Chapter 4
The Poetic Evidence

1. Beowulf

*Beowulf*’s one (certain) attestation of *ælf* is of particular interest because it situates *ælfe* within a wider discourse on the relationships between men and monsters in Anglo-Saxon culture, picking up the themes of the semantic evidence considered in Chapter 3. It probably dates from the eighth or ninth centuries. As Neville has emphasised regarding Old English poetry (1999, 144–63), Anglo-Saxon literature offers little in the way of explicit cosmography; what there is is directly based on Christian theology. *Beowulf*, however, is rich in implicit cosmology, which corroborates, elaborates and complicates my lexically-based reconstruction for sixth-century Anglo-Saxon culture of the relations between men and monsters.

To contextualise the ideological significance of the conflict between in-groups and monsters which appears both in *Beowulf* and widely in the earliest Anglo-Saxon art and literature (Clemoes 1995, 3–67; cf. Arent 1969, esp. 132–45), it is worth glancing at other literary evidence for traditional Anglo-Saxon cosmologies. Although Old English inherited a cognate of *Miðgarðr, middangeard*, this seems to have been losing favour to *Middaneard* (‘middle-dominion, realm’). However, there is evidence other than this old prominence of -*geard* for settlement as a controlling metaphor in Anglo-Saxon cosmologies. The Anglo-Saxon Hell was sometimes localised to the North, rather than

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98 Taylor and Salus noted that in the manuscript line 1314 reads ‘hwæþre him alfwalda’ and that although this has always been emended to *ælf(alwalda)* (‘all-ruler’; cf. Kelly 1983, 245), it might be an *elf*-compound (1982). The emendation is not unreasonable in terms of tendencies in scribal errors (it is unlikely to represent the hypercorrection discussed in Appendix 3 since in this case we would expect *elf-* rather than *alf-*) and the argument of Taylor and Salus is unacceptable as it stands (and improved neither by Tripp 1986 nor Taylor 1998, 99–106). But *alfwalda* could be an old compound showing the failure of *i*-mutation (see Hogg 1992a, §5.85.11), and the reading has its merits in the poetic context. Hrothgar waits to see whether the *alfwalda* will assist him at a point in the poem where he is conspicuously short of hope, his earlier invocations of the *alwalda* drying up (see Irving 1984, esp. 14–15; for further and incisive criticisms of Hrothgar see Gregorio 1999). The Danes have already shown a propensity to turn to the Devil in times of distress (cf. lines 175–88); in line 1314, too, Hrothgar may be turning to the *alfwalda*, understood by *Beowulf*’s audience as a synonym for the Devil. But this argument remains too speculative for confident deployment in this study.


100 Bosworth–Toller 1898; Toller 1921, s.vv. *middan-eard*, *middan-geard*; MED, s.v. *midden-èrd*; OED, s.vv. *middenerd*, *middle-erd*, *middle earth*; DOST, s.v. *Middil-erde*.
simply below the Earth, which strongly suggests the availability of a horizontal cosmology.\(^\text{101}\) The diction used of the Creation in *Genesis A* (probably one of our earliest Old English poems, see §4:2) and in *Cædmon’s Hymn* (allegedly dating from 680, and attested in Bede’s Latin translation around 731) envisages the world in terms of the hall. The hall is famously deployed as a metaphor for human life by Edwin’s thegn at the conversion of Northumbria in Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica* (again, around 731; Neville 1999, 62–64; cf. Lee 1972, esp. 24–26), and frequently as a metaphor for Heaven (Kabir 2001, 147–50). Accordingly, the *dryht*—the lord and his retainers, the inhabitants of a lordly hall—provides a major metaphor for society in Old English poetry (Lee 1972, esp. 12–14; cf. Hume 1974). Meanwhile, in *Beowulf*, Hrothgar’s hall Heorot is a microcosm. Heorot is coterminous with law and society, threatened from outside by monsters who explicitly do not share its social life.\(^\text{102}\) Perceiving this kind of ideology in other kinds of Anglo-Saxon evidence is as yet difficult. Anglo-Saxon settlement archaeology is still young, though Old English literary evidence has been integrated into discussions of Scandinavian archaeology and place-names.\(^\text{103}\) Thus our evidence, albeit sparse, suggests fairly clearly that at least in the earlier periods of Christian Anglo-Saxon culture, a cosmology was available which constructed the in-group as the inhabitants of a settlement (epitomised by a hall, its community and its *geard*), opposed to a monstrous and lawless outside, at both macrocosmic and microcosmic levels.

