

## Chapter 8

### *Wið færstice*

The reanalysis of our Old English *ælf*-corpus provides a new context for interpreting the text with which I opened this thesis, *Wið færstice*. Although we cannot be sure that its alliterative collocation of *ese* and *ælf* is a traditional Old English formula, we now know that the conceptual collocation of *ese* and *ælf* is traditional; moreover, the charm was at least partly composed before the phonemic split of earlier Old English /x -/ into /g-/ and /j-/, and so probably before the end of the tenth century (§§1:0, 3:2–3). I have shown that *ælf* were probably only male in earlier Anglo-Saxon beliefs (esp. §5:3.3), which brings the charm's collocation of *ælf* with the female *hægtessan* a new significance. Finally, I have argued that Old English *gescoten* and *gescot* could, as well as denoting shooting and projectiles, also mean '(pained with a) sharp localised pain'; my reanalysis of *ælf*sogoda found that *ælf* were associated with causing such pains elsewhere in Old English, as, I have noted, did their counterparts in later medieval England, early modern Scotland and Germany (§§6:1, 6:2.2 esp. n. 156). Here I extend these observations and adduce others in a new reading of *Wið færstice* as a medical text and as evidence for beliefs in *ælf*.

A new reading must also contextualise *Wið færstice* within wider medieval European traditions. It is generally and plausibly supposed that the beings referred to in the first ten metrical lines—successively by *hy* ('they') and *ða mihtigan wif* ('the powerful women')—comprise one group of supernatural females, and that this group is in turn identical with (or at least includes) the *hægtessan* mentioned later in the charm.<sup>212</sup> They ride loudly over a burial mound or hill and inflict 'isenes dæl | hægtessan geweorc' ('a piece of iron, | the work/deed of *hægtessan*').<sup>213</sup> This motif surely relates to other motifs of supernatural females riding out in groups and causing harm attested widely across later medieval and early modern Europe. The earliest attestation, often quoted, though not in this context, is

<sup>212</sup> Hauer, seeking to link the second half of *Wið færstice*'s charm intimately with the first, suggested that 'the wild riders of lines 3–6 reappear as the *esa* of lines 23 and 25; the mighty women of lines 7–12 are represented by the *hægtessan* of lines 24 and 26; and the smiths of line 16 occur as the *ylfa* in lines 23 and 25' (1977–78, 52). The identification of the smiths with *ælf* I discuss below. But the figures denoted by *hy* at the beginning of the charm are probably not to be distinguished from the *mihtigan wif* which are mentioned shortly after: 'þær ða mihtigan wif / hyra mægen beræddon' uses the demonstrative pronoun *þa*, implying that they are figures which we should already know—most obviously the figures who *hlude wæran*.

<sup>213</sup> This interpretation maintains the tradition of taking *hægtessan* as a late genitive plural (see §1 n. 8); even if *hægtessan* here is singular, it may still be read most easily to denote one of the larger group of *mihtigan wif*. The charm thus moves from the circumspect use of a pronoun to the more descriptive but still euphemistic *mihtigan wif*, finally defining the female threat by labelling it *hægtessan*.

in Burchard of Worms's *Corrector*, the nineteenth book of his *Decretum* (ch. 5, §170; ed. Hansen 1901, 40):

Credidisti quod multae mulieres retro Satanam conversae credunt et affirmant verum esse, ut credas in quietae noctis silentio, cum te collocaveris in lecto tuo et marito tuo in sinu tuo iacente, te dum corporea sis ianuis clausis exire posse, et terrarum spatia cum aliis simili errore deceptis pertransire valere, et homines baptizatos et Christi sanguine redemptos sine armis visibilibus et interficere et decoctis carnibus eorum vos comedere, et in loco cordis eorum stramen aut lignum, aut aliquod huiusmodi ponere, et commestis, iterum vivos facere et inducias vivendi dare?

Have you believed what many women, turned back to Satan, believe and declare to be true, such that you believe that in the peaceful silence of the night, when you should have been lying in your bed, and with your husband lying on your bosom, that you may be able to depart, in body, through closed doors, and that you can pass through lands' open spaces with others deceived by the same mistake, and also to kill people both baptised and redeemed by the blood of Christ, without visible weapons and that you eat their boiled flesh, and put in place of their hearts straw or kindling, or some other such thing; and that after you have consumed them, you make them alive again and grant truces for staying alive?

The *Decretum* and derivative texts were distributed widely, raising the problem that later attestations of similar beliefs may reflect Burchard's influence. But although the *Decretum* must have been published by 1023, and swiftly came to England, Burchard put the date of 1012 to one of its texts, so it cannot have been available before then.<sup>214</sup> This means that the manuscript of *Wið færstice* is likely to pre-date its publication, and the charm itself almost certainly does. It is admittedly not impossible that *Wið færstice* and the *Corrector* both drew on some lost penitential, but if so, *Wið færstice* represents the astonishing translation of a proscribed belief from the genre of Latin penitential-writing to that of Old English charm-composition. Rather, we may conclude that *Wið færstice* is a vital, early and independent attestation of beliefs similar to those alluded to by Burchard. It is also consistent with two hints of relevant beliefs earlier in Anglo-Saxon texts. I have discussed above how King Alfred exhibited an Anglo-Saxon idea that people's *gastas* ('spirits') might wander as they slept (§6:3.1). Additionally, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the Old English word *þunorrad* ('peal of thunder' but literally 'thunder/Thunor-ride') presupposes a tradition of Thunor riding, suggesting another tradition of a supernatural riding. Burchard's text compares well, then, with earlier, independent Anglo-Saxon evidence. Processions of the dead and supernatural hunts are prominent elsewhere in medieval and early modern sources—one of the earliest being another vernacular English account, this time of the black huntsmen whose cavalcade on black horses and goats riding portended the installment of Henri of Peitowe as abbot of Peterborough in 1127.<sup>215</sup> We have several accounts by later medieval writers who, contrary to the prescription of Burchard's canon, did believe in violent, riding

<sup>214</sup> On dating see Austin 2004, 931 n. 15; the earliest Anglo-Saxon copy is in part 1 of BL. Cotton Claudius C.VI, s. XI<sup>2</sup> (Kéry 1999, 133–48, at 137).

<sup>215</sup> Ed. Clark 1970, 49–50. See further Lecouteux 1998; Schmitt 1998 [1994], 93–121.

supernatural women, suggesting that at least some of these extensive attestations reflect sincerely held beliefs—problematic though Burchard’s later influence undoubtedly is (see Cohn 1993, 162–80; Broedel 2003, 91–121). Other traditions of nocturnal riding women are also attested; the earliest is a ninth-century Carolingian capitulary surviving in a penitential by Regino of Prüm admonishing bishops to preach against the belief that women might ride out in the night on animals (Russell 1972, 75–82), a belief which must relate to later traditions of rides to consume food and drink either left out for the riders or stolen from storerooms (Ginzburg 1983 [1966], esp. 40–50; Cohn 1993, 166–75; Broedel 2003, 101–7). This is not the place for a full examination of these traditions; nor would I wish to posit one point of origin for them (cf. Schmitt 1998 [1994], 3). But it is surely profitable to contextualise *Wið færstice* among such similar and probably interrelated beliefs.

The benefits of this contextualisation do not only extend to understanding *Wið færstice*. The construction by Institoris and Sprenger in their *Malleus Maleficarum* of an intellectually acceptable framework for incorporating traditions of supernatural cavalcades into witchcraft prosecutions led to their extensive representation in the early modern witchcraft trials, and it is largely this which has given the beliefs historiographical prominence.<sup>216</sup> The search for their antecedents has focused on Latin material, but our medieval vernacular evidence has vital perspectives to contribute. The manuscript of *Wið færstice* is as old as Burchard’s text, and it contains not episcopal proscriptions, but vernacular medical texts seriously presenting the possible causes of ailments. Indeed, *Wið færstice* has a close analogue in the Scottish witchcraft trials, the connection illuminating both early medieval and early modern traditions. Reading *Wið færstice* in a wider context of medieval European non-Christian belief has a range of implications, then, and makes it possible to orientate Anglo-Saxon *ælf*-traditions in this wider context.

