Chapter 9

The Meanings of *Ælfe*

A close analysis of our Old English texts, with due reference to analogous material from medieval North-West Europe, has enabled me to reconstruct a fairly full image of *ælfe* in the elite cultures of Anglo-Saxon England. Beliefs in *ælfe* were not, of course, monolithic: limited though our evidence is, it is possible to trace the rise of a demonised conception of *ælfe*, and its competition with traditional concepts of *ælfe*—which continued for over eight centuries. It also is possible to see the arrival of female *ælfe* in Anglo-Saxon beliefs, once more attesting to variation and change. I have summarised these conclusions above (§7:0). But comparative evidence also shows the likelihood that most of *ælfe*'s various associations were part of a coherent and significant construct (§§7, 8). The associations of *ælfe* with dangerous seductiveness and causing ailments, which I have reanalysed, need not compromise earlier evidence aligning them with the interests of the in-group: rather, comparable medieval narratives suggest that these threats can be understood to have been ordered, generally threatening only those members of the in-group who transgressed certain boundaries (spatial or social). Wider and later evidence consolidates the lexical associations of *ælfe* with seduction, illness and the magic denoted by *siden*, suggesting that these features could occur together in coherent narratives, of seduction or of revenge for failed seduction. The associations of *ælfe* with femininity which are also apparent in the Old English material are well-paralleled by these narratives, since the best comparisons for the lexical evidence involve female otherworldly beings, while similar Scandinavian narratives concerning male otherworldly beings involve their transgression of masculine gender boundaries in ways which we may take to have provided paradigmatic examples of socially abnormal behaviour.

It is gratifying to have been able to reconstruct these beliefs for a period where their attestation is so marginal. Several themes, however, demand further development now that all of the evidence, primary and comparative, has been assembled. Narrowing my approach to meaning to a broadly functionalist one, I conclude by examining the relationship between the beliefs I have identified and the society which maintained them, interpreting their change and survival in terms of responses to changing social and cultural structures. This is by no means the only valid approach to these issues; moreover, beliefs may be productively functional for a group smaller than that which holds the beliefs, and may exist in ways in which 'functions' seem more like rationalisations of beliefs which owe more to other social forces. But functionalism nonetheless affords one powerful way of using the new data assembled above.

Most pertain to Anglo-Saxon group identity—which has enjoyed considerable interest in the context of the recent scholarly debates concerning ethnicity in the post-Roman world.[238] A free man was liable to have a large number of complementary, overlapping and sometimes conflicting group identities, based on his household, settlement and kin; lords and clients; status, gender, dialect, language, and so forth (see Kleinschmidt 2000, 89–119). Although the study of monsters in medieval thought, and their relationships with identity, is now well-established,[239] this research has been largely limited to intellectual traditions whose significance for the less learned sections of early medieval society, and especially for the migration period, is questionable.[240] The present study, however, provides a viable set of evidence. Additionally, models of early medieval constructions of group identities have generally been based on processes of inclusion: groups, in these models, are formed through individuals' shared characteristics. In earlier scholarship, ancestry and language were emphasised; more recently, material culture and shared origin-myths have gained prominence. But my evidence suggests a model of identity based on exclusivity: individuals were members of a given group because they were not from outside it, in specific and historically traceable ways.

Members of a given Anglo-Saxon in-group belonged because they were not monsters: monsters were fundamentally opposed to the in-group in a fairly straightforward binary division. Combining the Anglo-Saxon data with models based on Scandinavian comparative evidence (§§2–4.1) suggests that, traditionally, *ælfe* were mythologically allied with humans in the cosmological struggle of men against monsters attested particularly by *Beowulf*. I have examined these themes already in detail. They could be developed further in various ways. One possibility would be the use of untapped place-name evidence to facilitate their mapping directly onto Anglo-Saxon conceptual landscapes (cf. Appendix 2). What I will focus on here, however, is how our Old English textual evidence as well as the Norse material also suggests that *ælfe* had associations with behaviour which was normally considered transgressive of proper behaviour—once more helping to define the in-group by what it was not.

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[238] For prominent examples see the articles in Hines 1997; in Frazer–Tyrrel 2000; in Gillet 2002; Smyth 1998; Higham 2002; Howe 1989; cf. more generally Kleinschmidt 2000, 89–119; the articles in other volumes in the series *Studies in Historical Archaeoethnology* and *The Transformation of the Roman World* published respectively by Brewer in Cambridge and Brill in Leiden.

[239] e.g. Williams 1996; Cohen 1999; Friedman 2000; cf. §2:4. On Anglo-Saxon England see especially Austin 2002; Lionarons 2002; Orchard 2003a.

[240] Excepting Scandinavia and Ireland, on which see the essays in Olsen–Houwen 2001; Borsje 1996; Carey 2002; and above §2:4.

