

Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

MATTERS OF BELIEF, HEALTH, GENDER
AND IDENTITY



Alaric Hall

Anglo-Saxon Studies 8

ELVES IN ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

Matters of Belief, Health,
Gender and Identity

Anglo-Saxon Studies

ISSN 1475–2468

General Editors

John Hines

Catherine Cubitt

Volume 1: The Dramatic Liturgy of Anglo-Saxon England

M. Bradford Bedingfield

Volume 2: The Art of the Anglo-Saxon Goldsmith: Fine Metalwork
in Anglo-Saxon England: its Practice and Practitioners

Elizabeth Coatsworth and Michael Pinder

Volume 3: The Ruler Portraits of Anglo-Saxon England

Catherine E. Karkov

Volume 4: Dying and Death in Later Anglo-Saxon England

Victoria Thompson

Volume 5: Landscapes of Monastic Foundation:

The Establishment of Religious Houses in East Anglia, c. 650–1200

Tim Pestell

Volume 6: Pastoral Care in Late Anglo-Saxon England

Edited by Francesca Tinti

Volume 7: Episcopal Culture in Late Anglo-Saxon England

Mary Frances Giandrea

‘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

© Alaric Hall 2007

All Rights Reserved. Except as permitted under current legislation no part of this work may be photocopied, stored in a retrieval system, published, performed in public, adapted, broadcast, transmitted, recorded or reproduced in any form or by any means, without the prior permission of the copyright owner

The right of Alaric Hall to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

First published 2007
The Boydell Press, Woodbridge

ISBN 1 84383 294 1
ISBN 978 1 84383 294 2

The Boydell Press is an imprint of Boydell & Brewer Ltd
PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3DF, UK
and of Boydell & Brewer Inc.
668 Mt Hope Avenue, Rochester, NY 14620, USA

website: www.boydellandbrewer.com

A catalogue record of this publication is available
from the British Library

This publication is printed on acid-free paper

Typeset by Word and Page, Chester

Printed in Great Britain by
Antony Rowe Ltd, Chippenham, Wiltshire

To my parents, Ann and Henry Hall

Contents

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

Figures

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

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. Depressing 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

<i>AHDWB</i>	<i>Althochdeutsches Wörterbuch</i>
<i>BL</i>	<i>British Library</i>
<i>DOE</i>	<i>Dictionary of Old English</i>
<i>DONP</i>	<i>A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose / Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog</i>
<i>DOST</i>	<i>Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue</i>
<i>MED</i>	<i>Middle English Dictionary</i>
<i>OED</i>	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>

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 *Lacnunga* ('remedies').² One wonders whether, having reproduced the conventional prose direction 'Wið færstice feferfuige 7 sēo rēade netele ðe þurh ærn inwyxð 7 wegbrāde wyll in būteran' ('For a violent, stabbing pain: feverfew and the "red nettle" [*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

¹ See A. N. Doane (ed.), *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts in Microfiche Facsimile: Volume 1*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 136 (Binghamton, NY: Medieval & Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1994), 26–36 [no. 265]; Edward Pettit (ed.), *Anglo-Saxon Remedies, Charms, and Prayers from British Library MS Harley 585: 'The Lacnunga'*, Mellen Critical Editions and Translations, 6a–b, 2 vols (Lewiston, NY: The Edward Mellen Press, 2001), pp. 134–5, 146–9; N. R. Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), 305–6 [no. 231].

² Oswald Cockayne (ed.), *Leechdoms, Wortcunning and Starcraft of Early England*, The Rolls Series, 35, 3 vols (London: Longman et al., 1864–6), III 2–80.

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. *Færstice* 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 *fær-* 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 *sice*, 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