## 1. What is *ylfa gescot*? And the coherence of the charm

There is no doubt that *Wið færstice* conceives of a violent, stabbing pain in terms of a projectile—albeit magical or metaphorical. Its concept of an ‘isernes dæl’ (‘piece of iron’) lodged inside the patient is well-paralleled anthropologically (Honko 1959), and even seems to have an Anglo-Saxon analogue in Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, where a similar infliction is caused by demons from Hell (Colgrave–Mynors 1991, 500 n. 2). There is good reason, then, to suppose *ylfa gescot* to denote a projectile.

<sup>216</sup> See Ginzburg 1983 [1966]; 1992 [1989], 89–102; Cohn 1993, 162–80; Broedel 2003, 91–121; Purkiss 2000, 142–51.

However, I have argued above that Old English (*ge*)*scoten* could mean ‘pained’ and *gescot* ‘sharp pain’ (§§6:1; 6:2.2 esp. n. 156)—so *esa gescot*, *ylfa gescot* and *hægtessan gescot* could also denote in literal and technical language an ailment which I have shown to be characteristic of *ælf*.

These observations suggest that in important respects, *Wið færstice* may be an elaborate play on words. Commentators once considered the charm incoherent and fragmentary, a perspective abetted by their insistence on dissecting it into ‘pagan’ and ‘Christian’ parts (see Abernethy 1983, 94–98). However, critics of the 1970s and 1980s developed the early revisionism of Skemp to argue for *Wið færstice*’s coherence of composition.<sup>217</sup> We may now add to their observations that when the charm moves into the passage saying ‘gif ðu wære ... scoten’, it may not merely be saying ‘if you were ... shot’, but also ‘if you were ... pained’. This deployment of the polysemous *scoten* brilliantly removes, at a linguistic level, the distinction between metaphor and reality: the individual who is *scoten* with an internal pain is at one and the same time *scoten* with a (magical) projectile. *Stice*, of course, is itself polysemic in this context, being equally able to denote internal pains and wounds. We are dealing in *Wið færstice* with an approach to healing which not only deploys metaphor at a discursive level, but underpins it with polysemy at a lexical one. This analysis suggests that the remedy’s use of vocabulary helps to bind it into a coherent composition: the terms *færstice*, *scoten* and *gescot* are all polysemic, denoting not only projectile wounds but also internal pains, and are used to facilitate the text’s construction of an ailment as the product of a conflict with supernatural beings.

## 2. The *hægtessan*

### 2.1 What is a *hægtesse*?

*Hægtesse* is one of the best attested Old English words for supernatural females. It and its variants appear not only in a range of glosses—where one most often finds Old English words for supernatural beings—but in a few other contexts besides.<sup>218</sup> Despite a dearth of Middle English attestations, it emerged into early modern English as *hag*, denoting witches and evil spirits (*MED*, s.v. *hagge*; *OED*, s.v. *hag*). As the irregular contracted form *hag* might lead us to expect, its etymology resists confident

<sup>217</sup> Skemp 1911, 289–93; Doskow 1976; Hauer 1977–78; Weston 1985, 177–80; cf. Chickering 1971.

<sup>218</sup> There is the strong variant *hægtes(s)* and the irregular contracted form *hætse* (for which see Campbell 1959, §393; Hogg 1992a, §6.71; cf. *witch*, OE *wicce*, *wicca* < \**witege*, *witega*).

reconstruction, but it has well-attested cognates in the other medieval West Germanic languages (Polomé 1987), and *Hægtesse* was evidently widely used.

In Old English glosses, *hægtesse* not only glosses words for immortals of Classical mythology—principally *Parcae* and *Furiae*—but *phinotissa*, denoting mortal prophetesses, and the more ambiguous *striga*.<sup>219</sup> Additionally, these glosses suggest that *hægtesse* was partially synonymous with *wælcyrige* (which glosses the personal names of *Furiae*), *burgrune* (which glosses *Furiae* and *Parcae*) and perhaps *hellerune* (which glosses *phinotissa*), a trend reminiscent of the partial synonymy of Old Norse *dís*, *valkyrja* and *norn* (cf. §2:2). This is not the place to discuss the intricate problems produced by these texts, but they seem to involve several independent textual traditions and are surely reliable evidence that *hægtesse*'s semantics were similar to those of *Parca*, *Furia*, *striga* and *phinotissa* on the one hand, and overlapping with those of *wælcyrige*, *burgrune* and *hellerune* on the other. Outside the glosses, around 1000, it is of interest that Ælfric, in his homiletic rendering of 2 Kings 9:34, used *hætse* to translate 'maledictam illam' ('that accursed woman'), as Jehu calls Jezebel after her death (ed. Weber 1975, 1 518; ed. Skeat 1881–1900, 1 404). Since *hægtesse* does not obviously mean 'cursed one' (unlike the synonym *sceand* which Ælfric also offers), its deployment here may reflect some other aspect of Jezebel's character; since her efforts to seduce Jehu (2 Kings 9:30; ed. Weber 1975, 1 517) drew special censure, Ælfric's use of *hætse* here may imply that *hægtesse*, at least to highly Christianised authors, have connoted sexual promiscuity (cf. the similar deployment of Old Irish *morrighu* to translate *Jocasta*; Herbert 1996, 148).

*Hægtesse*'s glossing of words denoting both mortal and immortal females has troubled various commentators.<sup>220</sup> Meaney (1989, 17–18) argued of *hægtesse* (and *wælcyrige* and *burgrune*) that the words originally denoted 'minor goddesses', but that

the coming of Christianity would have affected these words in more than one way, all more or less to their detriment. The *burgrune* and the *hægtesse* would have been interpreted as basically bad, and their protective characteristics forgotten. All three words would have declined in use,

<sup>219</sup> In our earliest glosses, *hægtes* glosses *striga* (e.g. Pfeifer 1974, 48 [no.913]; Lindsay 1921a, 168 [S528]; Bischoff and others 1988, Épinal f. 105r; Erfurt f. 12r; Corpus f. 58r), and *hægtesse* *Eumenides* (e.g. Lindsay 1921a, 68 [E354]). Herren's recent explanation of *hægtes* here as a corruption of a genitive singular *Hecates* (1998, 99) is unnecessary. Later, the Antwerp-London glossary offers 'Phinotissa . hellerune . † hægtesse' and 'Parce . hægtesse' (ed. Kindschi 1955, 247; collated with MS, f. 21). The former is surely a development of the widely-attested use of *helrunan* to gloss *phitonissam* in chapter 24 of Aldhelm's *Prosa de virginitate* (ed. Gwara 2001, 11 286–87; on the accreting practices of Antwerp-London see Porter 1999, 185), probably reflecting eleventh-century usage. The latter is unparalleled, though it may derive from the lost seventh- or eighth-century Isidore-glosses which also included the *ælfen* glosses.

<sup>220</sup> e.g. Lecouteux 1983; cf. Fell 1984, 29–31; Chickering 1971, 85. Although Bosworth and Toller gave 'a witch, hag, fury' (1898, s.v. *hægtesse*; cf. Toller 1921, s.v.), the *Thesaurus of Old English* lists *hægtesse* under 'a witch, sorceress', but not under 'a fury' or 'the Fates' (Roberts–Kay–Grundy 2000, 1 §§16.01.04, 16.01.06.02, 05.04.01).

and the meanings partly forgotten, so that they could be applied to mortal women, at first metaphorically, then exclusively.