We may turn now to *Beowulf* lines 102–14, the end of fitt I, whose explanation of the origins of Grendel mentions *ælfe* (ed. Klaeber 1950, 5; Malone 1963, f. 132):

\[
wæs se grimma gest     grendel haten
mære mearctapæ     se þe moras heold
fen ond fasten     fífelcynnes eard
wonsæla wer     weardode hwile
șiðan him scyppend     ðes þe moras heold
in caines cyne     þone cwealm gewræc
ecce drihten     þæs þe he abel slog ·
Ne gefeah he þære fæhæe ac he hine
feorwræc
dетод for þy mane     mancynne fram
þanon untydras     ealle onwocon
eotenas ond ylfe     ond orneas
swylce gigantas     þa wið gode wunnun
lange þragæ     he him ðæs lean forgeald ·
\]

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

This passage presents a binary opposition between men and monsters like that between Mannheimar and Jǫtunheimar in early medieval Scandinavia. Grendel is emphatically from beyond the in-group of the Danes (and human society generally): he has kin but no lineage (cf. Stanley 2001, 79–82); he is associated with Cain’s transgression of core social customs of reparation (cf. lines 134–37, 154–58); and is from a place apart from the in-group’s (cf. esp. lines 1345–79). Grendel’s depredations, unlike Óðinn’s in Grímnismál or Völundr’s in Völundarkviða, seem not to be provoked by a misdeed on the part of his victims (unless indirectly as a divine response to the Danes’ pride: see e.g. Goldsmith 1970, 83–96), and they are directed at the hall and so the whole society associated with it. Because Old English ham did not undergo heimr’s semantic extension from the older meaning ‘settlement (?and hinterland)’ (cf. Brink 1995), Norse compounds like Jǫtunheimar and Álfheimar have no Old English cognates. But the closest Old English counterpart to heimr seems to be eard (‘habitation, habitat, region, land, etc.’; cf. Roberts–Kay–Grundy 2000, §01.01.02), so it is fitting that Grendel’s territory is in fifelcynnes eard (‘the homeland of the (water-)monster-race’) and that his mere is later described as ælwihta eard (‘the homeland of ?alien beings’, line 1500; ed. Klaeber 1950, 56)—terms which seem likely to have contrasted with Old English middaneard in the same way as Jǫtunheimar contrasted with Mannheimar. Appropriately enough in view of these correlations, Beowulf’s list of the untydras (‘misbegotten beings’) of Caines cynn (‘the kin of Cain’) with which Grendel is aligned also includes the Old English cognate of jǫtnar, eotenas. This much, then, fits with the binary model posited above, and supports its validity regarding Anglo-Saxon culture.

However, Beowulf includes elfr among the untydras, and its usage here is diametrically contrary to the early Old Norse and Old English alignment of álfar~elfr with the human in-group against the monsters. Admittedly, of their eleven appearances in the Eddaic Alvíssmál, álfar are mentioned ten times in the same line as jǫtnar, in stanzas such as 12—where, incidentally, there may be an unusual hint of characterisation through the preferred diction of the álfar and dvergar (ed. Neckel 1962, 125–26):

Himinn heitir með mǫnmǫn, enn hlýmir með göðom,
kalla vindofni vanir,
uppheim jǫtmar, álfar fagrærfr,
dvergar drjúpan sal.

It is called himinn (‘sky’) among people, but hlýmir (lit. ‘warm/mild one’) among the god; the vanir call it vindofni (‘wind-weaver’),
the jǫtmar uppheim (‘world above’), the álfar fagrærfr (‘beautiful roof’),
the dvergar drjúpan sal (‘dripping hall’).

