approaches, to undermine the long-standing idea (historically cherished both by power-groups that would marginalise Celtic-speaking cultures and those cultures’ own nation-builders) that beliefs in otherworldly beings were somehow a distinctively ‘Celtic’ cultural feature in antique and medieval Europe. Our independent Old English evidence is sufficient for us to conclude that ælfe were fundamentally similar to the early Irish Æís Sídé, but with close counterparts among other Germanic-speaking cultures, a claim which my comparative work in chapter 5 consolidated. This perspective reverses some long-standing discourses: medieval Ireland, rich both in narratives and in lexical evidence, no longer looks like an idiosyncratic periphery of Europe, but rather provides an outstanding candidate for a case-study in what we might call early-medieval European fairy-belief. This is not to propose that Irish beliefs were European beliefs, but that they can provide us with a new and proximate framework for understanding patchier Continental evidence.

Another characteristic of research linked with the National Romantic movement was the realisation that contemporary folklore was often remarkably similar to beliefs attested centuries, and sometimes millennia, earlier. The enormous significance of this observation is not, of course, to be underrated. But it also encouraged scholars to use the evidence of later cultures to interpret or reconstruct earlier ones. Using present or recent knowledge as a means to understanding the past is inherent in scholarship and probably in human cognition, and I make no pretence to avoiding it here. But the incautious deployment of diachronic comparative evidence is also liable to flatten variation in our evidence, underplaying change and so both disengaging evidence for beliefs from wider evidence for historical change, and reducing the reliability of potentially equally significant claims to continuity. I have tried to tread more carefully in this regard than many of my predecessors, focusing on the deep analysis of our Old English data, and endeavouring to recognise not only continuities but discontinuities in the material. The comparative material I have used was chosen for its geographical and chronological proximity—whether early-medieval Ireland and Scandinavia, or the very earliest extensive attestations of elf-beliefs among non-aristocratic English-speakers, in the

Believing in early-medieval history

early-modern Scottish witchcraft trials. Once more, such comparisons point towards new avenues for future research. One of the many strands in trying to explain the violence and destruction which the early-modern witch-hunts entailed is trying to understand the diachronic development of belief-systems which made them possible. Some important work on this area has delved back into the high Middle Ages, but it has not looked extensively to the early Middle Ages.\(^{13}\) Those who have chosen to study early-modern witchcraft in a diachronic perspective have generally sought to relate their datasets less to early-medieval beliefs than to a hypothetical, prehistoric, shamanic past – an approach which has, amongst other reasons for want of data, so far rarely proved convincing.\(^{14}\) The present study shows generally that early-medieval beliefs are sufficiently recoverable to have a place in the history of early-modern witchcraft, and emphasises specifically the prospect in Germanic-speaking Europe of beliefs in sources of supernatural harm other than witches. Building on the arguments of Hutton, I have argued elsewhere that fairies are probably systematically under-represented in the evidence of the witchcraft trials for the obvious reason that they could not be apprehended and tried.\(^{15}\) Their importance in the wider belief-systems facilitating the eventuation or absence of witch-hunts may likewise have been underrated.

One outcome of this study, then, is that it is possible to show, on a sound basis of evidence, fundamental continuities in Anglo-Saxon traditional beliefs from before the time of conversion to the end of the Anglo-Saxon period. Important though this is, however, I prefer to emphasise our evidence that ælf-beliefs changed: this emphasises their continued vitality and, one presumes, relevance in Anglo-Saxon (aristocratic) culture following conversion. Imposing unwarranted assumptions on the interpretation on both the words which comprise our Old English medical texts, and the meanings of the texts themselves, commentators have hitherto envisaged an Anglo-Saxon tradition of invisible, sprite-like, arrow-shooting ‘elves’, which they took to be inherited from pre-migration Germanic culture. Although a re-examination of our medical texts does not disprove this interpretation as such, the inferences on which it rests are untenable. In particular, I have dismantled the scholarly construct of ‘elf-shot’ – magical arrows fired by ælfe and causing illness. These are never attested in medieval English. In fact, the best attested means for ælfe to inflict illness is a kind of magic denoted by the words ælfsīden and sīdsa, both cognates of the much-discussed Scandinavian seiðr. I have contextualised

---


Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

our later textual evidence by the analysis of our earliest evidence: patterns in the Anglo-Saxon personal-name system, and prehistoric morphological restructurings affecting *ælf* and other words in its declension, corroborated by analyses of our earliest Scandinavian evidence for the meanings of *ælf*'s cognate *álf*. This material shows that early Anglo-Saxon *ælfe* were human-like, as they remained in many varieties of belief for over a thousand years. Moreover, the evidence suggests that early Anglo-Saxon ideologies drew a fundamental distinction between the human in-group and the monsters which threatened its fabric, and that in this opposition, *ælfe* were fundamentally aligned with the in-group. Distinguishing this somewhat liminal class from both the in-group and the monsters, I have labelled it *otherworldly*. This gives us a more plausible and better-evidenced picture of continuity in non-Christian Anglo-Saxon belief than we have enjoyed hitherto, while also providing new insights into how group identities were formed and maintained in the earliest stages of Anglo-Saxon society.

Contrary to established thinking, our Old English medical texts do not contradict this reconstruction. Indeed, although they clearly associate *ælfe* with causing illness and with demons, they equally link *ælfe* with themes which are well paralleled in Old Irish, medieval Scandinavian and Middle English narratives about human-like, non-monstrous otherworldly beings inflicting ailments on people. Following the implications of these comparative texts, it is possible to read *ælfe* in Anglo-Saxon ideologies as powerful, and dangerous to members of the in-group – but dangerous only to members who transgress certain social norms. Whereas monsters threaten the whole of society, *ælfe* exert their threats to maintain society. This is no more than an interpretation, which may hold better for idealising, literary narratives than the more messy day-to-day reality of diagnosing and healing illnesses. But it is at least clear that we can read our Old English medical texts plausibly to reflect traditional and coherent belief-systems. Meanwhile, the medical texts generally show unease about the relationship of *ælfe* to demons. Not only were Anglo-Saxon clerics – Latin-literate men of royal courts – ready to believe in the power of *ælfe*, but when it came to the crunch they were far from confident that chasing away *dēoflas* would also undo *ælfe*'s harm. Medical anthropology also suggests the potential of these belief-systems to be manipulated in clinically efficacious ways. Anglo-Saxon medicine has traditionally been characterised in scholarship by its unfamiliarity, and although recent efforts to reinterpret it within the orthodox frameworks of Western twentieth-century clinical medicine have produced important insights, their failings have to a significant extent served to show that Anglo-Saxon medicine cannot be fully understood in these terms. Delving into our evidence for the roles of *ælfe* in inflicting illness provides a means of facing the differences between Anglo-Saxon culture and our own, and of trying to reconstruct the framework of assumptions and cultural categories in which Anglo-Saxon medical texts were rational and meaningful.

Linking our earliest evidence for *ælf*-beliefs with later textual sources also provides a new basis for detecting change in beliefs over time. By interpreting
Believing in early-medieval history

later evidence using only chronologically and geographically close comparative material (and by using this only with caution), while paying attention to the linguistic details of our Old English texts, I have identified change and variation within Anglo-Saxon beliefs. Demonisation is one change. It is apparent relatively early on, most clearly in Beowulf and in what seems to be the use of ælf as a synonym for Satanás in the Royal Prayerbook, of around 8oo. This is a development which is to be expected, so in this respect the continuities in belief which persist in other texts is more striking. Unexpected, however, is the evidence of Old English glosses on Latin words for nymphae. These suggest that on the one hand female ælfæ were minor components in early Anglo-Saxon belief-systems, if indeed they existed at all, and on the other that they rose to prominence during the Anglo-Saxon period. Interpreting the implications of this is tricky, but if nothing else this evidence shows Anglo-Saxon non-Christian belief to have remained dynamic after conversion – even among the monks to whom we owe our texts.

This relates to my remaining main theme: Anglo-Saxon gendering. I have argued that the development of a female denotation of ælf relates to older traditions in which – contrary to the expectations of Anglo-Saxon gendering established by our mainstream sources and by the formative modern historiography – male ælfe exhibited gender-transgressing traits. These traits are attested by our (Anglo-)Scandinavian portrayal of the álf r Vólundr; the evidence that ælf was the closest Old English equivalent to Latin words for nymphae despite glossators’ concern that it did not prototypically denote females; ælfe’s paradigmatic association with seductive feminine beauty in the word ælfsceyne; and the Scandinavian comparative evidence that the magic ælsíðen was considered inappropriate to males. Viewing this material in connection with evidence for martial supernatural females, usually called hægtessan, in Anglo-Saxon beliefs, I have inferred an early Anglo-Saxon mythological system which helped to define gender norms by showing their mirror image: effeminate ælfe and martial female hægtessan. (This conceivably also provided a paradigm for members of early Anglo-Saxon communities to gain power by performing gender transgressions themselves). As the Anglo-Saxon period progressed, non-Christian mythological gendering was reshaped to align it with gender norms, supporting a trend for neatening the alignment of sex and gender. The specific, well-defined and powerful ideologies concerning sex and gender operating in the Christian communities which dominated the production and preservation of Anglo-Saxon texts have left us with a remarkably limited range of perspectives on the processes of gendering in Anglo-Saxon culture. Since then, moreover, close relatives of these Christian ideologies have permeated and to a significant extent shaped orthodox cultural attitudes to gendering in Western societies, leaving us with the sense today of Anglo-Saxon attitudes to gender curiously similar to those traditional in our own societies. Glimpses into non-Christian Anglo-Saxon belief-systems, however, suggest less familiar processes, and perhaps less familiar outcomes. They encourage us to perceive a more complex, diverse and rich history of Anglo-Saxon gender – and culture.
Appendix 1: The Linguistic History of Elf

Several of my arguments in this book rely on details in the linguistic form and history of ælf. Although ælf is mostly regular in its development in Old English, it was affected by a number of sound-changes, some of whose details have been the subject of debate, and this has led to frequent misunderstandings and misreportings. Fortunately, the relevant processes are clear enough for present purposes. As both an aid to the reader unfamiliar with linguistics or the history of Old English, and to the informed reader faced with mistaken accounts, I include here a history of elf up to early Modern English.