This is a viable hypothesis, its thrust consistent with recent studies of otherworldly females in Old Norse which have tried to distinguish between human ‘shield-maidens’ and supernatural ‘valkyries’.<sup>221</sup> These interpretations, however, are unconvincing.<sup>222</sup> Jochens found that *skjöldmær* and *valkyrja* are used ‘interchangeably’ in the sources (1996, 90), which does not encourage the differentiation of ‘shield-maidens’ from ‘valkyries’. *Dís*, indeed, can denote women of the in-group like its West Germanic counterpart *ides*, and our Norse sources are at times explicit that *valkyrjur* and *dísir* are human females in special circumstances, not unlike the cavalcades of supernatural women described by Burchard. This also has clear parallels in the Latin tradition, in which *strigae* at least were in an ambiguous position between mortal and immortal, natural and supernatural beings (Cohn 1993, 162–66; Rampton 2002, 15–18). *Hægtesse*’s Old High German cognates gloss much the same range of Latin lemmata as the Old English word (*AHDWB*, s.vv. *hagazussa*, *hâzussa*, *hâzus*; cf. Lecouteux 1983). I have discussed already how it is hard to distinguish meaningfully between supernatural beings and ethnic others in early Norse and English traditions (§§2:4, 3:2–4), so a similar conceptual continuity between supernatural females and other exceptional females is no cause for surprise. Abandoning the separate categories of ‘witch’ and ‘supernatural female’ also removes a perceived crux in Wulfstan’s *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*, which deploys *wiccan* and *wælcyrjan* as a formulaic and implicitly partially synonymous pair (ed. Bethurum 1957, 273)—a formula which, given its recurrence in Middle English (see *MED*, s.v. *wal-kirie*), probably either was or became traditional. Bethurum considered that *wælcyrige* ‘is not before this passage used for anything except a supernatural being’ (1957, 363; cf. Fell 1984, 29–30; Meaney 1989, 17). But a high degree of synonymy between *wælcyrige* and both *wicce* (as in Wulfstan) and *Furia* (as in the glosses) is actually what our other evidence should lead us to expect. It is surely preferable to accept the Old English and Old High German evidence to reflect the usual semantics of *hægtesse*, rather than trying to explain it away: the distinctions which we would posit between ordinary and supernatural women do not work for early medieval Germanic-speaking cultures.

<sup>221</sup> e.g. Heinrichs 1986, 115–16; Jochens 1996, esp. 89–96 and note the book’s division into ‘divine images’ and ‘human images’; Kroesen 1997, 129–31, 137–38; cf. Damico’s ‘two distinct, antagonistic perceptions of valkyries’ (1990, 176); Jesch 1991, 179–80. Jochens also argued that ‘shield maidens’ alone ride through the air, ‘valkyries’ riding on the ground (1996, 95). But this claim has no basis in our sources (cf. the prose between stanzas 9 and 10 of *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, and between 4 and 5, 13 and 14, and 18 and 19 of *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*; ed. Neckel 1962, 143, 153, 154).

<sup>222</sup> Cf. Steblin-Kamenskij’s readings, 1982; Holmqvist Larsen 1983, 42; Eilola 2002, 9–16 on *troll* and Finnish *noita*.

*Hægtesse* seems likely to have been the main word for a class of females in Anglo-Saxon beliefs for which there was a range of other words bearing different connotations—much as I have argued for the relationships between *dís* and words such as *valkyrja* and *norn* in Old Icelandic (§2:2; 7:3). The supernatural powers of *hægtessan* set them apart from ordinary women, but, just as I have shown that we cannot usefully draw firm distinctions between groups of gods and ethnic others in traditional Anglo-Saxon ideologies, we should not seek to label *hægtessan* exclusively as supernatural females or as females with supernatural powers. To consolidate and extend this reading of the lexical evidence, I turn now to comparative material.

## 2.2 Medieval analogues for the *hægtessan* in *Wið færstice*

I have already emphasised the likelihood that *Wið færstice* should be understood as part of a group of traditions attested in Continental Latin sources. These have been reasonably well discussed in histories of European witch-beliefs, albeit not in relation to *Wið færstice*; so I focus here on vernacular evidence, which has tended to be overlooked.

The closest parallel to *Wið færstice* in the Eddaic corpus is *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* (ed. Neckel 1962, 130–39). Stanzas 15–17 describe the first appearance of Sigrún to Helgi:

Þá brá lióma af Logafjallom,  
enn af þeim liómom leiptrir qvómo;  
þá var und hiálmom á Himinvanga.

Brynior vóro þeira blóði stocnar.  
Enn af geirom geislar stóðo.

Frá árliga ór úlfíði  
dǫglingr at því dísir suðrænar,  
ef þær vildi heim með hildingom  
þá nótt fara; þrymr var álma.

Enn af hesti Hǫgna dóttir  
—líddi randa rym— ræsi sagði:  
[...]

Then a flash broke from Logafjallar [‘Flame-mountains’], and from those flashes came lightning; then [people] were under helmets on Sky-plains.

Their mail-coats were spattered with blood, and from the spears sprang rays.

From early on, from the wolf’s lair [=wood], the descendant of Dagr [was] at the question, whether the southern *dísir* wanted to go home with the warrior that night; there was the noise of elms [=bows].

And from her horse the daughter of Hǫgni—the din of shields ceased—said to the prince [...]

Stanza 54 tells for its part how

Kómo þar ór himni hiálmvitr ofan  
—óx geira gnýr—, þær er grami hlífðo;  
... sárvitr flugo,  
át hálo scær af Huginn barri.

From the sky there came down the helmet-beings—the din of spears grew—the women who protected the prince ... the wound-beings flew, [there was] eating for the witch’s horse [=wolf] from the barley of Huginn [=corpses].

Sigrún is a mortal woman, the daughter of Hǫgni, and illustrates the problems with trying to distinguish human from supernatural women. Her ride neatly parallels *Wið færstice*’s

armed supernatural women riding out in a group and causing harm, in the one case from *ffallar* ('mountains') and in the other over a *hlæw* ('(burial) mound, hill'). Commentators have perhaps shied from linking Sigrún with *Wið færstice* or Burchard's *Corrector* because she is not seen as harmful as the women in the other texts are. But while Sigrún and her *dísir* here protect Helgi in the battle (see also st. 30), protection to one side is harm to the other. The ambiguity is emphasised in the poem itself, in stanza 38, Sinfjötli's taunt at Guðmundr that

Þú var in scœða, scass, valkyria,  
 ǫtul, ámátlig, at Alfǫður;  
 mundo einheriar allir beriaz,  
 svévís kona, um sacar þínar.

You were the harmful one, witch, *valkyrja*,  
 cruel, ?violent, at the All-father's;  
 all the *einherjar* [slain chosen to fight in  
 Valhǫll] had to battle, you hard-headed  
 woman, for your sake.

Admittedly, Sigrún's seduction of Helgi is not paralleled in *Wið færstice*, but our evidence for the semantics of *hægtesse* may accommodate sexual forwardness.

*Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* cannot be confidently dated earlier than the thirteenth century, but there is good evidence for the antiquity of traditions of armed supernatural women in Scandinavia and the British Isles. For example, stanzas 10–11 of Eyvindr skáldaspillir's skaldic poem *Hákonarmál*, thought to have been composed in 961, attest them clearly, calling them *valkyrjur* (ed. Finnur Jónsson 1912, B1 58); more dramatic again is the tenth- or eleventh-century *Darraðarljóð*, whose images of *valkyrjur* weaving form a gory extended metaphor for their fighting in battle (ed. Finnur Jónsson 1912, B1 389–91; see further Poole 1991, 116–54). Carved and cast figures wearing women's clothes and bearing weapons, presumably to be associated with these literary figures, are found in Viking Age contexts, and include two found in England (see Leahy–Paterson 2000, 192; Margeson 1997, 12). Although they may not depict armed women, the inscriptions and carvings left at Housesteads on Hadrian's wall between 222 and 235 by a *cuneus* of *Frisii* ('Frisians') in the Roman army suggest deep roots for these beliefs among West Germanic-speaking cultures (see Collingwood–Wright 1965, 501, 507–8 [nos 1576, 1593–94]; Clayton and others 1885). The most revealing is an altar 'Deo Marti Thincso et duabus Alaisiagis Bede et Fimmilene' ('to the god Mars *Thingsus* and the two *Alaisiagae*, Beda and Fimmilena'; ed. Collingwood–Wright 1965, 507 [no. 1593]) and was found associated with a carved stone depicting a figure holding a spear and shield, with what seems to be a goose by his right leg, and a naked female on either side holding a wreath and sword or baton—presumably the *alaisiagae* (ed. Clayton and others 1885, plate I). Though their name is etymologically obscure (see Simek 1993 [1984], s.v. *Alaisiage*), the *alaisiagae* are reminiscent of the *dísir* in their association with a war-god and through his appellation *thingsus*, cognate with Old Norse *þing*