This pairing is reminiscent of Beowulf line 112. But there is no reason to suppose that it reflects any common formulaic heritage. I have commented on Alvíssmál’s unusual features above (§2:3.0),
traits, however, I do not think that this suggests the oft-posited Germanic tradition of ‘ambiguous’ or ‘amoral’ ælfe.\textsuperscript{105} Beowulf lines 102–14 present a subtle conflation of Biblical, apocryphal and patristic explanations for the origins of monsters (see Orchard 2003a, 58–85); at a lexical level, they connect words of vernacular origin (eotenas and ælfe) with words which are, and probably were, obviously loans: orcneas (< Latin Orcus ‘(god of the) underworld’) and, if the reading is correct—we owe the word to the Thorkelin transcripts—gigantas (< Latin gigas ‘giant’; cf. Holthausen 1934, s.vv. orc, gigant). While Beowulf line 112 may, then, attest to an established tradition of monstrous ælfe, there is no constraint upon us to assume so. In Middle Dutch, a diabolised meaning became well-established for ælf’s cognate alf (see Verwijs–Verdam–Stoett 1885–1941, s.v.), rather as another vernacular term, scinna, became a common synonym for deofol in Old English; but alf, as I show below, never underwent such successful pejoration. Beowulf’s situation of ælfe in alliterative and semantic collocation with eotenas can be read rather as a self-conscious (and perhaps ostentatious) realignment of the ælfe, demonising them by association with monsters traditional (eotenas), Classical (orcneas) and Biblical (gigantas). As so often, Beowulf finds a neat parallel in Grettis saga, in Hallmundr’s inclusion of ‘álfa kind’ in his poetic list of the monsters he has slain (ch. 62; ed. Guðni Jónsson 1936, 204), and is paralleled elsewhere in Old English by the prayer in the Royal Prayerbook considered below (§5:1). Nor was it done on a whim: Beowulf is, as Tolkien argued, predicated on a vision of the heathen past as a hopeless struggle against a diabolically-dominated world (1983 [1936]). For this portrayal to work, it was necessary to rule out the traditional idea that humans might have had non-Christian supernatural support in their struggle.\textsuperscript{106}

Reliably reconstructing the earliest conceptual associations between humans, ælfe and monsters provides us with a rare opportunity to check on Beowulf’s conservatism, and to investigate how the meanings of ælf could develop under the pressures of Christianisation. Beowulf incorporates Romano-Christian materials into an existing

\textsuperscript{105} e.g. Turville-Petre 1964, 231; Motz 1973–74, esp. 101–2; Stuart 1976, 316; Simek 1993 [1984], s.vv. elves, dark elves, light elves; cf. Schjødt 1991, 306 for a more sophisticated variation on the theme which, however, I find no more convincing.

\textsuperscript{106} Cf. Dyas’s illuminating contrast with Guthlac A—a poem which shows what can be done by monster-fighters in possession of the Christian faith (1997, 21–26). Similar implications arise from Rauer’s demonstration that the Beowulf-poet knew stories of dragon-fighting saints (2000). Donahue (1950) and Carney (1955, 102–14) have both suggested that Beowulf lines 111–13 were based on two related passages from the Irish tract Sex aetates mundi, apparently a translation from a Latin text, first attested in the eleventh-century manuscript Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson B. 502 (ed. Meyer 1909). If this were correct, then Irish counterparts for the untydras in Beowulf could be identified (the likely counterpart to ylfe being luchorpain). However, Carney saw the inspiration for the Irish passage in Isidore’s Etymologiae (XI.iii, De portentis; Carney 1955, 106–14) and, as Orchard implied, this could be taken as the direct inspiration for both Sex aetates mundi and Beowulf (2003a, 71). No secure conclusions can be drawn from these comparisons.
binary paradigm dividing humans and monsters, but is innovative in situating the ælfe on the monsters’ side of the arrangement.