The expected, regular sound-changes which ælf must have undergone according to standard accounts of Old English phonology are laid out as Figure 7. I use the International Phonetic Alphabet, except that as the phonetic value of the West Saxon spelling <ie> is unclear, I simply repeat the spelling where it is required.

Reconstructing lost forms

As Figure 7 shows, we must reconstruct the etymon of ælf as the long-stemmed masculine i-stem */alβi-/z/. The meanings of this statement and the underlying evidence are:

Long-stemmed: this means that the root syllable contains a long vowel and/or ends in two consonants. In this case, it ends in two consonants, as all Germanic dialects attest.

i-stem: most Germanic noun-stems consisted of a root syllable followed by a vowel, known as a stem-vowel. These stem-vowels were usually lost by the time of our attested Old English, but sometimes caused sound-changes elsewhere in the word which were retained. The root-vowels of prehistoric Old English i-stem nouns underwent a development known as i-mutation, which had different effects in different dialects. The i-mutation of */aIC-/ (where C stands for any consonant) is the only way to explain the various attested Old English forms of elf through regular sound-changes. Old Norse álfr and some medieval German plurals do not show the expected i-mutation, demanding the reconstruction of early a-stem variants */aIβa-z/, but */aIβa-z/ is not an etymon of the English word.²

---


2 Contra MED, s.v. elf; Fran Colman, ‘What is in a Name?’, in Historical Dialectology: Regional and Social, ed. Jacek Fisiak, Trends in Linguistics: Studies and Monographs, 37 (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1988), pp. 111–37, at 199; Edwards, ‘Laʒamon’s Elves’, 79. For variation between long-stemmed masculine a-stems in Norse and i-stems in other attested Germanic languages
The linguistic history of elf

Masculine: this is a largely arbitrary grammatical category. *Ælf* is never, in Old English, coupled with a determiner or adjective which might corroborate its gender. We can therefore infer its gender only from its inflexions and cognates. The inflexions of *elf* are only partially attested: we have the nominative singular *elf* (see notably p. 126 above); probably the dative singular *elfَe* (though the example could be an accusative plural; p. 120); the nominative plural *ylfa* (p. 69); and the genitive plural *ylfō* (pp. 2 and 99; both plural forms exhibit the West Saxon root vowel). Of Old English noun-declensions, only the long-stemmed masculine *i*-stems and the feminine *jō*-stems both exhibit these inflexions and show i-mutation. This choice can then be restricted particularly by the Old Norse *álf*, which preserves the masculine nominative singular ending -z as -r. Old High German and Old Frisian forms are also masculine.

The one variable left by these considerations is the original quality of the *f* in *elf*. A few early Old English name-forms in *aelb* and the unique Old English spelling ’ælbinne’ suggest that the Old English *f* derives from Germanic */β/.* This is confirmed by our rare attestations in East Germanic, where – unsurprisingly in view of the limited subject matter of our Gothic corpus – the *elf*-word is attested only in a few personal names, among them *Alboin*; and in the medieval German dialects where */flβ*-/*flβ*/ produced *alb* and *alp* by */β/ > */β/ > */β/ (/> /p/).>*

It might be expected that i-mutation would fail in compounds beginning in */flβ*-, since long-stemmed *i*-stems seem at least sometimes to have lost their -i in this context before i-mutation occurred. This would have produced compounds in Southern *ealf*- and Anglian *elf*-. But *ealf*- occurs only in names in a few post-Conquest copies of Old English charters, probably reflecting hypercorrect spellings by late scribes; likewise, *Alf*- forms in personal names are probably usually to be attributed variously to Latinate spelling and late confusion of *æ* and *a*. (A genuine *elf*-form, showing failure of i-mutation, may occur in the compound *alfwælde* in Beowulf, usually emended to *alwælde*;

see Noreen, *Altnordische Grammatik*, §§387–8, contra Peters, ‘OE *elf*’, 252; another example is Old Icelandic *furs*, *ogre*, cf. Old English *hya*. *Alfr* also exhibits the later lengthening of /a/ before /l/ (Noreen, *Altnordische Grammatik*, §124.3). The history of i-mutation in the Continental West Germanic dialects has been a subject of considerable debate (see Voyles, *Grammar*, §3.5.3). We would expect Old High German *alp* to develop like its *i*-stem counterpart *gast* (‘guest’), with *alp* in the nominative singular and *elpe* in the plural. But some plurals, such as *alpe* and *alpen*, demand derivation from */flβα*- if we are not to assume some analogical levelling. Old Frisian *a* did not undergo i-mutation before /IC/ (Voyles, *Grammar*, §7.1.9).

3 The genitive singular is attested only in place-names in what seem to be examples of a personal name *Ælf* (Hall, ‘Are There Any Elves?’, pp. 69–70), which may not be morphologically representative (see Colman, ‘Names Will Never Hurt Me’, 13–17).


6 Hogg, *Grammar*, §5.85.11.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elfs in Anglo-Saxon England</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prehistoric</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-OE, with loss of -z</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Hogg, Grammar, §4.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First fronting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(+ Anglian retraction or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>failure)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Hogg, Grammar, §§5.10-15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Hogg, Grammar, §5.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earliest texts (seventh century)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§-mutation,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-i-deletion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Hogg, Grammar, §§5.79(2a), 5.82, 6.18, 6.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenth century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Saxon &lt;ie-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; &lt;yg&gt;, /yl; second</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fronting in some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mercian varieties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Hogg, Grammar, §§5.163-68, 5.87);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>final outcomes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Northumbrian (Northern)  |
| *alβiz > *alβi           |
| *alβi                    |
| *alβi                    |
| ælβ                      |
| ælf                      |
| ælf                      |

| Mercian (Midland)        |
| *alβiz > *alβi           |
| *alβi                    |
| *alβi                    |
| ælβ                      |
| ælf                      |
| ælf, elf                 |

| West Saxon (South-Western) |
| *alβiz > *alβi             |
| *ælβi                     |
| *ælβi                     |
| *ielβ                     |
| *ielf                     |
| ylf                       |

| Southern                  |
| Kentish (South-Eastern)   |
| *alβiz > *alβi            |
| *ælβi                     |
| *ælβi                     |
| *elβ                      |
| elf                       |

Figure 7. The phonological development of ælf
see chapter 2 n. 75). Nor is *ielf, the i-mutated form of West Saxon */ælβi/, attested (the form <IELF> on coins being an epigraphic variant of <ÆLF>); the absence is worth noting because ielf is frequently cited in grammars and dictionaries.8

Middle English reflexes

In Middle English, reflexes of ælf, ylf and elf are all attested, in topological distributions consistent, as far as can be judged, with the Old English dialects. The West Saxon vowel is retained in the compound vluekecche (with the Anglo-Norman influenced spelling <v–u> for y) and may, Kitson has suggested, be the etymon of early Modern English ouphe and its later counterpart oaf.9 Otherwise, it was unrounded to /i/ as in ylues in the Wade-fragment quoted in chapter 4, and in the reflexes of personal names in the place-names Ilfracombe (< *Ylfredes-), Elmscott (< *Ylfmundes-), Elvendon Farm (with variants such as Ilvingden; < *Ylfingadūn) and perhaps Ilsington (putatively < *Ylfstan-).10 In the West Midlands, Anglian æ developed before /lC/ as in other contexts: unaffected by second fronting, it coalesced with a, giving the forms alue, aluen found in both manuscripts of Laʒamon’s Brut.11 However, in the other reflexes of Anglian dialects, Old English æ from */ʌlCi/ became e giving elf.12 This was more or less identical with the South-Eastern elf, so it was natural that elf became the standard English form, being the root used by Chaucer and almost all other later Middle English texts, regardless of their place of origin. Often when elf forms the first element of a compound it is followed by what is presumably an inorganic composition vowel, as in elvone lond, vluekecche.13

Like almost all English nouns, elf was eventually transferred to the paradigm derived from the masculine a-stems, with nominative and accusative plurals in -es, as in the form ylues mentioned above. However, its plural forms were

8 For example, Hogg, Grammar, §5.84 n.4; Campbell, Grammar, §200.1 n.4; Holthausen, Wörterbuch, s.v. ielf; Wright and Wright, Old English Grammar, §385. On the epigraphic forms see Colman, Money Talks, 161–2; ‘Names Will Never Hurt Me’, 22–3.


