

ELVES ON THE BRAIN:
CHAUCER, OLD ENGLISH, AND *ELVISH*

Abstract: Because Chaucer, through the mouthpiece of Harry Bailey, described himself as *elvish* in line 703 of the prologue to *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, the precise meanings of the Middle English word *elvish* have attracted a fair amount of commentary. Besides a reassessment of previous work by J. A. Burrow in 1995, the word has recently enjoyed a thorough consideration by Richard Firth Green. Green emphasised that to understand the reference in the prologue to *Sir Thopas*, we must also consider the semantics of *elvish* elsewhere in Chaucer's work, in lines 751 and 842 of *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*. He argued further that Chaucer's usage of *elvish* is liable to have drawn connotations from the meanings of its root *elf* – and ably elucidated these. However, some useful evidence for the meanings of *elvish* has been passed over. One revealing Middle English attestation remains to be adduced. Moreover, Old English attests once to *elvish*'s etymon *ælfisc*, as well as to another adjectival derivative of the *elf*-word, *ylfig*. The evidence of these Old English words is more complex, but also more revealing, than has been realised. Taken together, this new evidence affords new perspectives on the history of *elvish*, on what it may have meant to Chaucer, and on the significance of elves in medieval English-speaking cultures. In particular, while Chaucer doubtless kept elves in mind as he used *elvish*, in ways which Green's research illuminates, the word seems certainly in Old and Middle English to have had developed senses not strictly related to its literal meaning, along the lines of 'delusory', while the apparent sense of *elvish* in the prologue to *Sir Thopas*, 'abstracted', finds parallels in the Old English *ylfig*.

OLD ENGLISH *ÆLFISC*, AND WORLDLY GLORY

The more straightforward of our attestations of *elvish* in Chaucer's work – if only because they are of those of lesser critical moment – occur *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*. Here, the protagonist's long and lamenting description of the deceptions which he and other alchemists perpetrate mentions "Oure eluysse craft", 'our *elvish* art', and "this eluysse nyce loore", 'this *elvish*,

foolish learning'.¹ Green stated that "for some reason modern editors have been uncomfortable with the Canon's Yeoman's unequivocal statement that the alchemist's expertise is an elvish one. They evidently don't want to believe that he says what he quite patently does say". Green's preferred interpretation was 'elvish, having the character of elves'.² He might have looked for support to *elvish's* Middle High German counterpart (and possible cognate) *elbisch*, normally glossed as *alpartig* 'elf-like'.³ Had it been edited a few years earlier, he might also have adverted to a sixty-four-line English alchemical poem entitled *Semita Recta Albertus peribet testimonium*, recently edited in this journal by Peter Grund.⁴ First attested in a fifteenth-century manuscript, and presumed to be a fifteenth-century composition, this poem frames its alchemical recipe with a meeting between the thirteenth-century philosopher Albertus Magnus and one "Elchyzel fayre & fre / þe queen of elphys lond"; Elchyzel tells Albertus how to turn mercury into silver and silver into gold.⁵ Assuming (with Grund) that the composer of the *Semita Recta* wished his text to be taken seriously, we may infer that the Queen of the Elves was seen as the kind of person who might plausibly bestow alchemical knowledge.⁶ If ideas similar to those deployed in this poem were already available to Chaucer, then he might justly have called alchemy an *eluysshe craft*.

However, *elvish* need not have meant the same as *elbisch*, while the *Semita Recta* exists in only two manuscripts, and has no close parallels besides, putatively, the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* in its identification of elves as sources of specifically alchemical wisdom. Green's own analyses imply rather that Chaucer's usage in *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale* is to be understood in a sense along the lines

¹ Lines 751, 842, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987) 272, 274.

² Richard Firth Green, "Changing Chaucer", *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 25 (2003): 27–52 at 28–29.

³ Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, new ed. (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1965–) s. v. *ELBE*; Matthias Lexer, *Mittelhochdeutsches Handwörterbuch* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1869–76) s. v. *elbisch*.

⁴ Peter Grund, "Albertus Magnus and the Queen of the Elves: A 15th-Century English Verse Dialogue on Alchemy", *Anglia* 122 (2004): 640–62.

⁵ Quoting lines 11–12; Grund 2004, 657.

⁶ Cf. Grund 2004, 647–48.

of ‘delusory’.⁷ This argument is consolidated by our attestation of the Old English *ælfisc*: this suggests that a developed meaning of *elvish* along the lines of ‘delusory’ existed several centuries before Chaucer. This point can in turn be supported with Middle English evidence.

Direct evidence for Old English *ælfisc* comes only from a late-twelfth-century section of a German manuscript, Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 83. 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 somnari tractum ab alucitas quos nos conopes dicimus, sicut Petronius Arbiter ait: “Nam centum uernali me alucitae molestabant”.⁸

Alucinare [‘to wander in mind, speak while in such a state’]⁹ is said [when] foolish things are (day)dreamt. Derived from *alucitae* [attested only in this passage, and assumed to have the meaning ‘gnats, mosquitos’ implied here], which we call *conopes* [i. e. *κόνωπες* ‘gnats’]. Thus Petronius Arbiter affirms: “for a hundred *alucitae* would bother me in the spring”.

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

alucinare dicitur uana somniare. tractum ab alucitis quos cenopos dicimus. sicut petronius arbiter vernalia mā inquit mā lucite molestabant. Hos Galli Eluesce wehte uocant.¹⁰

Alucinare is said [i. e. means] ‘to (day)dream foolish things’. Derived from *alucitae*, which we call *cenopos* [not a real word]. Thus Petronius Arbiter said “vernal things ... [text corrupt] ... would bother”. The *Galli* call these [the *cenopos*] *Eluesce wehte* [*ælfisc* beings].

Despite the provenance of the manuscript, there is no doubt that the term “Eluesce wehte” is Old English – apparently a late Kentish form.¹¹ The provenance of the gloss is unknown, but it surely

⁷ Green 2003, esp. 51–52.