2. Ælfscyne

Ælf appears otherwise in Old English poetry only in the compound ælfscyne, twice in the poem Genesis A, and once in Judith. This affords valuable evidence for the connotations of aelf. Various interpretations of ælfscyne have been proposed; most notably, for devoting an article to the word, Stuart (1972) has argued that compound meant ‘inspired by God’. Although the Dictionary of Old English took Stuart’s reading seriously (s.v. ælfsccyn), a detailed dissection of her study would be undue. The most important objection is that the meaning ‘inspired by God’ bears no plausible resemblance either to ælfscyne’s literal meanings or, despite Stuart’s protestations (1972, 25), to its attested usage (discussed below). We may also dispense with Häcker’s argument that, taking aelf to have become semantically associated with engel (‘angel’) on the basis of medieval German personal names and the similarity of Snorri Sturluson’s ljósálfar to angels (discussed above, §§2:1.1, 3:2 n. 62), ‘Ælfscinu may then describe Judith as angelic, i.e. “Beautiful and holy”, rather than “beautiful as an elf”, which would be more consistent with the character assigned to her by the Old English poet’ (1996, 9). The proposed semantic association of aelf with engel is neither inherently implausible nor unique to Häcker, and is indeed suggested by the high medieval The Wars of Alexander quoted below. But it is insufficiently supported for Old English: the only angels with which ælfe are clearly associated are fallen ones. Less convincing handleings do exist (e.g. Williams 1991, 465–66).

Let us return to the primary evidence. Interpreting it depends on how the word ælfscyne related to the common Old English lexicon. The earlier of the two attesting poems seems certainly to be Genesis A, which on linguistic grounds seems to be of a date roughly similar to Beowulf (Fulk 1992, 348–51, 391–92). Judith, for its part, is generally thought to be a late-ninth- or tenth-century composition (Griffith 1997, 44–47; cf. Fulk 1992, 197). Were aelf- a common element in Old English poetic compounds, it would be possible that Judith’s instance was coined independently of Genesis A’s, but since ælfscyne is the only aelf-compound certainly attested in Old English poetry, this seems unlikely: there must be some link between the poems. Although this scenario would not preclude the idea that ælfscyne was a common word, we might rather have a compound coined by the Genesis A-poet, relying for its effect on the audience’s understandings of the meanings aelf and scyne—the understanding of one particular reader, the Judith-poet, being reflected in his borrowing and re-use of the word. However, literary contact
between *Genesis A* and *Judith* is not to be ruled out, and it may be noteworthy that *ælfscyne* is one of four compounds appearing only in these poems. In this case, *ælfscyne* might still have been a common word, but we might rather have a compound coined by the *Genesis A*-poet, relying for its effect on the audience’s understandings of the meanings *ælf* and *scyne*—the understanding of one particular reader, the *Judith*-poet, being reflected in his borrowing and re-use of the word. Without further work on the textual interrelatedness of our Old English poems, it is impossible to determine which of these scenarios is the more likely. Either way, however, we must both return to the literary contexts in which *ælfscyne* appears, and take account of the meanings of its constituent elements in order to establish both what we can about its meanings, and about the meanings of *ælf*.

Both attestations of *ælfscyne* in *Genesis A* describe the seductiveness of Abraham’s wife Sarah (on whom see further Anlezark 2000, 191–92). The first occurrence is in lines 1822–29, when Abraham travels to Egypt because of famine in Canaan, and fears that the Egyptians will kill him for his wife (ed. Doane 1978, 167; Gollancz 1927, 86):

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ongan þa his bryd frea .
  wishydig wer .     wordum læran .
siððan egypte .     eagum moton .
on þinne wlitæ .     wlace . monige .
þonne æðelinga     eorlas wenað .
  mæg ælfscieno .     þæt þu min sie .
beorht gebedda .     þe wile beorna sum .
him geagnian .
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This is based on the Vulgate’s ‘dixit Sarai uxori suae novi quod pulchra sis mulier et quod cum viderint te Aegyptii dicturi sunt uxor ipsius est’ (‘he said to Sarah his wife “I know that you are a beautiful woman and that when the Egyptians see you, they will say “she is his wife” ” ’, Gen. 12.11–12; ed. Weber 1975, 18). The closest parallel for *ælfscyne* here is *pulcher* (‘beautiful’), though the correspondence is not necessarily direct. Abraham’s prediction proves correct, the Pharaoh being seized with lust, taking Sarah, and being punished in due course by God (lines 1844–72). This process is repeated by Abimelech the king of Gerar, who also marries Sarah. However, being informed by God of his error, he rectifies the situation and in lines 2729–35 (ed. Doane 1978, 211–13; Gollancz 1927, 130) says to Sarah,