11 Hogg, Grammar, §§87.


13 Cf. Campbell, Grammar, §367. Cooke has argued that vluekecche and some other words show a singular *elfe-, originating in morphological levellings related to the transference of elf to the weak declension (on which see §5.3.3). However, this form is poorly attested as a simplex and examples are generally late enough that the -e may be merely orthographic. His comparisons, delf–delve and shelf–shelve, occur only as the first element of compounds (“Aluen swiðe sceone”, 6–7 n.18). He interpreted compounds such as eluene lond to contain fossilised weak genitive plurals (“Aluen swiðe sceone”, 2–3), but inorganic theme vowels explain these more elegantly.
in non-West Saxon dialects identical to those of the large feminine ē-stem declension and it may at times have been analysed as a member of this class, before transference to the a-stem declension, which presumably took place in the North by early Middle English times. Meanwhile, in some Southern and West-Midland varieties, ælf was first transferred to the weak noun class inherited from the Indo-European n-stems. I have discussed this development in detail in chapter 3.

The West Saxon ælf-forms

An exception to the regularity of the Old English texts is that early West Saxon shows the ‘Anglian’ form ælf – to the extent that ylf is never attested in the myriad pre-Conquest attestations of Anglo-Saxon personal names, its existence there being vouched for only by the few later attestations of place-names just mentioned. What is important here is that there is no serious doubt that ælf was an accepted West Saxon form. That it was not merely a scribal form is shown by other later reflexes of place-names containing Ælf-names, and West Saxon hypercorrect forms with ælf- for æl- (see Appendix 2). The form ælf would not have presented a strange or difficult combination of sounds in historical West Saxon: loan-words and the i-mutation of æ retracted by back-mutation had independently restored /ælC/. Moreover, early West Saxon shows Anglian-type retraction of */æl/ in breaking contexts, in forms like wælend for later wealdend. The /ælC/ forms, when i-mutated, should have produced the /ælC/ form found in ælf. In practice, these outcomes almost never occur except in ælf and probably – depending on the processes of metathesis in the word’s history – wærc (traditionally considered an ‘Anglian’ form, but well attested in early West Saxon). But /ælCi/ was not a very frequent combination in prehistoric Old English: so although some words in this group were common, such as */ældir-/* (‘older’), we should not be surprised to see somewhat haphazard levellings within the set. It is not unlikely, then, that variation in the development of */ælC/ in West Saxon produced corresponding variation in the development of */ælCi/; but that levelling followed in which the variants produced by the wealdend-varieties dominated, with rare adoptions from the wælend-varieties.

We might understand the variation between early and late West Saxon to reflect competing regional dialects or competing registers, but some sort of variation is clear. It is tempting to suggest that ælf specifically gained favour

14 Mossé, Middle English, §55–7.
15 For example, ælmesse (Ælf ‘alms’ < Latin eleëmosyna), pælle (Ælf ‘pallium’), hælter (‘halter’, probably from Old English ha lulfrí; cf. the restoration of /ærC/ by metathesis; Hogg, Grammar, §794.
18 For dialects cf. Hogg, Grammar, §5.15; for register Fulk’s demonstration that wælend-type
The linguistic history of elf

over ylf because so many early West Saxon-speaking nobles had names in Ælf: given the political dominance of Mercia during much of West Saxon history, this social group was perhaps also the most likely to speak Mercian-style waldend varieties, and to insist on Mercian-style pronunciations of their names. It is also conceivable that the singular ælf and the plural ylfe were sometimes interpreted to show a morphologically significant vowel-alternation. But both points are speculation.

forms were part of the poetic register of Southern Old English, Meter, §§318–39; more generally Gretsch, ‘Junius Psalter Gloss’, 89–106; Colman, ‘Names Will Never Hurt Me’, 22–5, on the South-Eastern evidence.
Appendix 2: Two Non-Elves

Several occurrences of ælf have been excluded from this book. One is a scribal error, as the correction of another Anglo-Saxon scribe confirms: the form ‘se ylfa god’ (putatively ‘the god of the ælfe’) for ‘se sylfa god’ (‘God Himself’) in psalm 59 of the Paris Psalter. Some other examples of ælf, however, stand unaltered in their manuscripts, but have not been considered here because I take them to be hypercorrect forms of words in æl-. This position is worth justifying, and offers some tangential support to my arguments above. Ælfmihtig occurs three times in a short text in Corpus Christi College Cambridge MS 320, folio 117, containing formulas and directions for pastoral use, and dating from around 1000: ‘Gelyfst ðū on god ælfmihtine’; ‘Ic þē bidde & bêode þêt þū gode ælfmihtigum gehyırsum sŷ’; ‘God ælfmihtig gefultumige ūs’ (‘Believe in God Almighty’; ‘I ask and command that you be obedient to God Almighty’; ‘May God Almighty help us’). Ælfmihtig never occurs here. The provenance of this manuscript is unknown, but its language is consistently late West Saxon; there is no other instance of initial /æl-/ in the text for comparison.

Ælfþēod- occurs twice in Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, MS 1650, but curiously the examples are attributed to different hands (both from about the first quarter of the eleventh century): it would appear that hypercorrection was contagious. Hand A, deriving material from the lost, early Common Recension glossary, glossed peregre (‘as though foreign’) with ‘ælfþēodelice’, for aelfþēodelice (‘as though foreign’). The largely indistinguishable hands CD, deriving once more from a lost body of glosses, gloss externē peregrinationis with ‘dre ælfþēodi’, presumably for fremdre ælþēodignysse (‘foreign journey abroad’). The hypercorrect forms may or may not originate with the Brus-
sels scribes themselves; each has a correct counterpart in Oxford, Bodleian MS Digby 146, which is textually related, but the principle of lectio difficilior could be invoked.

The hypercorrection here must relate to the fact that groups of three consonants were liable to lose their middle consonant in West Saxon, which

3 Ed. Gwara, Prosa, i 70 (for provenance, see i 94–101, 189*); cf. Goossens, MS Brussels, 172 [no. 381].
4 Ed. Gwara, Prosa, ii 248 (see more generally i 218*–234*); Goossens, MS Brussels, 252 [no. 1620].
5 Ed. Gwara, Prosa, i 70, 248.
Two non-elves

would affect ælf-compounds whose second element began with a consonant.⁶ How widespread this was or how profound its effects were in the common lexicon is open to doubt, but it had extensive effects on personal names, where æl- for ælf- is well attested in late Old English.⁷ Observing that words, and perhaps particularly names, whose first syllable was spelt as <ælf-> could be pronounced as [æl-], some scribes presumably inferred that some historical æl- compounds were actually ælf- compounds. This suggests clearly that West Saxon <ælf> is not merely a scribal form of the expected West Saxon form ylf – West Saxons evidently might say [ælf]. But the hypercorrection may have involved an element of folk-etymology, in which case the words must reflect a semantic congruence of ælf with -mihtig and -þēodig. In this reading, God was not ‘all-mighty’, but ‘mighty as an ælf is mighty’; a foreigner not ‘of another people’ (æl- < *alja- ‘other, foreign, strange’), but ‘from an ælf-people’. Both of these readings are well paralleled in other Old English evidence and would help to emphasise how late such associations lasted for ælf – but unfortunately, such evidence is too tangential to be relied on.⁸

---

⁷ For example, Colman, Money Talks, 201–3.
⁸ Ælfþēodig may also have a correlate in the manuscripts of Laʒamon’s Brut: whereas the more conservative Caligula manuscript has King Locrin reject his wife Guendoline, in the words of his accusers, ‘for alþeodisc meiden’ (‘for a foreign maiden’, line 1151), the later Otho manuscript calls her ‘one aluis maide’ (‘an elvish maid’; ed. Brook and Leslie, Laʒamon: Brut, i 58–9). But we should perhaps reckon with the meaning ‘delusory’ in the Otho text (cf. pp. 149–51): alþeodisc seems to occur in Middle English only in the Brut, and alþeodi is rare and restricted to the West Midlands (MED, s.vv.), so the meanings of alþeodisc may not have been obvious to the redactor(s) behind the Otho text.
Althochdeutsches Wörterbuch (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1968–)
Amours, F. J. (ed.), The Original Chronicle of Andrew of Wyntoun: Printed on Parallel Pages from the Cottonian and Wemyss MSS., with the Variants of the Other Texts, The Scottish Text Society, 1st series, 50, 53–4, 56–7, 63, 6 vols (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1903–14)
Atherton, M., ‘The Figure of the Archer in Beowulf and the Anglo-Saxon Psalter’, Neophilologus, 77 (1993), 653–7

Baetke, Walter, Yngvi und die Ynglinger: Eine quellenkritische Untersuchung über das nordische ‘Sakralkönigtum’, Sitzungsberichte der sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig, Philologisch-historische Klasse, 109/3 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1964)


Bammesberger, Alfred, Die Morphologie des urgermanischen Nomens, Untersuchungen zur vergleichenden Grammatik der germanischen Sprachen, 2 (Heidelberg: Winter, 1990)


Bauschatz, Paul C., ‘Urth’s Well’, Journal of Indo-European Studies, 3 (1975), 53–86