(‘public meeting’): *disir* are associated with the *þing* by the *Disaþing* (‘*Disir*’s *þing*’) attested at Uppsala at the end of the thirteenth century (see Sundqvist 2002, 100). The associations elsewhere of *disir* with helping warriors on the battlefield and hindering others, implicit in the term *valkyrja*, also have West Germanic and Irish parallels, but are less clearly relevant to *Wið færstice*.<sup>223</sup>

That concepts of supernatural armed women were not limited to the Scandinavians is also suggested by chapters 26–27 of the *Vita I Sancti Samsonis*, from between the early seventh century and the early ninth (Flobert 1997, 102–111)—well before Burchard’s *Corrector*. This is almost certainly a Breton composition, but the episode is set in Wales, where Samson grew up, and where the author claims to have heard oral accounts. Hagiographically unconventional, with close analogues in later Welsh literature, the episode in question must have roots in non-Christian insular belief.<sup>224</sup> Samson and a deacon, ‘dum irent orantes per uastissimam siluam, dirissimam audierunt uocem a quadam horribili ualde ad dexteram partem iuxta illos terribiliter strepitantem’ (‘as they went, praying, through a vast forest, heard a fearsome voice, assuredly from a kind of terrible [being], on the right-hand side alongside them, terrifyingly making a great noise’); as the deacon fled, Samson ‘uidit theomacham hirsutam canutamque, iam uetulam anum suis uestimentis birrhatam trisulcatamque uenalem in manu tenentem, ac siluas uastas ueloci cursu uolucritantem fugientemque recta linea insequentem’ (‘saw an unkempt grey-haired sorceress, already an old woman, with her garments ragged<sup>225</sup> and holding in her hand a bloody<sup>226</sup> three-pronged [weapon], and in a swift course traversing the vast woods and rushing past, following after [him] in a straight line’; ed. Flobert 1997, 184). She proves to be one of a family of nine sisters, the remnant of a once larger

<sup>223</sup> See the *idisi* in the Old High German First Merseburg Charm (ed. Steinmeyer 1916, 365); the Old English *Solomon and Saturn*, which depicts demons but still shows that a similar concept existed in Anglo-Saxon culture; the same motifs also attached to the Irish *Mórríghna*, showing that related beliefs circulated in the British Isles already around the eighth century (see Hennessy 1870–72; Donahue 1941; Herbert 1996, esp. 146–49; cf. Lysaght 1996, 191–218). Hindering and helping are perhaps reflected lexically in Old English by the probable semantic overlap of *wælcyrige* and *burgrune*, both partial synonyms of *hægtesse*, the first of which hints that *hægtessan* might have been choosers of the slain and the latter of which, whose first element probably means ‘protection’, suggests that they might have had protective functions. However, the meaning of first element of *burgrune* is a matter for debate, which cannot be entered into here (for other interpretations see *DOE*, s.v. *burh-rüne*; Meaney 1989, 14–15).

<sup>224</sup> See Sims-Williams 1991, 44–45; Goetinck 1975, 226–27; cf. Lovecy 1991, 176. Cf. the *Gallizenae* mentioned in the first century AD by Pomponius Mela, nine virgin priestesses with magical powers living on an island off Brittany (Dillon–Chadwick 1972, 129); the magic-working women who inscribed the Tablet of Larzac (ed. Koch 2003, 3–4); and the nine sisters living on the *Insula pomorum* in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Vita Merlini* (among them Morgen, who herself can change her shape and fly; ed. Clarke 1973, 100). There is a case to be made that the *Vita I Samsonis* or its successor, the *Vita II Samsonis*, were known in Anglo-Saxon England (Rauer 2000, 90–116), but direct influence on *Wið færstice* is unlikely.

<sup>225</sup> Reading *birratis* for which see *DMLBS*, s.v.

<sup>226</sup> *Venalis*, of course, means ‘for sale’, but we presumably have here a meaning influenced by a false etymology of *vena* (‘vein’).

community. The other details of the encounter need not concern us here: what is crucial is its convincing evidence that beliefs in armed, dangerous magic-working females circulated in Wales already by the ninth century. The woman's screaming is also of interest, since the women of *Wið færstice* may themselves be described as *gyllende* ('shouting'); however, *gyllende* there is at least as likely to describe their spears (see §1:0 n. 6).

This material establishes a convincing context for supposing that the supernatural, weapon-bearing women in *Wið færstice* are part of a pre-Viking Age Anglo-Saxon tradition, though other English evidence is hard to come by and equivocal.<sup>227</sup> However, the lexical evidence, albeit limited, does encourage the supposition that supernatural women like those in *Wið færstice* had a longer history. Seventh- and eighth-century Anglo-Saxons seem to have had no difficulty assigning native words to Classical concepts of the powerful, violent *furiae* and *strigae*, among them *wælcyrige*, the literal meaning of whose name suggests an early concept of supernatural women affecting the course of battle. This lexical approach is supported by the evidence for the meanings of *hægtesse* in the thirteenth-century Middle Dutch poem known as *De natuurkunde van het geheelal*.<sup>228</sup> Lines 707–30, in a section on stars and other 'fires in the sky', run

Vanden nacht ridderen, ende van anderen  
duuelen, die in die lucht maken vier.

About the night-riders, and about other  
devils, which make fire in the sky.

Dvuelen, die sijn in die lucht,  
Ende den mensche dicke doen vrucht.  
Die connen oec wel maken vier,  
Dat ons walme duncket hier

Devils, which are in the air,  
and which often cause fright—  
They also know well how to make fire  
which seems here to us like torches,

<sup>227</sup> *Beowulf's* Modþryþo is reminiscent of shield maidens (lines 1931–62; ed. Klaeber 1950, 72–73; cf. Damico 1984, 46–49), and it is interesting that line 1935 emphasises her gaze: this may be understood generally in terms of an alignment of sight and power (cf. Lassen 2000) but may also correlate with the note in chapter 9 of the Old English *Wonders of the East* concerning the place-name *Gorgoneus*, 'þæt is, Wælcyriginc' ('i.e. *wælcyrige*-place'; ed. Orchard 2003a, 190). This may associate *wælcyrigan* with the Gorgons' power to petrify people with their gaze, in which case we have an Anglo-Saxon correlative for *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* stanzas 2–4, where such women's eyes are *hvass* and *atall* ('piercing', 'fierce'; ed. Neckel 1962, 151). The perceived monstrosity of Grendel's mother has often been played down, her violent avenging of Grendel being argued to owe something to older traditions permitting women to take vengeance in the absence of eligible males (on Norse see Clover 1986; cf. 1993; on *Beowulf* Kiernan 1986; Alfano 1992; Taylor 1994; cf. Chance 1986, 99–107; Temple 1985–86; Damico 1984, 46); the subject matter of the Old English poems *Judith* and *Elene* and the aplomb with which the heroines take on martial masculine identities has also been attributed to the same origins (Damico 1984, esp. 26–27, 34–40; Olsen 1990). But one hesitates to build an argument on such disputable ground (cf. Lionarons's reading of *Elene*, 1998); nor do Ellis Davidson's arguments for 'valkyries' on the Franks Casket convince (1969). Some early Anglo-Saxon (and possibly Anglo-Scandinavian) biological women were buried with weapons (Stoodley 1999, 29–30; Lucy 1997, 158–59; 2001, 89; Jesch 1991, 21; cf. Shepherd 1999); in the historical period, some were rulers who oversaw if they did not lead military actions (e.g. Stafford 1983, 117–20). But both categories are too rare to be useful here.

<sup>228</sup> I am indebted to Paul Sander Langeslag, Theo van Heijnsbergen, Femke Kramer and Griet Coupé for assistance with interpreting this passage.