⁸ *Fabii Planciadis Fulgentii V. C. opera*, ed. Rudolf Helm (Leipzig: Teubner, 1898).

⁹ An apparently unique variant of *alucinor*, but doubtless of the same meaning.

¹⁰ *Die althochdeutschen Glossen*, ed. Elias von Steinmeyer and Eduard Sievers, 5 vols (Berlin: Weidmann, 1879–1922) 2: 162.

¹¹ The development of *wehte* would be **wibti-* > **wiohti-* > **weoht-* > *weht-*: Richard M. Hogg, *A Grammar of Old English, Volume 1: Phono-*

shows textual transmission from Anglo-Saxon England, presumably of a glossed copy of the *Expositio* – though we admittedly have no such manuscript.¹² The attribution of the term to *Galli* has caused puzzlement, since the most obvious meaning of *Galli*, ‘Gauls’, makes little sense: Gauls ought not to be speaking Old English. Schlutter rather desperately suggested corruption of * <āgli> ‘Angles’.¹³ Perhaps we should understand *Galli* rather as the homophone meaning ‘emasculated priests of Cybele’.¹⁴ An association of *eluesce wehte* with ecstatic pagan priests is semantically appropriate, and can plausibly be understood as a distancing strategy, whereby the glossator attributed the term *eluesce wehte* to pagan priests because although it was a useful gloss, he himself was cautious of being seen to endorse it.

Our text, then, declares *conopes* also to be called *eluesce wehte*. Accordingly, Schlutter took *eluesce wehte* “als altenglische benennnung [sic] für schnaken (κώνωπες)” – ‘as an Old English term for gnats (κώνωπες)’ – and was tacitly followed by the *Dictionary of Old English*, which gave “*seo ælfisce wiht* ‘the elvish creature’ glossing *conops* ‘gnat’ ”.¹⁵ This assumes, however, that

logy (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) §§ 5.24, 5.160, 5.210–11. The development of *eluesce* would be **alβi-* > **ealβi-* > **ealβ* > **elβ* > *elf-* (Hogg 1992, §§ 5.10–15, 5.20, 5.82, 6.18, 7.55).

¹² Helmut Gneuss, *Handlist of Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts: A List of Manuscripts and Manuscript Fragments Written or Owned in England up to 1100*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 241 (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2001) does not mention one.

¹³ O. B. Schlutter, review of John van Zandt Cortelyou, *Die altenglischen Namen der Insekten, Spinnen- und Krustentiere*, Anglistische Forschungen 19 (Heidelberg: Winter, 1906), in *Englische Studien* 38 (1907): 297–305 at 300.

¹⁴ *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1968–82) s. v. *Gallus*⁴. Cf. the Anglo-Saxon gloss among the Prudentius glosses in Boulogne-sur-Mer, Bibliothèque Municipale, MS 189, “gallus i, spado belisnud”, ‘*Gallus: i. e. a eunuch, castrated*’: *The Old English Prudentius Glosses at Boulogne-sur-Mer*, ed. Herbert Dean Meritt (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1959) 42 [no. 398]. The attestation in Junius 83 can if this is correct be added to the *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* (London: Oxford UP, 1975–) s. v. 4 *Gallus*.

¹⁵ *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–) s. v. *ælfisc*.

the glossator who wrote *eluesce wehte* understood *conopes* as ‘gnats’ – which, even disregarding the corruption in Junius 83 to *cenopos*, is optimistic. Since *alucita* is unique to this passage, a glossator would have had no help from that; he may have known material like the Corpus Glossary entry “Conopeum . rete muscarum”, ‘mosquito net: flies’ net’, but it is unlikely that this would have led him to divine the meaning of *conops*.¹⁶ More instructive is the response to Fulgentius’s text in the eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon Harley Glossary: “Conopes .i. alucinaria”, ‘*conopes*, i.e. hallucinations’, with “uana somnaria”, ‘foolish (day)dreams’, interlinearly above.¹⁷ This identifies *conops*, not *alucita*, as the word requiring a gloss, and takes it to denote delusions and dreams rather than mosquitos. The gloss *eluesce wehte* probably interprets *conops* in the same way, thus meaning something like ‘delusions’.

It seems clear, then, that *eluesce wehte* somehow denotes delusions. What is less clear is precisely how this usage relates to the lexical meanings of the component words. It is hard to escape the inference that *wehte* has its usual meaning of ‘beings’, but it need be no cause for surprise to find delusions or hallucinations denoted by this term. Anglo-Saxons did not share our distinctions between visions and corporeal beings, as numerous medieval demonic and angelic visions suggest. One pertinent example is an Old English remedy *Wið dweorg* (*dweorg* apparently being a polysemous word denoting both fevers and a class of diminutive monstrous beings), which includes a charm describing a “wiht”

¹⁶ *The Corpus Glossary*, ed. W.M. Lindsay (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1921) 42 [C531]; cf. *The Épinal, Erfurt, Werden, and Corpus Glossaries: Épinal Bibliothèque Municipale 72 (2), Erfurt Wissenschaftliche Bibliothek Amplonianus 2° 42, Düsseldorf Universitätsbibliothek Fragm. K 19: Z 9/1, Munich Bayerische Staatsbibliothek Cgm. 187 III (e.4), Cambridge Corpus Christi College 144*, ed. Bernhard Bischoff, Mildred Budny, Geoffrey Harlow, M. B. Parkes and J. D. Pheifer, *Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile 22* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1988) fol. 17v.

¹⁷ *The Harley Latin-Old English Glossary Edited from British Museum MS Harley 3376*, ed. Robert T. Oliphant, *Janua Linguarum, Series Practica 20* (The Hague: Mouton, 1966) 109 [C1979]; collated with the manuscript, British Library, Harley 3376, fol. 45r. *Alucinaria* and *somnaria* seem to be neologisms, but are transparent secondary formations on *alucinare* and *somniare*.

treating the sufferer of the fever as its “hæncgest”, ‘horse’.¹⁸ *Eluesce* must modify the meaning of *wehte* in some way to make it appropriate as a gloss meaning ‘delusions’ rather than ‘beings’, and this suggests in turn that *ælfisc* could mean something along the lines of ‘delusory’.