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Then the lord, wise-minded
man, began to instruct his wife with words:
‘After the Egyptians, many and proud,
can look with their eyes upon your beauty,
then the nobles of princes will expect,
*ælfscyne* girl, that you are my
bright consort, whom one of those warriors
will want to take for himself.’
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The others are *blachleor* (*Judith* line 128, *Genesis A* line 1970), *ealdorduguf* (*Judith* line 309, *Genesis A* line 2081), *torhtmod* (*Judith* lines 6, 93; *Genesis A* line 1502); cf. the similarity of *Judith* 229–31 and *Genesis A* lines 1991–93 noted by Griffith (who, however, saw these to reflect shared oral-formulaic diction; 1997, 63).
ne þearf ðe on edwit .     abraham settan .
dîn freadrihten .     þæt þu flettpaðas .
mæg ælfscierno .     mine træde .
ac him hygeteoman .     hwitan seolfre .
deope bete .     ne ceara incit duguða .
of ðisse eðyltyrf .     ellor secan .
winas uncuðe .     ac wuniað her .

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

This renders Genesis 20.15–16, ‘et ait terra coram vobis est ubicumque tibi placuerit habita. Sarrae autem dixit ecce mille argenteos dedi fratri tuo hoc erit tibi in velamen ocularum ad omnes qui tecum sunt et quocumque perrexeris mementoque te deprehensam’ (‘and he said, “wherever it suits you to settle, the land about you is yours”’. And to Sarah he said “behold, I have given a thousand pieces of silver to your brother. This will be for you as a veil of the eyes to all who are with you and wherever you go about; and remember that you were seized” ’; ed. Weber 1975, 128). Here, then, ælfscyne has no direct parallel.

Judith’s opening is lost, but ælfscyne is used, in lines 12–14, at the surviving text’s first description of Judith, as she proceeds to a feast held by Holofernes king of the Assyrians. Holofernes is attacking the holy city of Bethulia, and Judith is on a divine mission to seduce and kill him (ed. Dobbie 1953, 99; Malone 1963, f. 202r):

gefrægen ic ða holofernus
winhatan wyrcean georne     ond eallum wundrum
þrymlíc
girwan up swæsendo     to ðam het se gumena baldor
ealle ða yldestan ðegnas     hie ðæt ofstum miclum
rafnond rondwiggende     conson to ðam rican
þæodme
feran folces raswan     þæt was by feordan dogore
þæs ðe judith hyne     gleaw on godeonce
ides ælfscinu      ærest gesohte ·

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

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

In interpreting ælfscyne we may begin with its generic element. The principle meaning of scyne both etymologically and throughout medieval English is ‘beautiful’ (Bosworth–Toller 1898, s.v. scine; MED s.v. shēne; OED s.v. sheen; DOST, s.v. S(c) hene). Like beautiful it has a wide variety of applications, but is almost invariably used of women rather than men—except that it is often used of angels, which may afford a parallel to its association with elf. There is also a strong association of feminine beauty with lightness and brightness throughout the Germanic languages, attested for Old English by the adjectives listed under Beauty, fairness in the Thesaurus of Old English, and accordingly scyne connotated and sometimes denoted brightness in medieval English.
Chapter 4: The Poetic Evidence

—connotations which have been emphasised because of the Norse ljósálfar.\textsuperscript{108} But were brightness the most important meaning of ælfscyne, one would have expected a generic primarily denoting brightness (e.g. torht, beorht). Beauty, rather than brightness, is unambiguously the significance of ælfscyne in context: Sara is a liability because she is pulchra (‘beautiful’); Judith is called ælfscyne when she steps forward to seduce Holofernes. *Ælfscyne*, then, denotes a quality of feminine or perhaps angelic beauty modified by ælf. Of the attested semantic relationships within noun + adjective compounds (on which see Carr 1939, 340–41; Marchand 1969, §2.17; Kastovsky 1992, 372–73), ælfscyne no doubt exhibits comparison (cf. gærsgrene ‘green as grass’; hrimceald ‘cold as frost’). This strongly implies not only that ælfe were characterised by beauty, as frost is characterised by coldness, but that they were a paradigmatic example of beauty, as frost is a paradigmatic example of coldness.