Hlūde wæran hȳ lā hlūde ðā hȳ ofer þone hlǣw ridan
wæran ānmōde ðā hȳ ofer land ridan
scyld ðū ðē nū þū ðȳsne nīð genesan mōte
ūt lȳtel spere gif hēr inne sīe
stōd under linde under lēohtum scylde
þær ðā mihtigan wīf hyra mægen beræddon
7 hȳ gyllende gāras sændan
ic him oðerne eft wille sændan
flēogende flāne forane tōgēanes
ūt lȳtel spere gif hit hēr inne sȳ ·
sæt smið slōh seax
lȳtel īserna wund swīðe
ūt lȳtel spere gif hēr inne sȳ
syx smiðas sǣtan wælspera worhtan
ūt spere næs in spere
gif hēr inne sȳ īsenes dǣl
hægtessan geweorc hit sceal gemyltan
gif ðū wære on fell scoten oððe wære on flǣsc scoten
oððe wære on blōd scoten
oððe wære on lið scoten nǣfre ne sȳ ðīn lif ātǣsed
gif hit wære ēsa gescot oððe hit wære ylfa gescot
oððe hit wære hægtessan gescot nū ic wille ðīn helpan
þis ðē tō bōte ēsa gescotes ðis ðē tō bōte ylfa gescotes
ðis ðē tō bōte hægtessan gescotes ic ðīn wille helpan
flēo [MS fled] þær on fyrghenhǣfde
hāl westū helpe ðīn drihten
nim þonne þæt seax ādō on wǣtan ·

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. It⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷ Out, little spear,

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, lȳtel 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 *Aflakviða*, 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.hȳ.gyllende | garas sændan' – suggests 'and they, shrieking, sent spears' (cf. p. 143). This is no less plausible syntactically.

⁷ More literally '[a] small [one] of swords', reading *īserna* as a partitive genitive. On the difficulties here see Pettit, *Anglo-Saxon Remedies*, II 243–5. For *īsern* (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 *ēse*⁹ or it was the *gescot* of *ælf*e or it was the *gescot* of *hægtessan*, now I want to (?will) help you. This for you as a remedy for the *gescot* of *ēse*; this for you as a remedy for the *gescot* of *ælf*e, 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 *ælf*e, 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 *ælf*e? What were *gescotu*, and why and how did *ælf*e cause them? What were the *ēse* 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. *Ælf*e 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 *ælf*e 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 *ēsa*; 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), xcvi.

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.

¹¹ For *ælf*e's canonicity see, for example, Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 725; Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 65; Valerie Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 87, 115, 165; Cameron, *Anglo-Saxon Medicine*, 10, 141–2; Karen Louise Jolly, *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf-Charms in Context* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

establish what *ælf* 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 *ælf* had meaning. The subsequent chapters are structured by theme: our earliest evidence for *ælf*, some of it pre-textual (chapter 2); a cluster of evidence for *ælf*'s combined male gender and effeminate character (chapter 3); the bulk of our Old English medical texts, among them *Wid 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 *ælf*, 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 *ælf* 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*-, and so excluded from the main study, are assessed in the second.

As my usage above suggests, the Anglian form *ælf* 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 **ælf* are probably only attested in later reflexes, but the inconsistency has caused confusion.¹² Therefore, I use *ælf* 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 **ælfīg*, 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 *ylfīg* 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.¹³ 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 *ōs* (broadly, ‘pagan god’), which has appeared already in the genitive plural form *ēsa* in *Wið færstice* and recurs frequently in this study, is not attested in the nominative plural. I have adopted *ēse* 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.¹⁴ 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).¹⁵ 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 *ēa* versus shorter *eā*); but it is important to be clear that *ēa* in Old English corresponds

DOE, s.v. *ælf*, is similar. Perhaps in consequence, Peter R. Kitson, ‘How Anglo-Saxon Personal Names Work’, *Nomina*, 25 (2002), 91–131, at 105 and n. 25, seems to have inferred a West Saxon singular **ealf* alongside the plural *ylfe*, and alongside the Anglian singular *ælf* a plural **elfe*.

¹³ Adolf Noreen, *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), §124.3. Cf. Old English *healf*, *wulf*, later Old Icelandic *hálfr*, *úlfr*.

¹⁴ R. D. Fulk, *A History of Old English Meter* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), esp. 153–68.

¹⁵ Richard M. Hogg, *A Grammar of Old English, Volume 1: Phonology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), §2.29.

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.¹⁶ 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 *ælf*. 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.¹⁷

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”.’¹⁸ Introduced already into Middle English in 1929 by Müller’s

¹⁶ E. Prokosch, *A Comparative Germanic Grammar* (Philadelphia: Linguistic Society of America, 1939).

¹⁷ Charles Singer, ‘Early English Magic and Medicine’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 9 (1919–20), 341–74, at 357; cf. Grattan and Singer, *Anglo-Saxon Magic*, esp. 52–62.

