Elves in Anglo-Saxon England

MATTERS OF BELIEF, HEALTH, GENDER AND IDENTITY

Alaric Hall

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To my parents, Ann and Henry Hall

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

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

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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 færstice feferfuige ⁊ sēo rēade netele ðe 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]

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 *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 pururem* 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.

Hlūde wǣran hȳ lā hlūde ðā hȳ ofer þone hlǣw ridan
wǣran ānmōde ðā hȳ ofer land ridan
scyld ðū ðē nū þū ðysne nīð genesan mōte
ūt lȳtel spere gif hēr inne sīe
stōd under linde under lēohtum scylde
þǣr ðā mihtigan wīf hyra mægen berǣddon
⁊ hȳ gyllende gāras sændan
ic him ōðerne 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 wǣre on fell scoten oððe wǣre on flǣsc scoten
oððe wǣre on blōd scoten
oððe wǣre on lið scoten nǣfre ne sȳ ðīn līf ātǣsed
gif hit wǣre ēsa gescot oððe hit wǣre ylfa gescot
oððe hit wǣre 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*] þǣr on fyrgenhǣfde
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. It[5] 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 *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 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.

> 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 *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 *ēse*; 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 fǣrstice* – 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 fǣrstice*, 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 *ēse* and *hægtessan* with which they are associated and why were they grouped together? Moreover, although unique in many respects, *Wið fǣrstice* 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. *Ælfe* 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 síde*.[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 *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), 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.

11 For *ælfe*'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 *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 fӕrstice*, 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 *sīden*, 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-*, 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 **ælfe* are probably only attested in later reflexes, but the inconsistency has caused confusion.[12] 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.[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 *ea*); 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.