However, commentators’ surprise at Sara and Judith’s comparison with ælfe in fundamentally Christian poems is not unjustified. Thun suggested that ‘a certain lack of reflection over the exact meaning of words belonging to poetical vocabulary may in the last resort account for the word’ (1969, 392), but this should indeed be a last resort. In no case is ælfscyne necessary to the alliteration of the lines where it appears and alternative formulae were easy enough to come by. If ælfscyne was part of the common lexicon and not a coining by the *Genesis A*-poet, it might have been a bahuvrihi compound, its meanings detached from those of its constituent elements (just as bodice-ripper denotes a kind of novel, not a ripper of bodices). But in either case, it is too rare for this to seem likely. Perhaps, then, ælfscyne had some connotations missed by my analysis so far. *Hrimceald* may tell us that frost is cold, but its function within the lexicon is to denote a specific severity of coldness. A plausible possibility has been suggested by several commentators. Swanton observed that ‘the primary sense of Old English ælf has sinister connotations’ (2002, 172; cf. 1988, 297)—a claim which the present study substantiates below. North, apparently independently, took ælfscyne to mean ‘bewitchingly bright’ (1997a, 53). Tolkien seems to have had the same idea already by the nineteen-twenties, when he composed an Old English poem *Ides Ælfscýne*, inspired by later ballads, in which the poem’s protagonist is seduced and abducted by a supernatural *ides ælfscýne* (ed. Shippey 1982, 306–7). These readings suggest that someone who was ælfscyne was beautiful in a dangerously seductive, perhaps magical, way.

The women who are ælfscyne are not simply beautiful, but perilously so. In *Genesis A*, Sara’s beauty attracts lust which puts her desirers and her husband at risk. Abraham

\textsuperscript{108} e.g. Bosworth–Toller 1898, s.v. ælfscínu, a curious doublet of the superior entry s.v. ælfsciene; Grimm 1882–88 [1875–78], II 449; North 1997a, 53. Roberts–Kay–Grundy 2000, §07.10; cf. §03.01.12, *Brightness, light*; for Eddaic poetry, see below §7:3 n. 197.
uses ælfscyne when describing the threat posed by Sara’s beauty; Abimelech calls Sara a ‘mæg ælfscieno’ after discovering the dangers of divine retribution to which her beauty led him. Judith uses her beauty to seduce Holofernes and so assassinate him. The only other physical description of Judith before she decapitates Holofernes is that she is ‘beagum gehlæste hringum gehrodene’ (‘loaded with circlets, adorned with rings’; lines 36–37, ed. Dobbie 1953, 100; Malone 1963, f. 203r), which parallels the much more detailed description of Judith’s beautifying in Judith 10.3 (ed. Weber 1975, i 702). This being so, ælfscyne is, in the surviving part of Judith, the only word certainly to parallel the Vulgate’s various mentions of Judith’s beauty, increased by God ‘non ex libidine sed ex virtute’ (‘not out of lust, but out of virtue’, JUD. 10.4; ed. Weber 1975, i 702): ‘cum vidissent eam stupentes mirati sunt nimis pulchritudinam eius’; ‘erat in oculis eorum stupor quoniam mirabantur pulchritudinem eius nimis’; ‘cumque intrasset ante faciem eius statim captus est in suis oculis Holofernis’ (‘when they had seen her they, wondering, were enchanted beyond measure by her beauty’; ‘stupefaction was upon their eyes, since they were marvelling so much at her beauty’; ‘and when she had entered before his person, suddenly Holofernes was captivated, through his own eyes’, JUD. 10.7, 10.14, 10.17; ed. Weber 1975, i 702–3). In the Vulgate, then, Judith is jaw-droppingly beautiful through divine intervention; but the purpose of her beauty is not to reflect God’s glory: it is to provoke Holofernes’s sexual desire. It is hard to tell how much of this material finds representation in ælfscyne. The Old English poem downplays Judith’s seductiveness, and to some extent indeed her femininity (e.g. Chance 1986, 38–40; cf. Clayton 1994 on Ælfric’s similar response). However, the idea that ælfscyne might connote entrancing beauty, perhaps also implying supernatural assistance, would fit the context admirably. The application to Judith of a word with such pejorative connotations is not an obstacle to this reading: as the Vulgate explicitly recognises, such entrancing beauty would in ordinary circumstances be condemned.