Dat si scieten onderlinghe.  
 Men seyter of vele dinghen.  
 Nacht ridders, so heten si,  
 Ende sijn duuele, dat segghe ic di,  
 Haghetissen, ende varende vrouwen,  
 Godelinge<sup>wichte</sup> oec, en trouwen,  
 Cobboude, nickers, aluen, maren,<sup>nacht merien</sup>  
 Die hem tsmorghens openbaren,  
 Ende connen wel halen vier.  
 Nacht merien heten wise hier.  
 Minne, dit sien duuelen alle,  
 Die ons gherne brochten te valle.  
 Die duuel peynst nacht ende dach,  
 Hoe hi ons verlistighen mach,  
 Ende vten gheloue bringhen,  
 Ende proeft ons met menighen dinghen.

which they shoot among themselves.  
 Many things are said thereof.  
 Night riders, they are called  
 and they are devils, that I tell you,  
*haghetissen*, and wandering women,  
 ‘goodlings’ [protective spirits]<sup>-beings</sup> also,  
 indeed, cobalds, water-monsters, *aluen*,  
*maren*,<sup>night-maren</sup> who make themselves known in  
 the morning, and know well how to get fire.  
 We call them night-*maren* here,  
 indeed, these are devils all,  
 who brought us eagerly to the Fall.  
 The Devil ponders night and day,  
 how they can lead us astray,  
 and bring us from faith,  
 and tests us with many things.

This attests to traditions of supernatural beings riding, apparently in the air, and shooting fire between themselves. The similarity of this motif to the association of the *disir* in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* with a light from Logafjallar and with flying sparks suggests that we should imagine a network of overlapping traditions regarding supernatural, riding women among medieval North Sea cultures. The Dutch term *nacht ridders* also compares well with Norse terms—not, admittedly, applied to Sigrún—such as *kveldriða* and *myrkriða*, also used of supernatural females riding, sometimes in companies, in the night (Sveinbjörn Egilsson 1931; Cleasby–Vigusson 1957, s.vv.; cf. Mitchell 1997, esp. 87–88). However, the Dutch tradition is also connected to *Wið færstice*, this time lexically, since it calls the riding bands of devils *haghetissen*, the Middle Dutch cognate of *hægtessan*. *Haghetisse* and *hægtesse* must have been close in meaning as well as form.<sup>229</sup> The euphemistic *varende vrouwen* is also similar to *mihtigan wif*. Of course, the text emphasises primarily that the *nacht ridderen* are *duuelen*, and takes the opportunity to make the same identification for a range of other supernatural beings, including *aluen*. The inclusiveness of this list of supernatural beings means that its mention of both *aluen* and *haghetissen* cannot be considered a convincing parallel to the similar collocation in *Wið færstice*. However, it is reasonable to infer that the first synonyms given for *nacht ridderen*—*haghetissen* and *varende vrouwen*—are closer in meaning. The parallels between these terms and *Wið færstice* connect the Dutch text with its riding women shooting fire among themselves to *Wið færstice*’s spear-throwing *hægtessan*. *Wið færstice*, *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* and *De natuurkunde van het geheelal* form a group, whose various similarities in motifs and language situate *Wið færstice* convincingly among traditions of cavalcades of supernatural females.

*Wið færstice*’s cavalcade of martial women, then, can be taken plausibly to attest to

<sup>229</sup> Some consternation has been caused in Dutch scholarship by the meaning of the modern Dutch reflex *hagedis* (‘lizard’), but this meaning is a secondary development owing to the association of salamanders with magic (Jansen-Sieben 1968, II 647–48).

deep-rooted Anglo-Saxon traditions. The comparative material also provides various models for hypothesising the relationship of *hægtessan* to Anglo-Saxon in-groups and out-groups. The penitential tradition suggests that the *hægtessan* might include women from the in-group—married women who ought to be sleeping. On the other hand, the *hægtessan* may come partly or entirely from an out-group, in a model like that developed above for male supernatural beings (§§2:4, 3:2–4). They might be demons, as in *De natuurkunde van het geheelal*, or ethnic others, as in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* which identifies its *disir* with the formula *disir suðrænar* (‘southern ladies’; cf. *Völundarkviða* st. 1, quoted §7:3). Within this paradigm, *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* identifies its leading *dis* as an unmarried maiden, empowered by her liminal status between girlhood and wifehood, which affords another, overlapping model (cf. Clover 1986).

### 3. Issobel Gowdie: the smiths, the elves and the witches

*Wið færstice* proceeds from portraying the *mihtigan wif* to describing the actions first of a ‘*smið*’ (‘craftsman’) and then of ‘*six smiðas*’ (‘six craftsmen’), who forge weapons. These figures were long seen as forces aiding the patient against the *hægtessan*, mainly because of an assumed connection with Weland and a further assumption—contrary to all our major sources—that Weland was not the sort of person who might harm someone else (e.g. Glosecki 1989, 134; see also Chickering 1971, 100–1; Abernethy 1983, 105–7). However, as Doskow pointed out (1976, 324), identifying the smiths as a beneficial force

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

In addition, the *smiðas* of *Wið færstice* are portrayed as forging ‘*wælspera*’ (‘slaughter-spears’): the simplex *spere* is, on the four occasions when it occurs in the charm, exclusively and formulaically identified as the cause of the ailment. Nor should we be surprised to find smiths causing harm in (Christian) Anglo-Saxon culture. The common assertion that smiths and smithing were associated with magical power in early medieval Europe is rather ill-supported, especially if *Völundr* is removed from consideration.<sup>230</sup> But Judaeo-Christian traditions reproduced in Anglo-Saxon England sometimes criticised smiths (see Coatsworth–Pinder 2002, 178–203, esp. 198–203; Wright 1993, 189–90),

<sup>230</sup> The fact that magically-empowered figures are smiths does not mean that smiths are necessarily magically-empowered (cf. Wicker 1994, esp. 145–47): one rarely hears of weavers as inherently magical, despite the fact that magic and weaving are much more strongly associated than magic and smithing in our medieval sources (see 7:3 n. 193).

while lines 47–55 of the eighth-century Irish *lorica* known as *Patrick's Hymn* explicitly invoke protection ‘fri brichtu ban 7 gobann 7 druid’ (‘against the incantations of women and smiths and druids’; ed. Stokes–Strachan 1901–3, II 357).

*Hægtessan* are explicitly mentioned in both halves of *Wið færstice*. The question arises, then, whether the *ese* and/or the *ælf*e of the second part also have any correspondents in the first. This idea was long precluded by critics’ insistence on the fundamental unrelatedness of the two sections, but a connection between the *ælf*e and the *smið*as has more recently been proposed (see §8 n. 212). Medieval evidence to support this is thin on the ground: *Vǫlundarkviða*’s association of the flying *meyjar* with *Vǫlundr*, smith and *álfr*, bears only a distant resemblance, and *Lazamon*’s ‘aluisc smið’ (for whom see n. 133) takes us no further. However, there was a widespread association of otherworldly males in medieval North-West Europe with the manufacture of remarkable or magical weapons (cf. Cross 1952, 254 [F.217.3]; Guerreau-Jalabert 1992, 64, 67 [F271.3, F343.3]); and although *Boberg* did not identify the motif F271.3 *Fairies skilful as smiths* in Old Norse literature, the *æsir* and their civilisation are intimately associated with smithing in *Vǫluspá* and elsewhere (stanzas 7 and 61; cf. *Boberg* 1966, 23 [A140]). There was, then, a general connection between otherworldly males and smithing in North-West European traditions, providing a context for linking *ælf*e, *ese* and *smið*as. The fact that the *smið*as are not explicitly called *ælf*e or *ese* could reflect the charm’s use of allusion and euphemism: the supernatural beings of *Wið færstice* are for twenty lines denoted only by pronouns, *wif*, and *smið*. This use of allusion in the first half of the text creates tension, emphasising the threat posed by the mysterious supernatural forces, which go unnamed and therefore outside human control; this is climactically resolved by their naming as *hægtessan*, *ælf*e and *ese*. This movement parallels the progression from allusion to the ailment, to a description of a ‘wund swiðe’ (‘great injury’, line 12), to a concluding focus on the patient’s own body, the patient and his assailants being embodied precisely when they are exorcised. Linking *ese* and *ælf*e with the *smið*as, then, increases the coherence of the charm and is consistent both with its rhetorical techniques and with wider North-West European traditions.