¹⁸ Wilfrid Bonser, *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), 158; cf. ‘Magical Practices against Elves’, *Folk-lore*, 37 (1926), 350–63; ‘Survivals of Paganism in Anglo-Saxon England’, *Transactions of the Birmingham Archaeological Society*, 56 (1939), 37–70.

emendation of *vluekecche* ('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 *elfscot* (the word is actually first attested in Scots, in the sixteenth century, in the sense 'sharp pain caused by *elvis*').¹⁹ 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.²⁰

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"'.²¹

I tackle this tradition in detail in chapter 4. What is important here is the demonstration that current assessments of *ælfes*' 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.²²

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.²³ 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'.²⁴ However, since the 1960s

¹⁹ G. Müller (ed.), *Aus mittlenglischen Medizintexten: Die Prosarezepte des stockholmer Miszellen Kodex X.90*, Kölner anglistische Arbeiten, 10 (Cologne: Kölner anglistische Arbeiten, 1929), 89; C. Lecouteux, 'Mara-ephialtes-incubus: Le couchemar chez les peuples germaniques', *Études germaniques*, 42 (1987), 1–24, at 17–19; Michael Swanton, 'Die altenglische Judith: Weiblicher Held oder frauliche Heldin', in *Heldensage und Heldendichtung im Germanischen*, ed. Heinrich Beck, Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde, 2 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1988), pp. 289–304, at 297; Alaric Hall, 'Getting Shot of Elves: Healing, Witchcraft and Fairies in the Scottish Witchcraft Trials', *Folklore*, 116 (2005), 19–36, at 23–4 (quoted below, p. 103); preprint available at <<http://www.alarichall.org.uk>>.

²⁰ *Popular Religion*, 134; cf. Karen Louise Jolly, 'Elves in the Psalms? The Experience of Evil from a Cosmic Perspective', in *The Devil, Heresy and Witchcraft in the Middle Ages: Essays in Honor of Jeffrey B. Russell*, ed. Alberto Ferreiro, Cultures, Beliefs and Traditions, 6 (Leiden: Brill, 1998), pp. 19–44, at 20, 26.

²¹ *Anglo-Saxon Remedies*, 1 xxxiii.

²² Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), 30.

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

scholars have increasingly revealed the deep Latin learning underlying many Anglo-Saxon medical texts.²⁵ 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'.²⁶ As Glosecki has pointed out, however, Cameron's work is for all its merits a case-study in medical materialism.²⁷ Thus Cameron, despite his lip-service to the psychological importance of ritual, found himself struggling to divide remedies into 'rational' and 'amuletic' categories.²⁸ 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'.²⁹ 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.³⁰ 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.³¹ Facing the approaches to healing which differ between our societies' and Anglo-Saxons' – of which *ælf*e are symptomatic – offers a different way into producing a more comprehensive and plausible assessment of Anglo-Saxon healing. *Ælf*e 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.³² By *world-view* I mean the sum of the conceptual

Van Arsdall, *Medieval Herbal Remedies: The Old English Herbarium and Anglo-Saxon Medicine* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 35–54.

²⁵ See Jolly, *Popular Religion*, 99–102.

²⁶ Cameron, *Anglo-Saxon Medicine*, 117. Cf. Peter Dendle, 'Lupines, Manganese, and Devil-Sickness: An Anglo-Saxon Medical Response to Epilepsy', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 75 (2001), 91–101.

²⁷ Stephen O. Glosecki, "'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, at 92–3.

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.

³⁰ Cf. Aaron Gurevich, *Historical Anthropology of the Middle Ages*, ed. Jana Howlett (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), 6–9.

³¹ Barbara Brennessel, Michael D. C. Drout and Robyn Gravel, 'A Reassessment of the Efficacy of Anglo-Saxon Medicine', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 34 (2005), 183–95.

³² Peter Burke, 'Strengths and Weaknesses of the History of Mentalities', in *Varieties of Cultural History* (Cambridge: Polity, 1997), pp. 162–82 (rev. from *History of European Ideas*, 7 (1986),

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, *ælfes* were a 'social reality'.³³ 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 *ælfes*, and this collective belief made *ælfes* a social reality. Social realities are not mere fantasies: individuals cannot wish them away, any more than Beowulf could the dragon; *ælfes* 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.³⁴ The insider's perspective on *ælfes* can no longer be experienced, and I must simply admit my disbelief in *ælfes*' objective reality, while accepting that Anglo-Saxons' experiences could have been construed as experiences of *ælfes*. In this perspective, since there was no objective reality forcing societies to recognise the existence of *ælfes* – only cultural and social impulses – the study of *ælfes* is potentially especially illuminating for Anglo-Saxon culture and society: *ælfes* 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*.