This reading of ælfscyne is consistent with later comparative evidence and with ælf’s associations with delusion and magic in texts considered below, suggesting that the reading is reliable. The Sögubrot af fornkonungum states that the people of the Álfar ‘var miklu friðara en engi onnur mankind a Norðrlondum’ (‘was much more beautiful/handsome than any other human race in the North-lands’; ed. af Petersens–Olson 1919–25, 25) and Heinrich von Morungen’s observed that ‘Von den elben wirt entschen vil manic man’ (‘Many a man indeed is enchanted by the elben’; ed. Moser–Tervooren 1977, i 243; cf. Edwards 1994). A particularly close comparison is the intimate association of the Old French fée with dangerous beauty. The word’s first attestation—conveniently an Anglo-Norman one, on an Anglo-Saxon subject (cf. Stafford 1999, 3–5, 22–32), with Old Testament resonances (this time to David and
Chapter 4: The Poetic Evidence

Bathsheba, II SAM. 11–12)—will suffice as an example (cf. Harf-Lancner 1984, esp. 34–42). It appears in the story of King Edgar, in Geoffrei Gaimar’s *Estoire des Enguais*, composed around 1135–40 (lines 3561–4088; ed. Bell 1960, 113–30). King Edgar sends his counsellor Edelwold to verify the famous beauty of Elfroed, whom he intends to marry; Edelwold finds her beauty so remarkable that it ‘quidat [bien] que [ço] fust fée / E qu’èle ne fust de femme nee’ (‘shows well that she was a fée; / and that she was not born of a woman’, lines 3657–58). Thus enchanted, Edelwold tells the king that she is ‘mesfaite e laide e neire’ (‘deformed and ugly and black’, line 3682), marrying her himself. When Edgar discovers the deception, he sends Edelwold to York, and he is suspiciously murdered on the way. Edgar marries Elfroed, who outlives him and murders his first son Edward to put her own son Edelred on the throne. In Geoffrei’s assessment, Edward ‘Par femmes empeirat sa vie’ (‘spoiled his life through women’, line 3594); Elfroed’s fée-like beauty is thus an excellent parallel for the ælfsceyne Sarah and Judith.

Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman traditions probably both underlie the one explicit Middle English association of *elf* with beauty: lines 5381–84 of *The Wars of Alexander*, an alliterative translation of the *Historia de preliis Alexandri Magni* composed in the North-West Midlands between about 1350 and 1450 (ed. Duggan–Turville-Petre 1989, 167). The text describes Alexander’s first meeting with Candace, the queen of Prasiaca:

> Sire Alexandire hire avises & all his hert liȝtis, Him þo hire like at a loke his lady his modire. Scho was so faire & so fresche, as faucon hire semed, An elfe out of anothire erde or ellis an aungell.

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

The last two lines render ‘Erat autem ipsa regina pulchra, formosa plurimum et decora’ (‘but that queen was beautiful, exceedingly shapely and decorous’; cited by Duggan–Turville-Petre 1989, 292 n. to ll. 5383–84), so elf was added by the English poet and its usage is presumably not influenced by Latin. But although the poem makes it clear that Alexander has been drawn by Candace’s beauty into a potentially risky situation, no risk materialises, so there is no evidence that elf here is associated with dangerous seductiveness specifically. It is not clear whether the elf or the angel are considered masculine or feminine. All the same, *The Wars of Alexander* show that elf’s early connotations of feminine beauty had a long life.