However, a remarkable parallel is also available for this reading, in the confessions to witchcraft of *Issobel Gowdie*.<sup>231</sup> Tried in 1662, *Issobel* was from *Auldearn*, near *Inverness*, in the county of *Nairn*. We know that she was married, but little else about her. *Issobel*’s confessions are complex: we have four separate confessions, each recorded by the same notary, *Johne Innes*. *Issobel* made them at the peak of Scotland’s largest witch-hunt, at a time when intellectual ideas of witchcraft had been widely disseminated

<sup>231</sup> On comparing Scottish witchcraft trials with Old English evidence see §7:4.

and fairy-beliefs relatively well-assimilated to these (Henderson–Cowan 2001, 106–41; cf. Hall forthcoming [d]; on the hunt generally see Levack 1980). Issobel ‘interspersed fairy and diabolical beliefs in her confessions ... to a degree that is unrivalled in any other known witch trial’ (Henderson–Cowan 2001, 134): large parts of her confessions are—perhaps literally—text-book examples of elite conceptions of witchcraft. Yet alongside these, she recounted material about *Fearrie*. Desirable though it would be, I cannot consider the full range of European analogues to Issobel’s confessions here. But we can identify impressive parallels to *Wið færstice*’s juxtaposition of smiths, *ælf*e, and riding witches, and it is on these that I focus here.

On April 13<sup>th</sup> 1662, Issobel ‘appeiring penitent for hir haynows sinnes of Witchcraft, and that sho haid bein ower lang in that service; without ony compulsitouris {judicial compulsions}, proceidit in hir CONFESSIONE’ (ed. Pitcairn 1833, III 602–3), confessing again on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup>. It is not clear what processes of coercion, social, judicial or otherwise, the term ‘without ony compulsitouris’ might mask; if she had been imprisoned for the whole period, as Cohn assumed, then that alone was no small compulsion.<sup>232</sup> No questions are recorded in the confession records, which instead give the impression of being transcriptions of monologues by Issobel, but this does not mean that questions were not asked. Even so, parts of Issobel’s confessions are too unusual among the witchcraft trials to doubt that they derived from her rather than from her prosecutors. Moreover, the records twice cut off her accounts of fairies with ‘&c.’, which they do not do on other occasions, implying that these accounts were neither of interest to her prosecutors, nor words put into her mouth (cf. Henderson–Cowan 2001, 4).

Issobel’s first confession begins by describing her meeting with the Devil, renunciation of her baptism, and her ‘carnall cowpulation and dealing’ with him; and how she and her coven spoiled crops. The confession closes with other conventional, albeit unusually detailed, accounts of stealing cows’ milk, inflicting harm using images, and the coven’s membership. In between, however, is a passage (ed. Pitcairn 1833, III 603–4) which is worth quoting in full:

When we goe to any hous, we tak meat {food} and drink; and we fill wp the barrellis with owr oven {own} pish again; and we put boosomes {brooms} in our beds with our husbandis, till ve return again to them. We wer in *the Earle of Murreyes* hous in *Dernvey* and ve gott anewgh {enough} ther, and did eat and drink of the best, and browght pairt with ws. We went in at the windowes. I haid a little horse, and wold say ‘HORSE AND HATTOCK {little hat}, IN THE DIVELLIS NAME!’ And than ve vold flie {move at great speed/fly} away, quhair ve veold, be ewin as strawes wold flie wpon an hie-way. We will flie lyk strawes quhan we pleas; wild-strawes and come-strawes wilbe horses to ws, an {if} ve put thaim betwixt our foot, and say ‘HORSE AND HATTOCK, IN THE DIVELLIS nam!’ An quhan any sies thes strawes in a whirlwind, and doe not sanctifie them selues, we may shoot them dead at owr pleasour. Any that ar shot be vs, their sowell will goe to Hevin, bot ther bodies remains with ws, and will flie as horsis to ws, als small as strawes.

<sup>232</sup> 1993, 159; on torture, judicial and otherwise, in Scottish trials see Levack 2002, 173–77; MacDonald 2002, 123–42.

I was in *the Downie-hillis*, and got meat ther from THE QWEIN OF FEARRIE, mor than I could eat. *The Qwein of Fearrie* is brawlie {finely} clothed in whyt linens, and in whyt and browne cloathes, &c.; and THE KING OF FEARRIE is a braw man, weill favoured, and broad faced, &c. Ther wes elf-bullis rowtting and skoylling wp and downe thair, and affrighted me.

It is not certain that Issobel's use of *fle*, which is well-attested in the sense 'to move with the speed of flying' (*DOST*, s.v. *Fle*, v.<sup>1</sup>), attests to flight, though that does seem likely. The consistency of her confession with the early medieval admonitions of Burchard and Regino is, as often in the trials, impressive, and at least some elements here are certainly traditional.<sup>233</sup> But the similarities to *Wið færstice*, in which the cavalcade of riding women also shoots its victims, are unexpected and striking. Just as *Wið færstice* proceeds from depicting the cavalcade of women causing ailments using projectiles to mention *ælf*, Issobel proceeds to talk about the queen and king of *Fearrie*, in one of the passages where Johnne Innes broke off. The lexical collocation of this royal couple with *elf-bullis* emphasises the relevance of *Fearrie* to *elvis*, while their association with hills is reminiscent both of Andro Man's *Elphillok* and of the *hlæw* in *Wið færstice*.

Thus, Issobel's first confession contains some suggestive thematic collocations; but her second parallels *Wið færstice* more closely (ed. Pitcairn 1833, III 606–10). This confession generally complements the first: she explains that 'ilk on of vs has an SPRIT {spirit, sprite} to wait wpon ws', listing the sprites; Johnne breaks off when she mentions 'THOMAS A FEARIE'. Next Issobel describes a rhyme used to raise and quieten the wind, proceeding later to describe the rhymes which she used to change into and out of animals' forms, and those for healing and for harming. Between the wind-spells and the shape-changing spells, however, comes another passage (ed. Pitcairn 1833, III 607; the ellipses are Pitcairn's, reflecting manuscript lacunae, words in square brackets being his conjectural additions):

As for Elf-arrow-heidis, THE DIVELL shapes them with his awin hand, [and syne deliueris thame] to Elf-boyes, who whyttis {shapes} and dightis {finishes off} them with a sharp thing lyk a paking neidle {needle for binding bundles}; bot [quhan I wes in Elf-land ?] I saw them whytting and dighting them. Quhan I wes in the Elfes howssis, they will haw werie . . . . . them whytting and dighting; and THE DIVELL giwes them to ws, each of ws so many, quhen . . . . . Thes that dightis thaim ar litle ones, hollow, and boss-baked {probably 'concave-backed', connoting good posture}!<sup>234</sup> They speak gowstie lyk {gruesomely}. Quhen THE DIVELL giwes them to ws, he sayes,

<sup>233</sup> Issobel's phrase *horse and hattock* is paralleled elsewhere in seventeenth-century Scottish folklore (Pitcairn 1833, III 604 n. 3; cf. Henderson–Cowan 2001, 37–38) and *hattock* was probably already archaic by Issobel's time, appearing otherwise in the *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* only for 1501 (s.v. *Huttok*).

<sup>234</sup> *Boss-baked* has been translated as 'hunch-backed' (e.g. Cohn 1993, 159; Henderson–Cowan 2001, 55). But the noun *bos* seems to denote forms which were at once convex and concave (*DOST*, s.v., *n*<sup>2</sup>) and as an adjective it means 'hollow, concave', *DOST* giving 'hollow-backed' (s.v. *boss-ba(c)ked*; cf. *bos*, *a*). Either way, *DOST*'s reading is supported by the citation 'Ther faces seimed whyt and as lane {like fine linen}, but ther backis wer bos lyk fides', used of the dead men by whom Cristan Naughty, of the presbytery of Elgin, about twenty miles West of Nairn, confessed in 1629 to have been 'taine away with a wind'. In contrasting *bos backis* with white faces it suggests positive connotations for *bos backis* and so *boss-baked* (ed. Cramond 1903–8, II 211)—

‘SHOOT thes in my name,  
And they sall not goe heall hame!’