Birch, Walter de Gray, Index Saxonicus: An Index to All the Names in ‘Cartularium Saxonnicum: A Collection of Charters Relating to Anglo-Saxon History’ (London: Phillimore, 1899)
Works cited


Bjarni Æðalbjarnarson (ed.), *Snorri Sturluson: Heimskringla*, Íslenzk fornrit, 26–8, 3 vols (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Forntafelag, 1941–51)


—, ‘The Dissimilarity of Ancient Irish Magic from that of the Anglo-Saxons’, *Folk-Lore*, 37 (1926), 271–88

—, ‘Survivals of Paganism in Anglo-Saxon England’, *Transactions of the Birmingham Archaeological Society*, 56 (1939), 37–70

—, *The Medical Background of Anglo-Saxon England: A Study in History, Psychology and Folklore*, The Wellcome Historical Medical Library, n.s. 3 (London: Wellcome Historical Medical Library, 1963)

Boswell, John, *The Kindness of Strangers: The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance* (London: Allen Lane, 1988)


—, ‘Religious Thought and Behaviour as By-products of Brain Function’, *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 7 (2003), 119–24


Brady, Caroline, ‘“Warriors” in *Beowulf*: An Analysis of the Nominal Compounds and an Evaluation of the Poet’s Use of them’, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 11 (1983), 199–246


Elves in Anglo-Saxon England


Breeze, Andrew, ‘Old English Wann, “Dark; Pallid”: Welsh Gwann “Weak; Sad, Gloomy”’, ANQ, 10 (1997), 10–13


Broedel, Hans Peter, The ‘Malleus maleficarum’ and the Construction of Witchcraft: Theology and Popular Belief (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003)


Bullough, Vern L., and Bonnie Bullough, Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993)


——, Languages and Communities in Early Modern Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004)


Cahen, Maurice, Le mot ‘dieu’ en vieux-scandinave, Collection linguistique publiée par la Société de Linguistique de Paris, 10 (Paris: Champion, 1921)

Works cited

Campbell, Alistair, Old English Grammar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959)
Carney, James, Studies in Irish Literature and History (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1955)
Carr, Charles T., Nominal Compounds in Germanic, St Andrews University Publications, 41 (London: Oxford University Press, 1939)
Chadwick, Nora Kershaw, ‘Norse Ghosts (a Study in the Draugr and the Haugbúi)’, Folk-Lore, 57 (1946), 50–65, 106–27
Chance, Jane, Woman as Hero in Old English Literature (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986)
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England


—, Skáldskaparmál: Snorri Sturluson’s Ars Poetica and Medieval Theories of Language, The Viking Collection, 4 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1986)


Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome, ‘Monster Culture (Seven Theses)’, in Monster Theory: Reading Culture, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 3–25

—, Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages, Medieval Cultures, 17 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1999)

Cohn, Norman, Europe’s Inner Demons: The Demonization of Christians in Medieval Christendom, rev. edn (London: Pimlico, 1993)

Colgrave, Bertram (ed. and trans.), The Earliest Life of Gregory the Great, by an Anonymous Monk of Whitby (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1968)


Cook, Robert, and Mattias Tveitane (ed.), Strengleikar: An Old Norse Translation of Twenty-One Old French Lais, Norsk Historisk Kjeldeskrift-institutt, nórøne tekster, 3 (Oslo: Kjeldeskriftfondet, 1979)
Works cited

Cooke, William, ‘“Aluen swiðe sceone”: How Long did OE Ælfen/Elfen Survive in ME?’, English Language Notes, 41 (2003), 1–6
Cormak, M., ‘“Fjölkunnigri konu scalltu í faðmi sofa”: Sex and the Supernatural in Icelandic Saints’ Lives’, Skáldskaparmál, 2 (1992), 221–8
Crawford, Sally, Childhood in Anglo-Saxon England (Stroud: Sutton, 1999)
Cross, Tom Peete, Motif-Index of Early Irish Literature, Indiana University Publications, Folklore Series, 7 (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1952)
Damico, Helen, Beowulf’s Wealhtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1984)
—, ‘A Comparative Perspective on Scottish Cunning-Folk and Charmers’, in Witchcraft and Belief in Early Modern Scotland, ed. Julian Goodare, Lauren Martin and Joyce Miller (Basingstoke: Palgrave, forthcoming)
Dendale, Peter, Satan Unbound: The Devil in Old English Narrative Literature (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001)
—, ‘Lupines, Manganese, and Devil-Sickness: An Anglo-Saxon Medical Response to Epilepsy’, Bulletin of the History of Medicine, 75 (2001), 91–101
—, Allgermanische Religionsgeschichte, Grundriss der germanischen Philologie, 12 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1956–7)
—, Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch (Leiden: Brill, 1961)
Dickins, Bruce, ‘English Names and Old English Heathenism’, Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association, 19 (1933), 148–60
Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources (London: Oxford University Press, 1975–)
Dictionary of Old English (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies for the Dictionary of Old English Project, Center for Medieval Studies, University of Toronto, 1988–)
Dictionary of Old Norse Prose / Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog (Copenhagen: [Arnamagnæan Commission/Arnamagnæanske kommission], 1983–)
Dillon, Myles, ‘On the Text of Serglige Con Culainn’, Éigse, 3 (1941–2), 120–9
  — (ed.), *Serglige Con Culainn*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series, 14 ([Dublin]: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1953)


Donahue, Charles, ‘The Valkyries and the Irish War-Goddesses’, *PMLA*, 56 (1941), 1–12
  —, ‘Grendel and the Clan Cain’, *Journal of Celtic Studies*, 1 (1950), 167–75


Effros, Bonnie, ‘Skeletal Sex and Gender in Merovingian Mortuary Archaeology’, *Antiquity*, 74 (2000), 632–9

Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

Els, T. J. M. van, The Kassel Manuscript of Bede’s ‘Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum’ and its Old English Material (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1972)
Enright, Michael J., Lady with a Mead-Cup: Ritual, Prophecy and Lordship in the European Warband from La Tène to the Viking Age (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996)
Faull, Margaret Lindsay, ‘The Semantic Development of Old English Wealh’, Leeds Studies in English, 8 (1975), 20–44
Feilberg, H. F., Bjærgtagen: Studie over en gruppe træk fra nordisk alfetro, Danmarks folkeminder, 5 (Copenhagen: Det Schønbergske Forlag, 1910)
Filppula, Markku, Juhani Klemola and Heli Pitkänen (ed.), The Celtic Roots of English, Studies in Languages, 37 (Joensuu: University of Joensuu, Faculty of Humanities, 2002)
Findon, Joanne, A Woman’s Words: Emer and Female Speech in the Ulster Cycle (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997)
—, Órdbog til de af Samfund til udg. af gml. nord. litteratur udgivne rímur samt til de af Dr. O. Jiriczek udgivne Bósarimur, Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur, 51 (Copenhagen: Jørgensen, 1926–8)
Works cited


Forstemann, Ernst, *Altdeutsches Namenbuch*, rev. edn, 2 vols (Bonn: [n. pub.], 1900–16)


——, *Before the Closet: Same-Sex Love from ‘Beowulf’ to ‘Angels in America*’ (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998)


Fritzner, Johan, *Ordbog over det gamle norske sprog*, 4 vols (Oslo: Den Norske Forlagsforening; Universitetsforlaget, 1886–1972)


Gelling, Margaret, *The Place-Names of Oxfordshire*, English Place-Name Society, 23, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953–4)

——, ‘Place-Names and Anglo-Saxon Paganism’, *University of Birmingham Historical Journal*, 8 (1962), 7–25

——, ‘Further Thoughts on Pagan Place-Names’, in *Otium et Negotium: Studies in
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England


Gelling, Margaret, and Ann Cole, The Landscape of Place-Names (Stamford: Tyas, 2000)


——, "‘Blow these Vipers from me’: Mythic Magic in The Nine Herbs Charm’, in Essays on Old, Middle, Modern English and Old Icelandic in Honour of Raymond P. Tripp, Jr., ed. Loren C. Gruber (Lewiston NY: Mellen, 2000), pp. 91–123


Görlach, Manfred, Studies in Middle English Saints’ Legends, Anglistische Forschungen, 257 (Heidelberg: Winter, 1998)


Grattan, J. H. C., and Charles Singer, Anglo-Saxon Magic and Medicine, Publications of the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum, n.s. 3 (London: Oxford University Press, 1952)
Works cited


— and Wilhelm Grimm, Deutsches Wörterbuch, new edn (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1965–)


Guðni Jónsson (ed.), Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar; Bandamanna saga, Íslenzk fornrit, 7 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1936)

— and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (ed.), Fornaldarsögur norðurlanda, 3 vols (Reyjkjavík: Bókaútgáfan Forni, 1943–4)


Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

Gurevich, Aaron, Historical Anthropology of the Middle Ages, ed. Jana Howlett (Cambridge: Polity, 1992)


Hald, Kristian, Personannavne i Danmark, 2 vols (Copenhagen: Dansk Historisk Fællesforening, 1971–4)


—, ‘Calling the Shots: The Old English Remedy Gif hors osfcoten sie and Anglo-Saxon “Elf-Shot”’, Neophilologische Mitteilungen, 106 (2005), 195–209; available at <http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/3052>


—, ‘The Evidence for maran, the Anglo-Saxon “Nightmares”’, Neophilologus (forthcoming)