439–51), at 169.

³³ For the seminal discussion see Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Allen Lane, 1967); also John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (London: Allen Lane, 1995).

³⁴ Edith Turner, 'The Reality of Spirits', in *Shamanism: A Reader*, ed. Graham Harvey (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 145–52 (first publ. *ReVision*, 15 (1992), 28–32).

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^o
..Elf, goblin, etc.: *ælf(en)*, *pūca^s*, *pūcel^os*
..Of elves: *ælfisc^os*
..Mountain elf: *beorgælfen^o*, *dūnælf(en)*, *muntælfen^os*
..Field elf: *feldælfen^s*, *landælf^os*
..Wood elf: *wuduælfen^s*, *wudumær^s*, *wuduwāsa^s*
..Water elf: *sāælfen^s*, *wæterælfen^s*
..Nightmare caused by elf: *ælfād^lo*, *ælfsideⁿ*
..An incubus: *ælf*, *mera*
..A succubus: *lēof³⁶*

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 *ælf*e 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 *ælf*, 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.³⁹ 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

³⁵ Jane Roberts 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), 1 xvi–xx (cf. <<http://libra.englant.arts.gla.ac.uk/oethesaurus/>>, accessed 17 May 2006).

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"', *Neophilologist*, (forthcoming), §3. When *feldælfen* was coined, *feld* probably still meant 'open, unobstructed land' (see Margaret Gelling and Ann Cole, *The Landscape of Place-Names* (Stamford: Tyas, 2000), 269–74; for the dating of the text see p. 79 below). The interpretation of *ælfisc*, *ælfād^l* and *ælfsideⁿ* also requires revision (see pp. 122–3, 105 and chapter 5).

³⁸ Bosworth and Toller, *Dictionary*, s.vv. *mæra*, *ælf*. Cf. Hall, 'The Evidence for *maran*', §5.

³⁹ Ed. Herbert Dean Meritt, *The Old English Prudentius Glosses at Boulogne-sur-Mer* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959), 41 [no. 395].

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 *ælf* 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

⁴¹ Jennifer Neville, *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England, 27 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 2–3; cf. Neil S. Price, *The Viking Way: Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*, Aun, 31 (Uppsala: Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, 2002), 244, on Scandinavia.

⁴² *Representations*, esp. 2–3, 31–5, 70–4.

⁴³ For example, J. R. R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories', in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: Allen & Unwin, 1983), pp. 109–61 (first publ. in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* (Oxford, 1947)), at 110; C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Words*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 64–8; Ármann Jakobsson, 'History of the Trolls? *Bárðar saga* as an Historical Narrative', *Saga-Book of the Viking Society*, 25 (1998), 53–71, at 54–5; Neville, *Representations*, 71–3 *et passim*.

lexicon.⁴⁴ Despite Neville's claims, Old English had a substantial lexicon of the otherworldly, prominently involving the prefix *el-* 'foreign, strange; from elsewhere'.⁴⁵ In practice, Neville herself used the term *supernatural*, particularly in discussing *Beowulf*.⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸ 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.⁴⁹

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 *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, *Deutsche Mythologie*.⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹ 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

⁴⁴ 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.

⁴⁵ *DOE*, s.v. *el-*.

⁴⁶ For example, *Representations*, 73, 118.

⁴⁷ On Anglo-Saxons see Neville, *Representations*, 170–7; for an explicit Anglo-Saxonist Lewis, *Studies*, 64–8.

⁴⁸ Especially *Representations*, 107–9.

⁴⁹ There is also reason to think that a concept of the supernatural as I have defined it – or the 'counter-intuitive' as researchers in the emergent cognitive science of religion have termed it – is a natural consequence of human cognitive processes, as universal as language; but these claims are still at an emergent stage. See for example Justin L. Barrett, 'Exploring the Natural Foundations of Religion', *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 4 (2000), 29–34; Pascal Boyer, 'Religious Thought and Behaviour as By-products of Brain Function', *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 7 (2003), 119–24.

⁵⁰ Jacob Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, trans. James Steven Stallybrass, 4 vols (London: Bell, 1882–8) (first publ. *Deutsche Mythologie*, 4th edn, 3 vols (Berlin: Meyer, 1875–8)).

⁵¹ See John Lyons, *Semantics*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 1 245–61.