And quhan ve shoot these arrowes (we say)—  
     ‘I SHOOT yon man in THE DIVELLIS name,  
     He sall not win heall hame!  
     And this salbe als wa trw;  
     Thair sall not be an bitt of him on lieiw! {alive}’

We haw no bow to shoot with, but spang them from the naillis of our thowmbes. Som tymes we will misse; bot if thay twitch {touch}, be it beast, or man, or woman, it will kill, tho’ they haid an jack wpon them.

Here, then, Issobel describes the manufacture of the weapons with which she and her accomplices shot people and animals: *elf-arrow-heidis* (apparently denoting neolithic flint arrow-heads: *DOST*, s.v. *Elf-arrow*; *OED*, s.vv. *arrow* §1c, *arrow-head* §1b; there is no Scots evidence for the verb *schute* to mean ‘afflict with pain’ or the like). The description focuses on one manufacturer in particular, and then mentions his helpers, identified as *elf-boys*. As I have interpreted it, *Wið færstice* also describes how the projectiles of the *hægtessan* are made, mentioning, like Issobel, a single smith first and then focusing on a larger number. I have inferred that *Wið færstice*’s *smiðas* are *ælfes*, but their counterparts in Issobel’s confession are certainly *elvis*. The appearance of the Devil may reflect pressure from Issobel’s prosecutors (cf. Cohn 1993, 159), but the smiths are most unlikely to have been their invention.

It appears that Issobel saw the manufacture of the weapons ‘in the Elfes howssis’. Whether these should be identified with *Fearrie* in the *Downie-hillis* is uncertain, but this would be consistent with some other early modern Scottish evidence for witches’ sources of *elf-arrow-heidis*.<sup>235</sup> The identification would also help to explain why in her first confession Issobel proceeded directly from an account of how she and her coven could ride out and shoot people to an account of *Fearrie*. Conceivably, indeed, she went on then to describe the manufacture of the weapons in the part of her confession summarised by John Innes’s &c., forestalling this loss of interest during her second confession by introducing the Devil. Certainly, a direct connection between the rides, shooting, and the Devil’s provision of ammunition is suggested later in the second confession (ed. Pitcairn 1833, III 609), when Issobel says

though the motif is admittedly also reminiscent of the modern Scandinavian motif whereby the backs of otherworldly beings are hollow, like a rotten log (e.g. Erixon 1961, 34). This note supercedes Hall forthcoming [d], n. 7.

<sup>235</sup> Katherene Ross (Ross and Cromarty, 1590) would allegedly ‘gang in Hillis to speik the elf folk’ (ed. Pitcairn 1833, I 196). Neither the purpose nor the consequence of this advice is recorded, but *elf* occurs otherwise in Katherene’s trial only in the *elf-arrow-heidis* which she shot at images of her victims. Reading Katherene’s visits to the hills as quests for *elf-arrow-heidis* would be broadly consistent with the statement of James VI in his *Daemonologie* that ‘sundrie Witches haue gone to death with that confession, that they haue ben transported with the *Phairie* to such a hill, which opening, they went in, and there saw a faire Queen, who being now lighter {i.e. having given birth}, gawe them a stone that had sundrie vertues’ (ed. Craigie 1982, 51). On the use of *elf-arrow-heidis* by witches see further Hall forthcoming [d].



The first woyage that ewer I went with the rest of owt COVENS wes [to] Plewghlandis; and thair we shot an man betuixt the plewgh-stiltis {plough-handles}, and he presentlie fell to the ground, wpon his neise {nose} and his mowth; and than THE DIVELL gaw me an arrow, and cawsed me shoot an voman in that feildis; quhilk I did, and she fell down dead.

Meaney's point that 'there is no real evidence ... that the Anglo-Saxons believed that the malignant disease-bringing forces employed prehistoric arrowheads in their nefarious task' is important (1981, 212): I do not propose that *Wið færstice*'s (*wæl*)*speru* are neolithic arrow-heads. All the same, the collocation of women riding and shooting projectiles to harm members of the in-group with images of the supply of these projectiles by otherworldly smiths denoted partly by *elf* is striking.

Issobel's subsequent confessions mainly repeat the material in the first two. In the third confession she proceeds from describing the inside of the 'Downie-hillis' to 'the killing of severall persones, with the arrowes quhich I gott from THE DIVELL', and thereafter to a description of how 'we wold goe to seuerall howssis, in the night tym' (ed. Pitcairn 1833, III 611–12). This chain of association again resembles the sequence of similar motifs in *Wið færstice*: the *hlæw* over which the *mihtigan wif* ride, their shooting of projectiles to harm people, and the description of the *syx smiðas* who arguably supplied the weapons, Issobel then returning to describing her cavalcades. The fourth confession repeats the description in the second of the manufacture of the 'Elf-arrowes' (ed. Pitcairn 1833, III 615).

Issobel went on rides with her coven, on which she shot *elf-arrows* or *elf-arrowheidis* at people to cause their deaths. These were supplied by the Devil and his *elf-boyes*, who made them in the *Elfes howssis*. The rulers of *Fearrie*, lexically associated with *elvis*, lived in hills. This combination of motifs is a patchwork from two confessions, supported by the others, and the connections little more explicit than *Wið færstice*'s own juxtaposition of similar motifs. But taken together, Issobel's confessions show a set of connected motifs which are strikingly similar to those of *Wið færstice*. Moreover, Issobel's claims are similar to *Wið færstice* despite major countervailing trends in our intervening attestations of fairy-lore. In other English and Scottish evidence, *elves*, the word exhibiting the female denotation first attested in the eleventh century, were themselves being assimilated to the bands of riding women first attested by Regino of Prüm. Dancing groups of supernatural females are first attested in medieval European literature in the later twelfth century, in Walter Map's *De nugis curialium* (ii.11–12, iv.10, cf. iv.8; ed. James 1983, 148, 154, 349, cf. 345), followed by Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* (3.3.6; ed. Olrik–Ræder 1931–57, I 69). By around 1300 we find the cavalcade of dancing *eluene* in the *Southern English Legendary* (see §7.1.3) and the earliest attestation of *elf-ring*, 'a ring of daisies caused by elves' dancing'.<sup>236</sup> Shortly after, the<sup>236</sup> Missed from the *MED*, this is attested in three textually related lists of plant-names, the earliest

*Fasciculus morum* developed the penitential tradition mentioning ‘reginas pulcherrimas et alias puellas tripudiantes cum domina Dyana, choreas ducentes dea paganorum, que in nostro vulgari dicitur *elves*’ (‘beautiful queens and other girls dancing with their mistress Dyana, leading dances with the goddess of the pagans, who in our vernacular are called *elves*’; ed. Wenzel 1989, 578). Before the century was out, the Wife of Bath’s ‘elf-queene, with hir joly compaignye’ was declared to have ‘daunced ful ofte in many a grene mede’ (lines 857–61, cf. 989–96; ed. Benson 1987, 116, 118). Similar ideas are attested in Scotland around 1580 in the second invective of Montgomerie’s *Flyting against Polwart*, though this, like *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*, also alludes to male *elves* and their sexual aggression (lines 1–26; ed. Parkinson 2000, 1 143–44; cf. Simpson 1995, esp. 10). At the same time as Issobel’s trial, John Milton (*Paradise Lost* I.781–87; ed. Ricks 1989, 27) was describing

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

Issobel’s distinction between riding witches and weapon-making *elf-boyis* compares far better with *Wið færstice* than with these elite literary conventions. In her confession, then, we undoubtedly have remarkable glimpses into non-elite and possibly archaic Scottish beliefs.