—, ‘Continuity in European Witchcraft Beliefs: Early Medieval to Early Modern’, for Changes of Meaning and the Meanings of Change, ed. Alaric Hall, Marianna Hintikka, Leena Kahlas-Tarkka, Roderick McConchie and Matti Rissanen (forthcoming)

Hallberg, Peter, Snorri Sturluson och Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar, Studia Islandica, 20 (Reykjavik: Bókútgáfa Menningarsjóðs, 1962)

Harris, Anne Leslie, ‘Hands, Helms, and Heroes: The Role of Proper Names in Beowulf’, Neuphilologische Mitteilungen, 83 (1982), 414–21
Henning, Sam (ed.), Síælinna þröst: første delin af the bokinne som kallas Síælinna þröst, Samlingar utgivna av Svenska Fornskift-sällskapet, 59 (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1954)
Hermann Pálsson, Keltar á Íslandi ([Reykjavík]: Háskólaútgáfan, 1996)
[—], Úr landnóðri: Samar og ystu rætur islenskrar menningar, Studia Islandica, 54 (Reykjavík: Bókmenntafæðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 1997)
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England


Höfler, M. Deutsches Krankheitsnamen-Buch (Munich: Piloty & Loehele, 1899)


Holbek, Bengt, The Interpretation of Fairy Tales: Danish Folklore in a European Perspective, FF Communications, 239 (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1987)


Holmström, Helge, Studier över svanjungfrumotivet i Volundarkvida och annorstädes (Malmö: Maiander, 1919)

Holthausen, F., Altenglisches etymologisches Wörterbuch, Germanische Bibliothek, 4. Reihe (Wörterbücher), 7 (Heidelberg: Winter, 1934)

Holtsmark, Anne, Studier i Snorres mytologi, Skrifter utgift av det Norske Videnskaps-akademi i Oslo, II. Hist.-filos. klasse, ny serie, 4 (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1964)

—, Norrøn mytologi: Tro og myter i vikingtiden (Oslo: Norske Samlaget, 1970)

Holzmann, Verena, ‘“Ich beswer dich wurm vnd wyrmin. . .”: Die magische
Kunst des Besprechens’, LiLi: Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik, 130 (2003), 25–47
Honko, Lauri, Krankheitsprojekte: Untersuchung über eine urtümliche Krankheitserklärung, FF Communications, 178 (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia, 1959)
—, ‘Pre-Conquest Personal Names’, Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde, ed. Herbert Jankula et al., 2nd rev. edn (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1968–)
Jacobsen, Lis, and Erik Moltke (ed.), Danmarks Runeindskrifter, 3 vols (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1941–2)
James, Montague Rhodes, A Descriptive Catalogue of the Manuscripts in the Library of Peterhouse (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1899)
Jente, Richard, Die mythologischen Ausdrücke im altenglischen Wortschatz: Eine kulturgeschichtlich-etymologische Untersuchung, Anglistische Forschungen, 56 (Heidelberg: Winter, 1921)
Jesch, Judith, Women in the Viking Age (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1991)
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England


Klaeber, Fr. (ed.), *Beowulf*, 3rd edn (Boston: Heath, 1950)


Kluge, Friedrich, *Nominale Stammbildungslehre der altgermanischen Dialekte*, Sammlung kurzer Grammatiken germanischer Dialekte, 1, 3rd edn (Halle: Niemeyer, 1926)


Koht, Halvdan, ‘Var finanne alltid finnar?’, *Maaal og minne* (1923), 161–75


Krag, Claus, *Ynglingatal og Ynglingesagas: En studie i historiske kilder*, Studia humaniora (Rådet for humanistisk forskning), 2 (Oslo: Rådet for humanistisk forskning, NAVF, 1991)

Krahe, Hans, and Wolfgang Meid, *Germanische Sprachwissenschaft*, Sammlung Göschern, 238, 238a, 238b, 780, 1218, 1218a, 1218b, 7th edn by Wolfgang Meid, 3 vols (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1967)

Kroesen, Riti, ‘The Valkyries in the Heroic Literature of the North’, *Skáldskaparmál*, 4 (1997), 129–61


*Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1956–78)


Lagerholm, Åke (ed.), *Drei Lygis ður: Egils saga einhenda ok Æmundar berserkjabana, Ala flekks saga, Flóres saga konungs ok sona hans, Altnordische Saga-Bibliothek*, 17 (Halle (Saale): Niemeyer, 1927)


Larrington, Carolyne, ‘“What Does Woman Want?” Mær und Munr in *Skírnismál*, *Álvismál*, 1 (1992), 3–16


Laskaya, Anna and Eve Salisbury (ed.), *The Middle English Breton Lays* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995); also at <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/salisbur.htm>, accessed 11 October 2004

Lassen, Annette, ‘Hœðr’s Blindness and the Pledging of Óðinn’s Eye: A Study of the Symbolic Value of the Eyes of Hœðr, Óðinn and Þórr’, in *Old Norse Myths*, 204
Works cited


Lees, Clare A., Tradition and Belief: Religious Writing in Late Anglo-Saxon England, Medieval Cultures, 19 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999)


Lid, Nils, ‘Um finnskot og alvskot: Eit umråde av norsk sjudomsmagi’, Maal og minne (1921), 37–66


Lind, E. H., Norsk-isländska dopnamn ock fingerade namn från medeltiden (Uppsala: Lundequistska Bokhandeln, 1905–15)
—, Norsk-isländska dopnamn och fingerade namn från medeltiden: supplementband (Oslo: Dybwad, 1931)


—— (ed.), The Corpus Glossary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921)
——, The Corpus, Epinal, Erfurt and Leyden Glossaries, Publications of the Philological Society, 8 (London: Oxford University Press, 1921)
Lucic, K., Historische Grammatik der englischen Sprache, 2 vols (Leipzig, CH: Tauchnitz, 1914–40)
Luikman, Niels, ‘An Irish Source and Some Icelandic Fornaldarsögur’, Mediaeval Scandinavia, 10 (1977), 41–57
Madan, Falconer, et al., A Summary Catalogue of Western Manuscripts in the Bodleian
Works cited

Library at Oxford which have not hitherto been Catalogued in the Quarto Series, corr. repr., 7 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1895–1953)


Malone, Kemp (ed.), Deor, Methuen’s Old English Library, 2, 2nd edn (London: Methuen, 1949)


Maurus, P., Die Wielandsage in der Litteratur, Münchener Beiträge zur romanischen und englischen Philologie, 25 (Erlangen: Böhme, 1902)

Mayrhofer, Manfred, Kurzgefaßtes etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindischen / A Concise Etymological Sanskrit Dictionary, 4 vols (Heidelberg: Winter, 1956–80)


——, Satan’s Conspiracy: Magic and Witchcraft in Sixteenth-Century Scotland (East Linton: Tuckwell, 2001)


——, Both One and Many: Essays on Change and Variation in Late Norse Heathenism (Rome: Il calamo, 1994)


——, Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend (Cambridge: Brewer, 2005)


Meaney, Audrey L., ‘Alfred, the Patriarch and the White Stone’, Aumla: Journal of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association, 49 (May 1978), 65–79


——, ‘Variant Versions of Old English Medical Remedies and the Compilation of Bald’s Leechbook’, Anglo-Saxon England, 13 (1984), 235–68


——, ‘The Anglo-Saxon View of the Causes of Illness’, in Health, Disease and Healing in Medieval Culture, ed. Sheila Campbell, Bert Hall and David Klausner (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 12–33

Elves in Anglo-Saxon England


Meissner, Rudolf, Die Kenningar der Skalden: Ein Beitrag zur skaldischen Poetik, Rheinische Beiträge und Hülfsbücher zur germanischen Philologie und Volkskunde, 1 (Bonn: Schroeder, 1921)


Miller, Sean (ed.), Charters of the New Minster, Winchester, Anglo-Saxon Charters, 9 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)


Mitchell, Bruce, Old English Syntax, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985)


Mitterauer, Michael, Ahnen und Heilige: Namengebung in der europäischen Geschichte (Munich: Beck, 1993)

Moreschini, Claudio (ed.), *Boethivs: De consolatione philosophiae, Opuscula theologica* (Munich: Saur, 2000)


—–, *The Wise One of the Mountain: Form, Function and Significance of the Subterranean Smith. A Study in Folklore*, Göpinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik, 379 (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1983)


Müller, G. (ed.), *Aus mittelenglischen Medizintexten: Die Prosarezepte des stockholmer Miszellan Kodex X.90*, Kölner anglistische Arbeiten, 10 (Cologne: Kölner anglistische Arbeiten, 1929)

—–, *Studien zu den theriophoren Personennamen der Germanen*, Niederdeutsche Studien, 17 (Cologne: Böhlau, 1970)


Nedoma, Robert, *‘The Legend of Wayland in Deor’*, *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, 38 (1990), 129–45


—–, *‘The Problem of the Ending of The Wife’s Lament’, Speculum*, 78 (2003), 1107–50


Nordal, Sigurður (ed.), *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, Íslenzk fornnrit, 2 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Forntíðafélag, 1933)

Noreen, Adolf, *Altnordische Grammatik I: Altisländische und altnorwegische Grammatik (Laut- und Flexionslehre) unter Berücksichtigung des Urnordischen, Sammlung kurzer Grammatiken germanischer Dialekte*, 4, 4th edn (Halle (Saale): Niemeyer, 1923)