The parameters for the semantics of Old English *ælfisc* are suggested by its suffix *-isc*, which “forms denominal adjectives ... with the meaning ‘being like, having the character of’, e.g. *ceorlisc* ‘of a churl, common’, *cildisc* ‘childish’, *mennisc* ‘human’. The suffix is also frequently used for the derivation of ethnic adjectives, e.g. *denisc* ‘Danish’”.¹⁹ This suggests that *ælfisc* might, as the *Dictionary of Old English* (s.v.) inferred, mean “having the qualities thought to pertain to elves”. Alternatively, since I have shown elsewhere that in Old English the plural *ælfe*, ‘elves’, was an ethnonym, it is not unlikely in principle that it could have meant ‘having to do with the people of the Elves’ just as *denisc* meant ‘having to do with the people of the Danes’.²⁰ There is, however, no clear-cut example of an ethnic sense of *elvish* in medieval English.²¹ Moreover, the evidence of our Old English med-

¹⁸ Edited in J. H. G. Grattan and Charles Singer, *Anglo-Saxon Magic and Medicine Illustrated Specially from the Semi-Pagan Text “Lacnunga”*, Publications of the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum, New Series 3 (London: Oxford UP, 1952) 160–62.

¹⁹ Dieter Kastovsky, “Semantics and Vocabulary”, *The Cambridge History of the English Language, Volume 1: The Beginnings to 1066*, ed. Richard M. Hogg (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992): 290–408 at 390.

²⁰ Alaric Timothy Peter Hall, “The Meanings of *Elf* and *Elves* in Medieval England” (Unpublished Ph. D. Diss., University of Glasgow, 2004) 57–66.

²¹ The earliest likely example of *elvish* in an ethnic sense is from *Laȝamon’s Brut*, in which Arthur’s mailcoat is made by “on aluisc smið” in the Caligula manuscript, “an haluis smiþ” in the Otho manuscript (*Laȝamon: Brut*, Edited from British Museum MS. Cotton Caligula A. IX and British Museum MS. Cotton Otho C. XIII, ed. G. L. Brook and R. F. Leslie, EETS OS 250, 277, 2 vols (London: Oxford UP, 1963–78) 2: 550–51). But, as François H. M. Le Saux, *Laȝamon’s “Brut”: The Poem and its Sources* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1989) 196–200 and Cyril Edwards, “Laȝamon’s *Elves*”, *Laȝamon: Contexts, Language, and Interpretation*, ed. Rosamund Allen, Lucy Perry and Jane Roberts, King’s College London Medieval Studies 19 (London: King’s College London, Centre for Late Antique and Medieval Studies, 2002) 79–96 at 85–87 have discussed, the syntax of the passage in question is full of ambiguities. Another possible example occurs in the early fifteenth-century Middle English translation of *Gui de Warewic*

ical texts, though challenging, demonstrates clear connections of *ælf*e with the infliction of altered mental states, so the idea that ‘having the character of elves’ should be equated with ‘delusory’ is not unlikely.²² It is also important to appreciate, however, that not all of elves’ characteristics need have been reflected in *elvish*; and nor need the characteristics of elves reflected in *elvish* have been those of all elves. Just as *ceorlisc* did not simply mean ‘like a *ceorl*, of the class of *ceorlas*’, but had specific meanings such as ‘common, rustic, unlearned’, *ælfisc* and its Middle English reflexes may have had more specific senses. Accordingly, the implication of our Old English attestation of *ælfisc* is that at some level *ælfisc* meant ‘delusory’. Its denotation may still, of course, have been ‘having the character of elves’, or even ‘belonging ethnically to the Elves’, but it is evident that if so, connotations along the lines of ‘delusory’ came to the fore reliably enough for a glossator to draw on them in a context where his readers would have little external information for judging the meaning of the gloss. That Chaucer also used *elvish* to mean ‘delusory’, then, would reflect a long-standing usage of the word.

This inference is supported by Middle English evidence – particularly by an attestation of *elvish* which has not been considered hitherto.²³ It occurs in sermon 25 of Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodley 649, which was composed in 1421 × 22 and declares

in Caius College, Cambridge, MS 107. The text says that Guy “girde him with his bronde, / That was made in eluysshlonde” (cf. the independent Auchinleck version, lines 3861–62 of which have the sword “y-made in eluene lond”); *The Romance of Guy of Warwick: The First or 14th-Century Version*, ed. Julius Zupitza, EETS ES 42, 49, 59, 3 vols (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1883–91) 222–23. But the French original has “Puis ad ceinte un espee / Ke faite fu en un isle faee”, ‘Then on his waist a sword / Which was made on an otherworldly island’ (lines 3869–70; *Gui de Warewic: Roman du XIII^e Siècle*, ed. Alfred Ewert, Les classiques français du moyen age 74–75, 2 vols (Paris: Champion, 1932–33) 1: 118), suggesting the sense ‘otherworldly’. See also the later fifteenth-century translation, in Cambridge University Library, MS Ff. 2.38, lines 11 315–19, *The Romance of Guy of Warwick: The Second or 15th-Century Version*, ed. Julius Zupitza, EETS ES 25–6 (London: Trübner, 1875–6) 325–26; cf. lines 12 223–32 in the French; Ewert 1932–33, 2: 167.

²² See below and Hall 2004, 117–31; cf. 132–67.

²³ See prominently *Middle English Dictionary* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1952–2001), accessed from <<http://ets.umdl.umich.edu/m/mec/>>, 4–3–

Non est fiducia nec mundi stabilitas in mundi gloria: mundi honor est a sliper þinge and an elvich; nunc est, nunc non est; hodie homo, cras non homo; hodie dominus, cras a lost man; hodie a dowti werrou, cras defunctus in campo.²⁴

There is neither assurance nor worldly stability in worldly glory: worldly fame is *a treacherous and "elvich" thing*; now it's there, now it isn't; today a person, tomorrow not a person; today the master, tomorrow *a lost man*; today *a mighty warrior*, tomorrow lifeless in the field.