Issobel Gowdie’s confessions, then, parallel *Wið færstice* in a number of ways, and while some of the parallels represent motifs prominent in the elite ideologies of witchcraft of the time, some we owe to Issobel and, it seems, to ancient traditions. Prominent in Issobel’s confessions, albeit by abstraction from partial accounts, is a conception of witchcraft involving groups of witches riding in flight, gaining magical projectiles from the *elvis* who manufacture them, possibly in hills, and using them to shoot people. Like *Wið færstice*, Issobel portrayed one smith (in her account the Devil) in a group of smiths. The relevance of these parallels to the whole of the Old English charm consolidates literary arguments for its coherence, and their existence shows that *Wið færstice* is not a unique imaginative blooming. Issobel’s use of *elf*—albeit only in the compounds *elf-bull*, *elf-boy* and *elf-arrow-heid*—links her narratives lexically to the history of *ælf*, and supports the inference on internal evidence that *Wið færstice*’s *ælfes* are identical with its *smiðas*.

being in British Library, Add. 15236, from about 1300, in the word *elferingewort* (lit. ‘elf-ring-plant’; ed. Hunt 1989, 87). This glosses ‘la meine consoude’, itself apparently denoting daisies.

#### 4. Healing and the supernatural in Anglo-Saxon culture

I have argued above that the Old English medical texts relating to *ælfside*n can be convincingly linked with a wider world of medieval narratives in which otherworldly beings interact with members of the in-group through love and magic, and which afforded a discourse through which people could construct mind-altering illnesses and other debilitating ailments, and even socially proscribed sexual encounters. The narratives, intimately linked to concepts of supernatural threat and personal transgression, could give these events meanings, causes, appropriate responses and ameliorating benefits. However, this comparative material illuminates the other Old English medical texts, which do not suggest mind-altering illnesses, only indirectly. *Wið færstice*, on the other hand, provides a paradigm for understanding how the attribution of other ailments to *ælf*e could have been significant in Anglo-Saxon culture. Cameron has shown that the plants prescribed in *Wið færstice*, if applied as a salve, would be likely to have been chemically effective ‘for muscular and joint pains’ (1993, 142–44). Why, then, the addition of an elaborate charm, which dominates the remedy to the extent that we cannot even be sure that the plants were used as a salve? Although other factors will have been involved, it is reasonable to look for a functional interpretation, to see how the charm helped the patient and the healer.

We are hampered, of course, by not knowing what range of symptoms *færstice* connoted—anything on Glosecki’s range from a stitch to a ruptured appendix is possible (1989, 112–13). But we may assume that the sufferer was sufficiently debilitated that his or her usual contribution to the community was diminished. *Wið færstice* had a potential role not only in healing the body, then, but also the sufferer’s position in the community. Its impressively developed metaphor of pain as a (metaphysical) projectile wound concretises the pain both for the sufferer and the community, making it possible to bring it into a narrative of interaction and healing, and into human comprehension and control. Specifically, it renarrates the sufferer’s experience in martial and heroic terms. If recited only victims of the illness, the charm had the potential to help them renegotiate their self-perception, but if intended for public performance, it could extend that renegotiation to the whole community. The technique is reminiscent of the conceptualisation of temptation to sin as arrows and prayers as armour, which take their scriptural precedent primarily from Ephesians 6:16, but were developed with especial vigour in Anglo-Saxon Christianity (Atherton 1993; Dendle 2001, 33–35; Orchard 2003a, 51–52). Whether the use of this metaphor in Christian texts and *Wið færstice* owe anything to one another is hard to guess, but the power of the technique is evident.

Moreover, just as it proved useful in early medieval Christianity to posit Satan as the ultimate source of the arrows of temptation, positing supernatural beings as the source of the *færstice* opened up a world of meaning. Introducing other players into the narrative of patient and healer gave the ailment an ultimate as well as a proximate source, and created a narrative in which the healer tackled the disease at its root, not merely through defence or cure, but through counter-offensive. The latter element may run deeper in the charm than has been realised. Chickering (1971, 96) noted that

the nettle and the black heads of the ribwort plantain (*Plantago lanceolata*) resemble spears or arrows in shape. If the feverfew in the charm were centaury, it too might have had magical value because its seeds are in the shape of small spindles.

Cameron has reidentified the referent of *seo reade netele* as *Lamium purpureum*, which is not a true nettle, but as it is like them in form, Chickering's point stands (1993, 108). The remedy contains ingredients reminiscent of the *speru* directed against the sufferer. In addition, however, *Wið færstice*'s portrayal of the *smiðas* forging weapons may be more than an aside on the origins of *hægtessan*'s weapons. I have noted that smiths could be associated with harmful magic in early medieval North-West Europe, and mentioned the arguments that in *Vǫlundarkviða*, Vǫlundr works magic by smithing, much as women could work magic by spinning and weaving (§§7:3, 8:3). This concept suggests that the smithing depicted in *Wið færstice* itself implies a magical attack, potentially causing the *færstice*, paralleling the assault by the *mihrtigan wif* in lines 3–11. If so, then we can also imagine the manufacture of the salve prescribed in *Wið færstice* to have been a creative act with magical potential. The charm says that the speaker will return the projectiles of the *mihrtigan wif*: arguably, the act of making the salve could have been understood to effect just this; if the act of creating weapons could cause harm, then the act of creating a salve could effect healing.

It is possible, then, to read the recitation of the charm and the manufacture of the concoction in *Wið færstice* as a symbolically integrated process, in which the healer fights fire with fire at a number of levels. That such rituals could also help to effect the healing of individuals is well-attested anthropologically (e.g. Lévi-Strauss 1968–77 [1949]). Lastly, *Wið færstice* apparently situates the origins of the ailment outside the sphere of the community, associating the hostile, supernatural protagonists with the liminal space of the natural world (and possibly of the burial mound).<sup>237</sup> We do have one case of a wife, abetted by her son, murdering her husband by sticking pins in an image (S1377), which serves to emphasise how different the construction of supernatural harm in *Wið færstice* is. By establishing a contrast between in-group and out-group, the charm

<sup>237</sup> On which see Semple 1998–99; 2003; Williams 1998–99; Reynolds 2002, esp. 175–79.

firmly aligns the sufferer with his or her community, and implicitly the community with the sufferer. The sufferer becomes, indeed, the community's representative in a wider struggle. This implicitly also creates a powerful position for the healer: the charm suggests that the healer has special knowledge of supernatural forces and special access to their world, privileging him; his own potentially liminal situation is, like the patient's, ameliorated by the binary division between friend and foe in the charm, since this aligns him unquestionably with the in-group.

Some of these readings are undeniably speculative. But even the more straightforward inferences from *Wið færstice* suggest the power which beliefs in *ælf*e and similar beings could have in Anglo-Saxon healing, and help us to understand the meanings of their association with ailments other than mind-altering ones in the Old English medical texts.

## 5. Conclusions

*Wið færstice* furthers our understanding of the meanings of *ælf*e in Anglo-Saxon culture in several important ways, and it situates *ælf*e in a comparatively fully-portrayed mythological context, which has ramifications for how we read *ælf*e's roles in the construction of sickness and healing. In it, *ælf*e are linked with *ese*, recalling other evidence for the same collocation, but also *hægtessan*. The meanings of *hægtesse* and *hægtessan* are comparatively well-evidenced, both by Old English evidence and wider sources, showing that traditions of cavalcades of supernatural, armed women causing harm to members of the in-group are widely-paralleled. That their collocation with *ælf*e may reflect more than a chance combination is suggested by the early Norse hints that *dísir* and *álfar* were mythological counterparts, and *Völundarkviða*'s collocation of *alvitr* and *álfr*, but most clearly by the strikingly similar and otherwise distinctive combination of motifs in Issobel Gowdie's confessions during the early modern Scottish witchcraft trials. This affords a basis, better-established than any hitherto, for interpreting the evidence for early *ælf*e's male gender and lack of a nymph-like counterpart, and for the change in that situation, which I consider in the concluding analyses of my next chapter. *Wið færstice* also shows how beliefs of this sort could be developed as explanations for harm, and I have presented a reading of the text emphasising its potential power to ameliorate the suffering of individuals beset by *færsticas* by re-narrating their situations as heroic struggles in which they represent the in-group in opposition to external forces. This could certainly renegotiate a sufferer's position in his or her community, and potentially also facilitate the work of his or her own immune system by concretising the disease, symbolically identifying and negating its root cause, and improving his or her self-perception. Although we lack such vivid evidence for other *ælf*-ailments, *Wið*

*færstice* suggests the significance which identifying ailments' sources as *ælf*e could have had in our other Old English medical texts—and so more widely in Anglo-Saxon culture.