Orton, Peter, ‘Sticks or Stones? The Story of Imma in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 41 of the Old English Bede, and Old English Tân (‘Twig’)*, *Medium Ævum*, 72 (2003), 1–12


Pentikäinen, Juha, ‘Child Abandonment as an Indicator of Christianization in the Nordic Countries’, in Old Norse and Finnish Religions and Cultic Place-Names, Based on Papers Read at the Symposium on Encounters between Religions in Old Nordic Times and Cultic Place-Names Held at Åbo, Finland, on the 19th–21st August 1987, ed. Tore Ahlbäck (Åbo: Donner Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History, 1990), pp. 72–91


Philipsson, Ernst Alfred, Germanisches Heidentum bei den Angelsachsen, Kölner anglistische Arbeiten, 4 (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1929)

Pickering, O. S., ‘South English Legendary Style in Robert of Gloucester’s Chronicle’, Medium Ævum, 70 (2001), 1–18

Elves in Anglo-Saxon England


Platzer, Hans, “‘No Sex Please, We’re Anglo-Saxon?’: On Grammatical Gender in Old English’, VIEWS, 10.1 (2001), 34–47, accessed from <http://www.univie.ac.at/Anglistik/ang_new/online_papers/views/archive.htm>, 10 June 2005


Pokorny, Julius, Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch, 2 vols (Bern: Francke, 1959–69)


——, The Viking Way: Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia, Aun, 31 (Uppsala: Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, 2002)

Prokosch, E., A Comparative Germanic Grammar (Philadelphia: Linguistic Society of America, 1939)


Rauer, Christine, Beowulf and the Dragon: Parallels and Analogues (Cambridge: Brewer, 2000)


Redin, Mats, Studies on Uncompounded Personal Names in Old English, Uppsala Universitets årsskrift 1919: Filosofi, språkvetenskap och historiska vetenskaper, 2 (Uppsala: Akademiska Bokhandeln, 1919)

Works cited

Roberts, Jane, and Christian Kay, with Lynne Grundy, A Thesaurus of Old English in Two Volumes, Costerus New Series, 131–2, 2nd rev. impression, 2 vols (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000); accessed from <http://libra.englang.arts.gla.ac.uk/oethesaurus/>, 10 June 2005
Robinson, Fred C., ‘The Significance of Names in Old English Literature’, Anglia, 86 (1968), 14–58
Schiff, Leon, The Differential Diagnosis of Jaundice (Chicago: Year Book Publishers, 1946)
Schjødt, Jens Peter, ‘Horizontale und vertikale Achsen in der vorchristlichen skandinavischen Kosmologie’, in Old Norse and Finnish Religions and Cultic Place-Names, Based on Papers Read at the Symposium on Encounters between Religions in Old Nordic Times and Cultic Place-Names Held at Åbo, Finland, on the 19th–21st August 1987, ed. Tore Ahlbäck (Åbo: Donner Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History, 1990), pp. 35–57
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England


Schulz, Monika, Magie oder: Die Wiederherstellung der Ordnung, Beiträge zur europäischen Ethnologie und Folklore, Reihe A: Texte und Untersuchungen, 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2000)


Searle, William George, Onomasticon Anglo-Saxonicum: A List of Anglo-Saxon Proper Names from the Time of Beda to that of King John (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1897)


See, Klaus von, et al., Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda (Heidelberg: Winter, 1997–)


Semple, Sarah, ‘Illustrations of Damnation in Late Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts’, Anglo-Saxon England, 32 (2003), 231–45


Sjöblom, Tom, Early Irish Taboos: A Study in Cognitive History, Uskontotiede / Comparative Religion, 5 (Helsinki: Department of Comparative Studies, University of Helsinki, 2000)


Works cited


Solli, Brit, Seid: Myter, sjamanisme og kjønn i vikingenes tid (Oslo: Pax Forlag, 2002)

Solterer, Helen, ‘Figures of Female Militancy in French Literature’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 16 (1991), 522–49


Stafford, Pauline, *Queens, Concubines and Dowagers: The King’s Wife in the Early Middle Ages* (London: Batsford, 1983)


Storm, Gustav (ed.), *Monumenta historica Norwegiae: Latinske kildekrifter til Norges historie i middelalderen* (Kristiania: Brøgger, 1889)


Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

Schubert, Studien zur klassischen Philologie, 100 (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1990), pp. 559–612
Ström, Folke, Diser, norner, valkyrjor: Fruktbarhetskult och sakralt kungadöme i norden, Kungl. vitterhets historie och antikviteter akademiens handlingar, filologisk-filosofiska serien, 1 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1954)
Ström, Hilmer, Old English Personal Names in Bede’s History: An Etymological-Phonological Investigation, Lund Studies in English, 8 (Lund: Gleerup, 1939)
Strömbäck, Dag, Sejd: Textstudier i nordisk religionshistoria, Nordiska texter och undersökningar, 5 (Stockholm: Geber, 1935)
Sveinbjörn Egilsson, Lexicon poeticum antiquæ linguae septentrionalis / Ordbog over det Norsk-Islandske Skjaldesprog, 2nd edn by Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen: Møller, 1931)
—, ‘From Trolls to Turks: Continuity and Change in Danish Legend Tradition’, Scandinavian Studies, 67 (1995), 32–62
Works cited


—, *Beowulf 1314a: The Hero as Alfwalda, “Ruler of Elves”*, *Neophilologus*, 70 (1986), 630–2


217
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England


Wiker, Gry, ‘Om konstruksjon av ny menneskelig identitet i jernalderen’, *Primitive tider*, 4 (2001), 51–72


Woolf, Henry Bosley, *The Old Germanic Principles of Name-Giving* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1939)

Wordsworth, Christopher, ‘Two Yorkshire Charms or Amulets: Exorcisms and Adjurations’, *The Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, 17 (1903), 377–412


Works cited

Wright, Joseph, and Elizabeth Mary Wright, *Old English Grammar*, 3rd edn (London: Oxford University Press, 1924)


Zettersten, Arne (ed.), *Waldere* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979)

abandonment 117–18
Abimelech 91
Abraham 90–1
æl- 4, 12, 182–3
ælf: see also ælfn, dünælf, landælf, álfr
and beauty 75–6, 88–95
and changelings 117–18
and cutaneous ailments 106–8
and femininity 81–4, 87–8, 148, 157–9, 161–6
and healing 115–18
and internal pains 98–104, 105–6, 112, 115, 173
and providing supernatural power 148–9, 151–6
and sīden 97, 98, 104, 119–30, 137, 140, 155–6, 173, 175; see also siden, seidr
ælfsogða 102, 104, 105–6, 107
ælfhöðig 182–3
ælfþone 123, 155
Aeneid 84, 111
åes side 3, 33, 68, 137–40, 143, 146, 152, 156, 162, 163, 172
asir: see Æss
Àla flekks saga 39 n. 61
Aldhelm 81, 84; see also Carmen de virginitate, Enigmata, Prosa de virginitate
álfablot 30–1
álfheimar: see álfheimr
álfheimr 24, 26, 36, 47, 70–1; see also heimr
álfkona 28, 81, 136, 144
álfkunnr 30, 127
Alfred the Great 97; see also De consolatione philosophiae (Old English version)
álfrðubl 26, 30, 38–9, 55
alfwalda 69 n. 77, 177–8
Allecto 86, 111–12, 113
alp 5, 32–3, 84, 103, 108, 125–6, 141, 177; see also elvin
Alvismál 37, 44 n. 106
alvskot(t) 108
amulets 8, 129, 153
Ancient Greece: see Classical mythology
Angi 26
angels 25–6, 57 n. 12, 75, 89–90, 91, 107, 140, 141–2
Annwn 68
Antwerp–London Glossary 77–8, 79, 82, 83, 85, 87–8
Antwerp, Plantin-Moretus Museum M 16.2: see Antwerp–London Glossary
Argante 75, 80, 88, 163
art 15–16, 166
Art mac Coin 146 n. 85
Ásgarðr 48
áss 6, 26, 27, 28–30, 31–34, 35–6, 37–8, 42, 47–49, 58 n. 14, 81, 108, 132; see also ðs ásynja 28, 29, 81
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