The meanings of *elvish* here are clarified by its partner *sliper* ('deceitful, false, treacherous'): 'false, delusory' is an obvious interpretation, correlating nicely with the Old English evidence. Current handlings of Middle English *elvish* do not clearly accommodate this. The *Middle English Dictionary* offers "(a) Belonging or pertaining to the elves; possessing supernatural skill or powers; (b) mysterious, strange; (c) elf-like, otherworldly".²⁵ But for the sermoniser to have understood the world as *elvish* in any of these senses, he would have needed to be using *elvish* metaphorically. This is not impossible, but in view of the sermon's preference for direct and unambiguous language, it seems unlikely. Although the etymological connection of *elvish* with elves need not have been far from the minds of the people who heard this sermon, I doubt equally that it was at their forefront.

Green argued that editors of *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale* glossing *elvish* with 'strange' or similar terms are guilty of "substituting connotation for denotation".²⁶ But it is hard to see 'having the character of elves' as the denotation of *elvish* in Sermon 25, and on these grounds we might reasonably consider the Canon's Yeoman's alchemy to be "elvish nyce loore" in the same way as the sermoniser's worldly glory was "a sliper þinge and an elvich". Our attestation of Old English *ælfisc* and the sermon suggest that *elvish* had a developed sense along the lines of 'delusory' already

2005 s.v. *elvish*; *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1989), accessed from <<http://dictionary.oed.com>>, 28–10–2004 s.v.; Green 2003.

²⁴ Edited in Roy M. Haines, " 'Our Master Mariner, Our Sovereign Lord': A Contemporary View of Henry V", *Mediaeval Studies* 38 (1976): 85–96 at 92.

²⁵ Cf. *Dictionary of Old English*, s.v. *ælfisc*; *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. *elvish*.

²⁶ Green 2003, 28–29.

in the eleventh century, subsequently throughout the Middle English period, and that Chaucer used it in this sense.

ELUYSSH BY HIS CONTENAUNCE AND YLFIG

‘Delusory’, however, will not serve as a gloss for Chaucer’s better-known usage of *elvish*, Harry Bailey’s claim in line 13 of *The Prologue to Sir Thopas* that Chaucer himself “semeth eluyssh by his contenaunce”, ‘seems from his expression to be *elvish*’.²⁷ Chaucer is not delusory here: rather, Harry portrays him as reserved, to the point of being withdrawn; closer to ‘deluded’ than ‘delusory’, and closer again to ‘reserved, abstracted’. As before, the extent to which we can understand Chaucer’s usage here in the sense of ‘having the character of elves’, as opposed to some developed meaning which did not necessarily denote elves, is not immediately obvious. A long if speculative tradition infers that elves were disinterested in day-to-day human activity, and not only ontologically but also psychologically otherworldly.²⁸ There seems to be no evidence for this, but equally there is none against it. Alternatively, Chaucer’s usage could be understood to reflect the changing meaning of the simplex *elf*: it is attested from the sixteenth century as a term of abuse, implying stupidity (in which sense it seems to be the etymon of *oaf*), while such meanings are attested for *alp* in Middle High German.²⁹ If this was the case by Chaucer’s

²⁷ Ed. Benson 1987, 213.

²⁸ J. A. Burrow, “Elvish Chaucer”, *The Endless Knot: Essays on Old and Middle English in Honor of Marie Borroff*, ed. M. Teresa Tavormina and R. F. Yeager (Cambridge: Brewer, 1995) 105–11 at 106–7.

²⁹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. *elf* n.¹ §§ 2, 3b, 5; *ouphe* § 2; *oaf*; cf. *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue*, s. v. *elf* § 1; Grimm–Grimm 1965–, s. v. *ALP m.* § 2. The likely context for this semantic development is the idea that mentally handicapped children owed their state to one parent being an elf – as when Donegild accuses Constance of being an elf when claiming that Constance’s son is “so horrible a feendly creature” in *The Man of Law’s Tale* (lines 750–56; ed. Benson 1987, 98) – or to their being changelings left by elves, an idea first attested in connection with beings termed *elves* in the fifteenth century, through the use of *elf* as a gloss for *lamia* in the fifteenth-century *Promptorium parvulorum* (*Promptorium Parvulorum sive Clericorum: Lexicon Anglo-Latinum Princeps*,

time, *elvish* might be understood in the *Prologue to Sir Thopas* in the *Middle English Dictionary*'s sense of 'having the character of elves', with implications along the lines of 'dull-witted'. But this is not ideal either, because the semantic development of *elf* on which it is predicated is attested in English so much later.

However, as Burrow emphasised, Chaucer's usage in the prologue to *Sir Thopas* foreshadows a sense attested otherwise in 1530, when Palsgrave's *Lesclarcissement de la langue francoyse* gave, among different usages of the verb *to waxe*, the phrases

I waxe elvysshe, nat easye to be dealt with. *Ie deuiens mal traictable*, conjugate in *je viens*, I come. He waxeth so elvysshe nowe a dayes that I dare nat medell with hym: *il deuient si mal traictable tous les jours que je ne me ose pas mesler avec luy*.³⁰

I grow *elvish*, difficult to have social intercourse with. *Ie deuiens mal traictable* ['I am getting cantankerous'] (conjugate like *je viens*, 'I come'). He grows so *elvish* these days that I do not dare spend time with him: *il deuient si mal traictable tous les jours que je ne me ose pas mesler avec luy* ['he grows so cantankerous day by day that I do not dare spend time with him'].