Atlakviða 2 n. 6
Austrfararvísur 30–1

Badb 163
Bald’s Leechbook 96–7, 98–9, 119, 120, 124–5, 128, 130, 136; see also Gif hors ofcoten sie
Baldrs draumar 153
Bede: see Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum
Beowulf 3, 12, 37, 54, 60 n. 44, 66, 69–74, 90, 94, 96, 116, 158, 175, 177
bergaefen 78 n. 10
Bergen rune stave 133–4, 148
Björketorp stone 147
Bõðvildr 40, 42, 46, 145; see also Võlundarkviða
Boethius: see De consolatione philosophiae (Old English Version)
Bós a saga ok Herrauðs 133
Bra gi inn gamli Boddason 15, 28
bríathar-thecosc 152
Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, MS 1650 149–50
Brut (Lažamon’s) 33, 75–6, 80, 88, 161, 163, 179, 183 n. 8
burgrüne 85 n. 41, 86
burhspec 19 n. 78
burials 116, 153–4, 159 n. 5
Bushueva 133
Byrhtferth of Ramsey 82
Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 320, 182
Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 144: see Corpus Glossary
canons: see laws, Canons of Edgar
Canons of Edgar 151–2
Canterbury Tales 75; see also Wife of Bath’s Tale, Man of Lato’s Tale, Tale of Sir Thopas
Carmen de virginitate 81, 82, 85, 111–12
castalides 106, 107
categorisation 9–12
Celticism 76, 139, 172
changelings 117–18
Chaucer, Geoffrey 179; see also Wife of Bath’s Tale, Man of Lato’s Tale, Tale of Sir Thopas
Circe 84, 85, 145
Classical mythology 10, 15, 46, 50, 51, 111; see also Circe, Fauns, Nymphs
Cleopatra Glossary, First 79, 82–83, 85, 87
Cleopatra Glossary, Third 82, 87, 111
Coifi 154
comitialis 150–1
comparison (methodology of) 14–15, 157, 172–3
concubinage 165–6
conops 123
Corpus Glossary 82 n. 33, 151
cross-dressing 154, 164
Cú Chulainn 137–40, 143–4, 145, 152
Dáinn 38
dark-elf: see døkkálfr
De consolatione philosophiae (Old English version) 41, 51, 81, 84, 85, 145
De medicamentis 129
demons 7, 11, 15, 54, 58 n. 14, 73, 106, 116, 122, 124, 130, 143, 144 n. 79, 156, 162, 174–5; see also Devil, the and feóndes costunga
deor 46 n. 118
Devil, the 72, 73, 106, 112, 114, 127–30, 140, 156, 175; see also demons, feóndes costunga
Diana 75
dis 22–3, 29, 31, 32, 39 n. 81, 43–4, 116, 159
disablót 31
døkkálfr 24, 27
dragons 9, 60 n. 44
draugr 29
Drifa 134–6, 138–9, 140, 144, 156
druids 34
dínuelf 81–3, 85, 87–8
dínuelfen 78–9
dvergr 24, 25, 29, 32–4, 35, 37–38, 47; see also dweorg
dweorg 61, 126 n. 25, 155
dweorgeddastle 155
Dyirbal 14
Eadwine Psalter 96
Echo 10, 85
Eddaict verse 24, 27, 33, 34–47, 55
Egils saga Skallagrímssonar 145
Einarr skálaglamm 29
Ektors saga ok kappa hans 24
el-: see æl-
elbin 79–80; see also alp
elf (Latin) 72, 106 n. 48, 122, 133 n. 44; see also Elfa
elf (Middle English) 5, 68, 75–6, 88, 107, 140–2, 143, 146, 149, 152, 160, 161–2, 163–4, 179–80; see also elf
elf (Older Scots) 5, 7, 68, 103, 146, 153, 160, 162; see also elf
Elf-Queen 75, 76, 89, 114, 160
Index

elf-ring 75
elf-shot 4, 6–7, 96, 98–103, 114, 173
Elfa 72, 122, 129 n. 32
elleborus 155
Elmascott 179
Elucidarius 25
elephant 108
Elveden 64–5
Elvedon Farm 65, 179
elevine 123; see also ælfisc-
en (< -injō) 77, 80–1, 87–8
-ene (deverbalic nominal suffix) 119
enigmata 78–9, 155
ent 62, 66
coten 37, 61, 71, 73; see also jotunn
epilepsy 122, 150, 151
ergi 147
es: see ës
Etymologiae 70 n. 78, 79, 84, 125, 150
Evagrius: see Vita sancti Antonii
Expositio sermonum antiquorum 122–3
Gandalf 38
garron 150–1
and magic 145–8
of ælfe 94–5, 154, 157–66, 175
Genesis A 90–2
genitives
of elf 64
weak plural 3 n. 8, 80
Georgics 84
Gerðr 38, 148
geascot 3, 108, 112, 115
Gesta Danorum 50, 148
Gif hors ofscoten sīe 98–103, 120
gigant 73
gigas 73
glosses 10, 17, 19 n. 28, 27 n. 31, 65, 72, 76–88, 94–5, 106–7, 111–12, 123, 125, 145, 146, 149–52, 163, 170
god 61, 149; see also god, gydig, gyden
gyðr 29–30, 37; see also god
Godheimar 48
Gowdie, Issobel 114–15, 116, 159, 162
Grendel 66, 69–71
Grimnismál 22, 36, 38, 46, 47, 50, 51–2, 70, 153
Gripispa 153
Grossen Seelentrost, Der 125 n. 24, 132
Hāmundrizón 22
Haguenst 2–3, 86, 108, 111–13, 115, 159, 162–3, 175; see also hagazussa
hagazussa 154 n. 119; see also hægtessa
ham 70–1; see also heimr
Hamðismál 22
Hancock, Agnes 153
Harley Glossary 82, 85, 123, 149
Hauvamál 35, 38, 44 n. 106
Heidreks saga 39 n. 81, 46 n. 117
Heimdalr 45, 55
heimr 48, 70–1; see also hám
Helgakviða Hundingsbana I 44, 45 n. 111, 135 n. 49
Helgakviða Hundingsbana II 44 n. 106
Helgi Hálfdanarson 136, 144, 145
Heljorn 141
Herbarium (Old English) 127
Historia de preliis Alexandri Magni 89
Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum 110, 154
Historia Norwegiae 144 n. 79
Historiography 167–70
Holofernes 92, 93–4
Hrólf’s saga kraka 136, 144
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

hud 119, 147; cf. seiðr
Humilimini sub potenti manu dei 103–4, 179
Hyndiluljóð 38

Ides Ælfscýne 93
Ilfracombe 179
Ilsington 179
i-mutation 27 n. 31, 62–3, 69 n. 77, 81 n. 23, 149 n. 102, 176, 177–9, 180
incubus 85, 87, 125; see also incubus
infanticide 117–18
Irar 52
i-stems, long-stemmed masculine 42 n. 96, 62–3, 80 n. 20, 83, 176–7

Jötunheimar 48, 70–1
jóttum 24, 27, 29, 31–4, 37, 38, 48–52, 133–4; see also eaten
Judith 90, 92–4
kennings 22 n. 4, 28–9, 30, 38–9
Kormakr Óg mundarson: see Sigurðarkviða

Läcnunga 1, 100, 119, 120–1, 140; see also Wid færstice
Laşamon: see ‘Brut’ (Laşamon’s)
lanðasvæði 81–3, 85
language
as reflection of world-view 9, 12–14, 171–2
as shaper of world-view 12–14, 171–2
in medieval studies 12–13, 17–18, 171–2
social registers 18–19, 180–1

Lawval 163
laws 152, 165
Lebor na hUidre 137
Leechbook III 82, 96–7, 100, 104–8, 119–20, 121–2, 124, 126–9
Leiden Riddle 79
Leiden, Bibliothek der Rijksuniversiteit

Voccius Lat. 4° 106 78–9
lentenādl 121–2, 124, 128–9
lēod 42 n. 95, 80 n. 20; cf. ljóði
léodrūne 124–5, 128–9, 140
Liber monstrorum 84–5
Life of Adam and Eve 107
light-elf: see ljósálf
linguistic turn, the 168–70
ljóði 40–2; cf. lēod
ljósálf 24–7, 55, 90, 92
Lóeg 143–4
Lokasenna 35–36, 147
London, BL MS Additional 32,246: see Antwerp–London Glossary
London, BL MS Cotton Cleopatra A. III 79, 81–2; see also Cleopatra Glossary
London, BL MS Harley 3376: see Harley Glossary
London, BL MS Harley 585 1, 96, 100; see also Lācnunga
London, BL MS Royal 12 D. xvii 82, 96–7; see also Bald’s Leechbook, Leech-book III
London, BL MS Royal 2 A. XX: see Royal Prayerbook
London, BL MS Sloane 2584 122, 150
London, BL MS Sloane 963 122, 129 n. 32
Luther, Martin 103
mær: see mære
mære 10, 85, 124–6, 129, 137, 140, 141, 155–6; see also mar
magic 33–4, 145–8; see also elfsíden, seiðr, siden, weaving, witchcraft
Man of Law’s Tale 117, 140–1
Man, Andro 76, 89, 160
Mannheimar 48, 71
mara 29, 135–6; see also mære
Marcellus Empiricus: see De medicamentis
mare: see mære
Marie de France 81, 148, 163
matriarchy, myth of 164
medical anthropology 108–9, 174
medical materialism 7–8
medicine (historiography) 6–8
Metamorphoses 84
metten 81
middaneard 71
Midgardr 48–9
Milton, John: see Paradise Lost
Miracula sancte Wihtburge 64–5
monsters 47–53, 65–6, 115–16, 174; see also ent, dvergr, dwørg, jõttum, þurs, þyrs
Morungen, Heinrich von 141
Münchener Nachtsegen 108
muntælfe 78 n. 10, 87
muses: see nymphs
myncenu 81
names: see personal names, place-names
narratives (in historical research) 168–70
National Romanticism 12, 171–2
Index

nightmare: see mære, mara
nihtragja 104, 124, 126–9, 140
Njóðr 36
norn 22–3, 29, 133
nuns 162, 164
nymphs 51, 65, 78–88, 106, 161, 175
oaf 179
Óðinn 31, 35, 42, 46, 47, 51–2, 70, 147–8, 153, 156; see also Woden
Óláfr Geirstaðaálfr 26–7
Old Saxon Catechism 73
orcneas 73
Oregon 36
orn 22–3, 29, 133
nuns 162, 164
nymphs 51, 65, 78–88, 106, 161, 175
oaf 179
Óðinn 31, 35, 42, 46, 47, 51–2, 70, 147–8, 153, 156; see also Woden
Óláfr Geirstaðaálfr 26–7
Old Saxon Catechism 73
orcneas 73
Orcus 73
Original Chronicle 153
Órvar-Odds saga 130 n. 35
ōs 2–3, 5, 6, 35, 60–1, 63, 108, 112–14, 116; see also Æss
ouphe 179
Ovid 84
Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. poet. a.1: see Vernon Manuscript
Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Junius 83, 122
Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Junius 121, 152
Paradise Lost 76, 89
Parcae 23, 81, 85, 86, 87
Paris Psalter 182
Parker Chronicle 96–7
Patrick’s Hymn 34
personal names 30, 39, 55–62, 64
Pharaoh 91
place-names 64–6
possession 101, 106, 127, 149, 151, 156
projectiles, metaphysical 110–12; see also elf-shot
Prosa de virginitate 149–50, 151
puica 10, 66
Pwyll Pendeuic Dyuet 163
Queen of Elphen: see Elf-Queen
Queen of Fearrie: see Elf-Queen
Ragnarök 51
Ragnarsdrápa 15, 28
rbhu 54 n. 1
reality 9, 169, 170
regen 60–61; see also regin
regin 26, 29–30, 37; see also regen
Reginsmál 22
Roech, Elspeth 152–3
Rhiannon 163
Rígsþula 44–5, 45 n. 111
Rindr 148
Rowll, John 103
Royal Prayerbook 71–2, 73, 94, 96, 175
Russian Empire 167
sæulfen 79, 87
Sámi 49–50, 52, 131; see also Finnar
Sara 93
Sarah 90–1, 92
Satan: see Devil, the
satyrs 51
Saxo Grammaticus: see Gesta Danorum
Scandinavia (academic culture) 167–8
scéatan 100, 103, 112
Scotland (academic culture) 167
scucca 66
scýne 92
seduction 40, 43, 45–7, 84, 90–4, 127,
133–48, 155–6, 163–4, 165–6
seiðkona 130 n. 35, 134–6, 138
seiðr 4, 97, 119–20, 125, 130–2, 134–6,
146–7, 155, 157, 173
semantics (methodologies) 9–14, 17–18,
31–2, 77, 170–2
Semita recta Albertus peribet testimonium 88–9, 153
Serglige Con Culainn 137–40, 143–4, 152,
153, 156, 162, 166
Sexaetates mundi 70 n. 78
Sizelmina throst 125 n. 24, 132
side: see Æss side
siden 4, 97, 119, 157; see also elfsid
sidi 119, 147
síðsa 97, 119, 120, 155, 173
Sigdrifumál 37, 44, 153
Sigrún 163
Sigurdarkvida 147–8
Sigurdarkvida in skamma 44 n. 106
Sigvatr Þorðarson 30–1
skaldic verse 15, 28–34
Skáldskaparmál 23, 24, 26, 27, 29, 46 n. 117
Skern stone 2, 147
Skirnir 38, 148, 156
Skirnismál 35, 37, 38, 148, 148
smiths 32–4, 113–15, 159
Snorra Edda 22, 23–6, 30 n. 44, 36, 38, 46
n. 117, 48, 50–1, 90
Snorri Sturluson: see Snorra Edda, Gylfaginning, Ynglinga saga
Sögubrot af fornkonungum 27, 50, 89
solanum dulcamara 155
South English Legendary 75, 88, 89, 141–4,
156, 162, 166
space 46, 47–53
spinning 43
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

Stentoften stone  147
stice  1 n. 3, 110, 112
strige 85, 86, 87
succuba  10
Summe sende ylues  103–4, 179
supernatural (analytical category) 11–12, 170
Svartálfaheimr  24
svartálfr  24

Tale of Sir Thopas  75, 89
Thesaurus of Old English  9–11, 77
Thomas of Erceldoune  153
Thuon 66, 73
Tīw  65; see also tīvar
Valkyrie: see valkyrja, wælcyrige
valkyrja 22, 40, 133–4, 135 n. 49
vanr 6, 26, 27, 29, 35–7, 45, 55, 132, 155
Velents þáttr: see Þiðreks saga af Bern
Vellekla 29
Vernon Manuscript  107
Vindálf  38
Virgil 84; see also Aeneid, Georgics
visi 40–1
Vita sancti Antonii 85, 165
Vita sancti Guthlacii  165
vekeche  179
Vǫlundarkviða 33, 39–47, 50, 51–2, 70, 92, 117, 144, 145, 146 n. 86, 157, 163
Vǫlundr  16, 33, 39–47, 51–2, 55, 70, 136 n. 52, 144, 157, 175
white neck of 44–5, 55, 157
Vǫluspá 23, 25 n. 23, 33, 38, 44, 153
volva  147, 153
vowel-length  5–6

Wade 103–4, 179
wælcyrige  77, 86, 111, 162
væterelfþæl 104, 106–8, 109, 112
væterelfen  79, 106
Waldere 46 n. 118
wanseoc 29 n. 31
warrior women 162–3, 164
Wars of Alexander 89, 90
weak nouns (growth of) 42, 80, 87–8, 179 n. 13, 180
weaving 34, 43
Wee Wee Man, the  153
Weladan 16, 41, 113
wicce  86
Wife of Bath’s Tale  75, 146, 160
wild men 51–2
witchcraft 103, 137 n. 53, 152–3, 170; see also bargrûne, Cwodie, Issobel, hægtesse, Man, Andro, striga, seiðkona, wælcyrige, wicce, weaving
witchcraft trials  114–15, 116, 146, 152–3, 162, 168, 173
Witches’ Sabbath  160
Wōden 65, 73; see also Óðinn
women, Anglo-Saxon 158, 162, 164–5
woody nightshade 155
world-view  8–9, 114–15, 117
wudumæ: see mære
wudumæsa 10
Wyntoun, Andrew: see Original Chronicle
wyrm  61
ylfig 5, 123, 149–51, 153, 156
Ylfing dene 64, 65
Ynglinga saga 23, 26–7, 36, 39 n. 81, 132, 134–7, 138–9, 144–5, 147
Ynglingatal 26–7, 28, 30 n. 44, 135–6, 144 n. 79
Yoniec 148

zuweg  33
Þiðreks saga af Bern 39, 40, 46
Þjóðólfr ór Hvini 26, 28; see also Ynglingatal
Þórr  30, 37, 45, 58 n. 14
Þrymskviða  45
þurs  29, 47, 61, 133–4
þyrs  61
Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

MATTERS OF BELIEF, HEALTH, GENDER AND IDENTITY

ANGLO-SAXON ELVES

(a)elfe

are one of the best attested non-Christian beliefs in early medieval Europe. Current interpretations of the evidence, however, derive directly from outdated nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholarship. Integrating linguistic and textual approaches into an anthropologically-inspired framework, this book reassesses the full range of evidence relating to elves. With a new degree of reliability, it traces continuities and changes in medieval non-Christian beliefs, from pre-conversion times to the eleventh century and beyond, and uses comparative material from medieval Ireland and Scandinavia to argue for a dynamic relationship between beliefs and society. In particular, it interprets the cultural significance of elves as a cause of illness in medical texts, and provides new insights into the much-discussed Scandinavian magic of seiðr. Elf-beliefs, moreover, were connected with Anglo-Saxon constructions of sex and gender, and their changing nature provides a rare insight into a fascinating area of early medieval European culture.

ALARIC HALL

is a fellow of the Helsinki

Collegium for Advanced Studies.

BOYDELL & BREWER

P O Box 9, Woodbridge IP12 3DF (GB) and
668 Mt Hope Ave, Rochester NY 14620-2731 (US)

Also available

Dying and Death in Later Anglo-Saxon England

VICTORIA THOMPSON

Filled with evocative details, unexpected sources, and fresh insights... makes substantial contributions to Anglo-Saxon studies, medieval history, and the interdisciplinary investigation of death and dying. AMERICAN HISTORICAL REVIEW

Pre-Conquest attitudes towards the dying and the dead have major implications for every aspect of culture, society and religion of the Anglo-Saxon period, but death-bed and funerary practices have been comparatively neglected by historical scholarship. Dr Thompson examines such practices in the context of confessional and penitential literature, wills, poetry, chronicles and homilies, to show that complex and ambiguous ideas about death were current at all levels of Anglo-Saxon society; her study also takes in grave monuments.

Feasting the Dead

Food and Drink in Anglo-Saxon Burial Rituals

CHRISTINA LEE

Anglo-Saxons were frequently buried with material artefacts, ranging from pots to clothing to jewellery, and also with items of food, while the funeral ritual itself was frequently marked by feasting, sometimes at the graveside. The book examines the place of food and feasting in funerary rituals from the earliest period to the eleventh century, drawing on a wide range of sources, from archaeological evidence to the existing texts. It looks in particular at representations of funerary feasting and how they shed light on the relationship between the living and the dead.

www.boydell.co.uk
www.boydellandbrewer.com