Here *elvish* clearly means 'antisocial, cantankerous'. This usage seems not to be attested before the *Canterbury Tales*, nor for *elbisch* in German. However, there is an Old English adjective *ylfig*, formed, like *elvish*, on *elf*'s Old English etymon *ælf*.³¹ While there is no way of proving that this has any direct relationship with Chaucer's unusual use of *elvish* in *The Prologue to Sir Thopas*, it too denotes people in a strange state of mind. Although Chaucer's usage of *elvish* is unexpected, then, and appears innovative, it can also be shown that another *elf*-derivation in the history of English has had broadly similar senses. *Ylfig* provides a context for understanding what looks like an innovation in the meanings of *elvish*. I take it to encourage a reconstruction of *el-*

Auctore Fratris Galfrido Grammatico Dicto, ed. Albert Way, Camden Society Publications 25, 54, 89, 3 vols (London: Camden Society, 1843–65) 1: 138). See further Green 2003, 41–45.

³⁰ *L'Éclaircissement de la langue Française par Jean Palsgrave*, ed. F. Génin, Collection de documents inédits sur l'histoire de France 73 (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1852), accessed from <<http://gallica.bnf.fr/>>, 15-1-2006 p. 774; Burrow 1995.

³¹ The root-vowel *y-* merely shows Old English dialectal variation in the *elf*-word, for which see Hall 2004, 212–13.

vish's semantic development from 'delusory' to 'deluded' and in due course to 'abstracted' and 'antisocial, cantankerous'.

Ylfig is attested only in Old English glosses; previous commentators have understood it to mean "affected by elves [?], mad, frantic", "raving, mad" and "afflicted in mind, mad, frantic".³² However, a detailed analysis demands a slightly different interpretation. Four of *ylfig*'s five occurrences are textually related glosses on the word *comitiales* (conventionally translated 'epileptics') in chapter 52 of Aldhelm's *Prosa de virginitate*, composed sometime before Aldhelm's death in 709, in a passage describing the miracles of Saint Anatolia. I quote from the *Prosa de virginitate* as edited by Gwara and as translated by Lapidge and Herren, but including the extensive glosses from Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, MS 1650, since these have the most direct bearing on interpreting *ylfig*:

Anatolia uero in exilium [Hand A: *on wræcsiþ*] trusa signorum [Hand C: *uel*] miraculis crebrescente [Hand CD: *wide springende*] praefatam sociam in uirtutibus aequiperauit; execrata etenim filium consulis inerguminum [Hand C: *deouelseocne*] rigidis catenarum nexibus [Hand CD: *berdum*] asstrictum [*i. ligatum*] expulso habitatore dicto citius curauit. Quo rumore [*fama*] clarescente [*l crescente*] et laruatos [Hand A: *æfarede*; Hand C: *inerguminos infirmos*; Hand CD: *deofelseoce*] et comitiales [Hand A: *i. garritores, ylfige*; Hand C: *lunaticos, wanseoce*] ac ceteros ualitudinarios [Hand A: *adlie*] pristinae sanitati restituit . . .³³

³² Respectively Joseph Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (London: Oxford UP, 1898) s. v. *ylfig*; John R. Clark Hall, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, 4th rev. ed. Herbert D. Meritt (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1960) s. v.; *Dictionary of Old English*, s. v. *ælfig*.

³³ *Aldhelmi Malmesbiriensis Prosa de virginitate: cum glosa latina atque anglosaxonica*, ed. Scott Gwara, Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina 124, 124a, 2 vols (Turnhout: Brepols, 2001) 2: 696–97; *Aldhelm's De Laudibus Virginitatis with Latin and Old English Glosses. Manuscript 1650 of the Royal Library in Brussels*, ed. G. van Langenhove, Rijksuniversiteit te Gent, Werken uitgegeven door de Faculteit van de Wijsbegeerte en Letteren, Extra Serie 2 (Bruges: Saint Catherine P, 1941) fol. 48r; cf. *The Old English Glosses of MS. Brussels, Royal Library, 1650 (Aldhelm's "De Laudibus Virginitatis")*, ed. Louis Goossens, Verhandelingen van de Koninklijke Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en schone Kunsten van België, Klasse der Letteren 36 (Brussels: Koninklijke Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en schone Kunsten van België, 1974) 456–57 [nos 4815–21]; *Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, trans. Michael Lapidge and Michael Herren (Cambridge: Brewer, 1979) 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.

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 . . .

Brussels 1650 dates from the beginning of the eleventh century, but Hand A, which added the gloss *ylfie* to it, is later, of the first half of that century.³⁴ Although Brussels 1650 has long been associated with Abingdon, Gwara has recently argued for a Canterbury provenance.³⁵ Brussels 1650 seems to have been an exemplar of the glosses in Oxford, Bodleian Library, Digby 146 (the manuscript probably from late tenth-century Canterbury and its Old English glosses probably from the mid-eleventh century), contributing its gloss *ylfige*.³⁶ However, London, British Library, Royal B.vii, whose text and glosses were both written at Exeter in the late eleventh century, must with regard to *ylfig* derive independently from an ancestor of the other two manuscripts.³⁷

Gwara has recently argued convincingly for the existence of a corpus of glosses to the *Prosa de virginitate*, early enough to have contributed to the early ninth-century Corpus Glossary and preserved as a stratum in surviving glosses to the poem, which he termed the Common Recension.³⁸ If the strata of Brussels 1650 and Royal 6 B.vii containing the gloss *ylfige* derive, as Gwara thought, independently from the Common Recension, the glossing of *comitiales* with *ylfig* must derive from this eighth-century text, probably compiled in Canterbury or Malmesbury.³⁹ That said, the poor attestation of this particular entry leaves open the possibility of some later origin, with a transmission outside the lines of Gwara's stemma.

³⁴ N. R. Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1957) 6 [no. 8]; Goossens 1974, 51.

³⁵ Gwara 2001, 1: 94*–101*.

³⁶ Gwara 2001, 1: 147*–56*, 191*, 197*–99*.

³⁷ Gwara 2001, 1: 113*–22*, 191*, 199*–216*.

³⁸ Gwara 2001, 1: 235*–308*; also Philip G. Rusche, "Isidore's *Etymologiae* and the Canterbury Aldhelm Scholia", *Journal of English and German Philology* 104 (2005): 437–55 at 444–46.

³⁹ Gwara 2001, esp. 1: 191*, 209*–11*, 266*–72*; cf. 294*–308*. These are guesses, but the only likely candidates; a detailed linguistic analysis is desirable.

Understanding *ylfig* in the glosses to the *Prosa de virginitate* depends on understanding its lemma: *comitialis*. This was an obscure word: although it occurs both as a lemma and a gloss in early medieval Insular Latin, only Aldhelm seems to have used it there in connected prose.⁴⁰ *Comitialis* is – as in Lapidge and Herren’s translation quoted above – usually translated ‘epileptic’. However, the connotations of *epileptic* today are probably thoroughly anachronistic as a translation of Aldhelm’s *comitialis*, and it is important to understand this word more precisely.⁴¹ The probable source of *comitialis* for both Aldhelm and his glossators is the entry in Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologiae* for ‘Epilemsia’.⁴² This, according to Isidore,

Fit . . . ex melancholico humore, quotiens exuberaverit et ad cerebrum conversus fuerit. Haec passio et *caduca* vocatur, eo quod cadens aeger spasmos patiatur. Hos etiam vulgus lunaticos vocant, quod per lunae cursum comitetur eos insidia daemonum. Item et *larvatici*. Ipse est et morbus *comitialis*, id est maior et divinus, quo caduci tenentur. Cui tanta vis est ut homo valens concidat spumetque. *Comitialis* autem dictus, quod apud gentiles cum comitorum die cuiquam accidisset, *comitia* dimittebantur. Erat autem apud Romanos *comitorum* dies sollennis in kalendis Ianuarii.⁴³

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 [*patiat*] 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/prophetic, 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 *comitium* [assembly for electing Roman magistrates], the *comitia* was 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’; it also pro-

⁴⁰ *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*, s. v. *comitialis*.

⁴¹ Cf. Oswei Temkin, *The Falling Sickness: A History of Epilepsy from the Greeks to the Beginnings of Modern Neurology*, 2nd rev. ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins P, 1971) 86–102.

⁴² Cf. Rusche 2005.

⁴³ *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi: Etymologiarum sive Originum*, ed. W. M. Lindsay, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1911) 1: § 4.7.5–7.

vides an origin for the Brussels gloss *lunaticos*, ‘those made mad by the moon’. *Ylfig* must, then, denote some altered state of mind – possibly one which was “maior et divinus”, *divinus* meaning either ‘of divine origin’ or ‘prophetic’ (or both). We may set this alongside its pairing with the Latin gloss *garritor*. This word is even more unusual than *comitialis*,⁴⁴ but is a transparent deverbative formation from *garrio*, ‘I chatter, babble, prate’, meaning ‘babblers’. It seems unlikely, however, that *comitiales*, at least in the *Prosa de virginitate*, was taken simply to denote people who talked.⁴⁵ Chapter 44 of the *Prosa de virginitate* mentions “a pithonibus et aruspibus uana falsitatis deleramenta garrientibus”, ‘empty gibberish of falsity from *garrientes* prophetesses and soothsayers’,⁴⁶ suggesting connotations of prophetic speech (viewed pejoratively) for the root of *garritor* – which is consistent with one sense of *divinus*.

This evidence matches the usage of *ylfig* in the last manuscript to contain the Aldhelm gloss, the now fragmentary eleventh-century Harley Glossary (British Library, Harley 3376; Lawrence, University of Kansas, Kenneth Spenser Research Library, Pryce P2 A: 1; Oxford, Bodleian Library, Lat. Misc. a. 3., fol. 49), which also contains a further, otherwise unattested example, which appears to have the sense ‘futura praecinens’ (‘foretelling the future’). Although, as Cooke has emphasised, the Harley Glossary needs re-editing, her own analysis has established a new foundation for its study.⁴⁷ It is from Western England, and specifically, Cooke argued, from Worcester Cathedral. Earlier commentators dated the manuscript to the early eleventh century, but Cooke has made a convincing, though not conclusive, case for composition in the second half of that century.⁴⁸ The lemmata and many glosses in the Harley Glossary – particularly Latin ones – were written in con-

⁴⁴ But see *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*, s. v.

⁴⁵ Contra *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*, s. v. *comitialis* § 1c; *Dictionary of Old English*, s. v. *ælfīg*.

⁴⁶ Ed. Gwara 2003, 2: 625.

⁴⁷ Jessica Cooke, “The Harley Manuscript 3376: A Study in Anglo-Saxon Glossography” (Unpublished Ph. D. Diss., Cambridge University, 1994) at 22–23, 231–34; summarised in Jessica Cooke, “Worcester Books and Scholars, and the Making of the Harley Glossary: British Library MS. Harley 3376”, *Anglia* 115 (1997): 441–68.

⁴⁸ 1994, 27–34; cf. Ker 1957, 312–13 [no. 240].

tinuous lines, but other glosses – particularly Old English ones – were included in smaller letters interlinearly.⁴⁹ Fol. 31r includes the gloss “Comitiales .i. garritores”, adding above it and into the right margin “l dies mensi . l ylfie . l monapseoce . l dagas .”, ‘or a day of the month, or *ylfige*, or lunatics, or days’.⁵⁰ Here, *ylfig* must derive from the Aldhelm glosses just quoted, the glossary exhibiting its characteristic conflation of different glosses for the same lemma (using Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologiae* and other glosses found in Brussels 1650).⁵¹ However, fol. 76r also includes the entry “Fanaticus .i. minister templi”, ‘*Fanaticus*: i. e. the priest of a temple’, with “futura praecinens . l ylfig”, ‘one foretelling things to come, or *ylfig*’, written above.⁵² Here, only *futura praecinens* and *ylfig* gloss *fanaticus* as adjectives, and the lineation further allies them, so *ylfig* presumably means something like ‘foretelling the future’. *Ylfig* is clearly an innovation here: the rest of the entry must be based on entries like those in the Corpus Glossary, “the glossary closest to Harley in content”, which lack *ylfig*.⁵³

⁴⁹ Cooke 1994, 24–25, 27, 34–38.

⁵⁰ Ed. Oliphant 1966, 85 [C1211]; collated with the MS.

⁵¹ Cf. Cooke 1994, 157–58, 77–79, 144–45.

⁵² Ed. Oliphant 1966, 178 [F151]; collated with the MS.

⁵³ Cooke 1994, 133–34 at 133; cf. 1997, 456–57. The entries there probably derive from the seventh-century Continental Abstrusa Glossary (Lindsay 1921, 74–75). Corpus gives “fanatici . futura . precinentes .”, ‘*Fanatici*: those foretelling things to come’ and “Fanaticus . templi minister .”, ‘*Fanaticus*: the priest of a temple’ (ed. Lindsay 1921, 74 [F38], 75 [F78]; *The Épinal, Erfurt, Werden, and Corpus Glossaries*, ed. Bischoff et al., fol. 28r, v). Although “the scribe . . . used the *punctus* after each lemma, after each different interpretation of the same lemma, and at the end of each gloss” and “errors in punctuation are rare”, the former glosses demand to be understood together in a syntactic relationship: Bernhard Bischoff and M. B. Parkes, ‘Palaeographical Commentary’, in Bischoff et al. 1988: 13–26 at 24, cf. n. 145. *Fanaticus* in the sense ‘priest of a temple’ seems still to have been associated with prophecy since a different but apparently contemporary hand (Bischoff and Parkes 1988, 24) annotated the entry with “qui Intemplo . arguitur” (‘he who prates in a temple’). Corpus also has a third *fanaticus* gloss, “fanaticus . qui templum . diu . deseruit [MS *deserit*]” (ed. Lindsay 1921, 75 [F76]; ed. Bischoff et al. 1988, fol. 28v), its presence emphasising Corpus’s complexity regarding *fanaticus* glosses. Whatever the textual history of the Corpus Glossary here, it seems clear that two glosses like these have been conflated to produce the Harley Glossary’s one.

This correlation may not be independent. It is not certainly known whether *ylfig* was a member of the common Old English lexicon or whether it was coined by an Aldhelm-glossator and subsequently learned and redeployed by the Harley Glossator – who may have taken *ylfig* from the *comitalis* gloss and inferred an association of it with prophetic speech in the same way as I have. *Ylfig* has no attested Germanic cognates and is transparently derived from the late West Saxon form of *ælf* and the denominative adjectival suffix *-ig*; as this suffix has been productive from Common Germanic to present day English, *ylfig* could have been coined at any time. Parallel Old English formations are *werig* (‘weary, tired, exhausted’ < *wor* ‘ooze, bog’); *sælig* (‘happy, prosperous’ < *sæl* ‘prosperity, happiness’); and *gydig* (‘possessed (by a god)’ < **γυðaz* ‘god’). All these suggest ‘(like) one engaged with noun X’: ‘like one in a bog’, ‘one in good fortune’, ‘one engaged with a god’, and so forth. The etymological meaning of *ylfig* seems therefore to be ‘(like) one engaged with an *ælf* or *ælfe*’. As Jente pointed out, *gydig* may provide a particularly important parallel, since it involves a semantically similar root, and must for phonological reasons go back to Common Germanic.⁵⁴ It is attested only in textually related glosses on *lymphaticus* (‘diabolically possessed’), again in the *Prosa de virginitate*, this time in chapter 53.⁵⁵ However, it is fairly common in Middle English, with the primary meanings “insane, crazy; possessed by a devil”, which correlate precisely with the Old English and etymological evidence.⁵⁶ It is salutary that, unattested in other Germanic languages and so poorly attested in Old English, *gydig* might have been taken as a gloss-word, were it not for its

⁵⁴ Richard Jente, *Die mythologischen Ausdrücke im altenglischen Wortschatz: Eine kulturgeschichtlich-etymologische Untersuchung*, Anglistische Forschungen 56 (Heidelberg: Winter, 1921) 127; cf. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. *giddy*. On the semantic overlap between *ælf* and *god* see Hall 2004, 60–62. An Old English root-vowel *y* is demonstrated for *gydig* by Middle and Modern English reflexes (the manuscript form *gidig* showing unrounding: see Goossens 1974, 78–79); this must derive from the *i*-mutation of */*γυðis*/, predating the Germanic lowering of /*u*...*a*/ > /*o*...*a*/ in *god* (< */*γυðaz*/; see A. Campbell, *Old English Grammar* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1959) §§ 115, 572–73).

⁵⁵ Ed. Gwara 2003, 2: 704–5; cf. Goossens 1974, 461 [no. 4892].

⁵⁶ *Middle English Dictionary*, s. v. *gidi*; cf. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. *giddy*.

etymology and later popularity; so it is plausible that *ylfig*, despite its sparse attestation, was in general use in Old English. Moreover, the Harley Glossator tended to prefer Latin glosses; while obsessive completism was not beyond him, it seems unlikely that he would have added *ylfig* here if he only knew it as a gloss to *comitialis*: *ylfig* was surely a member of the common lexicon, like *gydig*.⁵⁷

All the evidence so far – the parallel with *gydig*, the meanings of *comitialis* and *garritor*, and the Harley Glossator's usage of *ylfig* – militates in favour of understanding *ylfig* to mean 'one speaking prophetically through divine/demonic possession'. Admittedly, the Common Recension glossator may not have had too many options for glossing *comitialis*. By the tenth century, scholarly Old English had a well-developed lexicon for altered states of mind: attested glosses on Isidore's terms relating to epilepsy besides *ylfig* and *gydig* are *bræccopu* 'phlegm-sickness'; (*ge*)*bræcseoc* 'phlegm-ill'; *deofolseoc* 'devil-sick'; *fylleseoc(nes)* and possibly *fyllewærc*, both meaning 'falling sick(ness)'; *monapseoc* 'month-sick'; and *woda* 'madman'.⁵⁸ But most of these were probably originally coined in response to Mediterranean and Christian medical traditions: early glossators like the Common Recension glossator probably had only *gydig* – which they were apparently unwilling to use – and variants on *wod* 'frenzied, enraged, mad'.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Cooke 1994, 24–25; 1997, 455.

⁵⁸ Cf. Jane Roberts and Christian Kay, with Lynne Grundy, *A Thesaurus of Old English in Two Volumes*, Costerus New Series 131–32, 2nd rev. impression, 2 vols (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), accessed from <<http://libra.englang.arts.gla.ac.uk/oethesaurus/>>, 10-6-2005 §§ 02.08.09.02 Epilepsy, 02.08.11.02.01 Insanity, madness; *Dictionary of Old English* s.vv. where available; Bosworth and Toller 1898, s.vv. *monapseoc*, *monapseoc-ness*; T. Northcote Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary: Supplement* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1921) s. v. *monap-seoc*.

⁵⁹ *Fylleseoc* and *fyllewærc* are probably calques on *morbus caducus* ('falling sickness'), while *bræccopu* and (*ge*)*bræcseoc* probably reflect Isidore's association of *epilepsia* with *melancholia*, an excess of phlegm; *monapseoc* is probably a calque on *lunaticos*. Cf. Erfurt "ephilenticus uuoda", 'epileptic: madman', and Épinal-Erfurt "lymphatico uuodendi", 'possessed man (dative singular): raging one (dative singular)': *Old English Glosses in the Épinal-Erfurt Glossary*, ed. J. D. Pfeifer (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1974) 21 [383], 31 [575]; Corpus adds "inergumenos . wodan" (ed. Lindsay 1921, 92 [I 74]; ed. Bischoff et al. 1988, Erfurt fol. 5v, 7v, Épinal fol. 100r, Corpus fol. 34r).

This makes the usage of the Harley Glossator crucial: he had access to the full late Old English lexicon of altered states of mind, and could have chosen any of its other members to gloss *fanaticus: futura praecinens*, but chose *ylfig*. This suggests that *ylfig* was precisely the right word for the job.

It emerges that *ylfig* was used in a sense along the lines of ‘speaking prophetically’. As with *ælfisc~elvish*, it is hard to guess how directly this usage reflects the etymological denotation ‘engaged with an *ælf* or *ælfe*’: was ‘speaking prophetically’ its denotation, with associations of elves recalled only when speakers paused to consider the word’s individual elements, or was ‘speaking prophetically’ rather a connotation, arising from a primary and lasting association of *ylfig* with elves and of elves with causing prophetic speech (itself not unlikely)?⁶⁰ We have no evidence for how *ylfig* developed, or for how long it survived beyond the eleventh century. However, from the point of view of Chaucer’s usage of *elvish* in the prologue to *Sir Thopas*, *ylfig* is significant because it is an early attestation of an *elf*-derivation denoting strange mental states. I do not claim that Chaucer described himself as ‘speaking prophetically’, much less ‘possessed by elves’, but *ylfig* does provide a parallel for the traditional gloss for *elvish* here of ‘abstracted’. Moreover, we may entertain the hypothesis that Chaucer’s usage in the prologue to *Sir Thopas* has some historical connection with *ylfig*. Just as *gydig* eventually came to have the quite different meaning of ‘giddy’, it is not improbable that *ylfig* itself should have developed to mean ‘distracted, reserved’, while any lingering connotations of supernaturally inspired speech would be eminently appropriate to Chaucer’s self-image as a man unduly preoccupied with composing poetry. Meanwhile, it is also clear that *ylfig* dropped out of English usage, whereas *elvish* was widely used in Middle English. Whether as a cause or an effect of *ylfig*’s decline, one might hypothesise that by the late fourteenth century, *elvish* had absorbed the meanings of *ylfig*.

Either way, however, the evidence of *ylfig* suggests that Chaucer’s usage of *elvish* in the prologue to *Sir Thopas* was less

⁶⁰ Hall 2004, 192–94; Alaric Hall, “Madness, Medication and Self-Induced Hallucination: *Elleborus* (and Woody Nightshade) in Anglo-Saxon England, 700–900”, *From Seaweed to Juniper: Anglo-Saxon Plant-Studies*, ed. Carol Biggam (forthcoming) § 6.

unusual than it would seem on Middle English evidence alone. Although its evidence is less secure than the attestations of *elvish*, *ælfisc* and *elbisch* which I have considered, *ylfig* is like them in hinting that Chaucer may have used *elvish* without elves at the forefront of his mind, and without necessarily calling them to the minds of his listeners.

CONCLUSIONS

There is no reason to doubt that Chaucer was alive to the etymological connection of *elvish* with *elf*, and that he expected his audience to be alert to it, too. However, although it is possible to interpret his use of the word in the literal sense ‘having the character of elves’ – a case for which Green has recently argued and for which I have marshalled a little additional support here – this is a stretch. More natural glosses for Chaucer’s usages are, depending on context, ‘delusory’ and ‘abstracted’. I have shown that the former sense is attested by our one Old English attestation of the etymon of *elvish* and by a little-known Middle English attestation, and that the plausibility of the latter is increased by the fact that it is reasonably well paralleled by another Old English adjective deriving from the *elf*-word, *ylfig*. For its part, the Old English word *ælfisc* consolidates our extensive Old English evidence for elves’ power to inflict mind-altering ailments. *Ylfig* provides similar evidence, but with an unexpected additional implication: that the influence of elves (apparently but not certainly through the mechanism of possession) could, at least in some earlier Anglo-Saxon cultures, bring about prophetic speech – a rare glimpse into Anglo-Saxon traditional beliefs.⁶¹

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