1. *Ælfe* as sources of danger and power

The evidence that *ælfe* had roles in Anglo-Saxon cultures as sources of danger is
extensive. I have studied the significance of this construct in detail in chapters 6–8,
arguing that beliefs in *ælfe* encoded supernatural threats to those who would cross
important social boundaries—whether spatial or behavioural. In our evidence at least,
ælfe's main sanction against transgression seems to have been to inflict ailments, in
particular mind-altering ones and sharp internal pains. Such beliefs could also be used to
impart meaning to illnesses, potentially providing a rationale for their infliction and
certainly a set of cultural references through which the experience of illness could be
safely constructed within the community, and the curing of those afflicted facilitated.
These points suggest a further dimension to my association of *ælfe* with demarcating
group identity: that they not only helped to demarcate boundaries of acceptable
behaviour (whether by good or bad example), but that they were viewed as an active
force in policing at least some of those boundaries. *Ælfe* have long been seen as
malignant forces in Anglo-Saxon belief, but in my analysis they are understood rather as
powerful beings who would exercise their power in fundamentally ordered ways—albeit
perhaps violently and perhaps not fairly—for the long-term benefit of the community.
They presumably differed in this from the monstrous threats with which, at least in the
early Anglo-Saxon period, they were systematically contrasted, and which we may guess
to have been genuinely malignant.

  Specific evidence that *ælfe* may have interacted with in-groups in less harmful ways is
slight, but it is important, partly because it may connect with other evidence considered
in the next section. The word *ylfig*, which on balance seems probably to have been a
member of the common Old English lexicon from at least the eighth century to the
eleventh, denoted prophetic states of mind (§5:4). The implication of its semantics and
etymology is that *ælfe* could be sources of prophetic power to at least some sections of
the community, implying that their associations with altered states of mind could be
positive as well as negative (and conceivably both at once). The same point is suggested
by the evidence that some Anglo-Saxons, at least around the seventh century, would
employ a plant called, amongst other things, *ælfþone* (etymologically '*ælf*-vine') for its
mind-altering qualities, though other explanations for the name are possible. The idea of
supernatural sources of healing or prophetic powers was familiar in Christian Anglo-
Saxon society: it is ubiquitous in the saints' lives and homilies produced or otherwise
circulated in the region, while religious specialists were deemed to have special access to
divine power for healing purposes (e.g. Jolly 1996, 170 *et passim*); and Anglo-Saxons'
invocation of divine power in cursing is likewise extensively attested (Niles 2003, 1120–

46). It is not unlikely, then, that certain Anglo-Saxons should have claimed supernatural sources for their powers. The putative existence of *ælfe* in these roles after conversion need not only represent inertia in belief: access to Christian supernatural power was jealously guarded by a limited group of ritual specialists—monks and priests—but other members of the Anglo-Saxon community might have wanted or needed to claim supernatural power, making non-Christian traditional sources a significant resource.

These speculations are to some extent supported by later evidence. That non-Christian supernatural beings might be the source of otherworldly information is attested in England in the fourteenth century, in the poem known, like its eighteenth-century Scottish counterpart, as *The Wee Wee Man* (on which see Lagopoulou-Boklund 2002, 147–52). The speaker of the poem encounters a 'litel man' of strange appearance, whom he interrogates for prophetic information (ed. Wright 1866–68, II 452–66). Much the same implications arise from other texts discussed above (§7:4.2): Wyntoun's *Original Chronicle*, from the 1420s (admittedly identifying its otherworldly informant as the Devil); *Thomas of Erceldoune*, of the fourteenth or fifteenth century; and the trial in 1438 of Agnes Hancok. Thomas's interrogation of his lady at their parting, in the face of her oft-repeated desire to leave, is also strikingly reminiscent of Óðinn's interrogation of the *vǫlva* in the Eddaic poem *Baldrs draumar* (ed. Neckel 1962, 277–79), emphasising a wider and older context. Supernatural beings providing wisdom—whether prophetic, as in *Vǫluspá*, *Baldrs draumar* and *Grípispá*, or concerning healing and protection, as in *Sigrdrífumál*—are prominent in Old Norse poetry; though usually female, they may be male, like Fáfnir in *Fáfnismál* or Óðinn himself in *Grímnismál*. But the potential power of non-Christian otherworldly beings, male and female, to provide knowledge in English-speaking cultures is shown most dramatically by the Scottish witchcraft trials, which suggest that at least by the early modern period, such ideas were a reasonably widespread and important part of healers' construction and representation of their knowledge.

Other narratives concerning the beneficence of otherworldly beings also recall the better-attested power of *ælfe* to harm, because they associate the receipt of supernatural power from otherworldly beings with harm from them (§7). *Serglige Con Culainn* associates Cú Chulainn's awakening from his *serglige* with his recitation of a *bríathar-thecosc*. Elspeth Reoch was struck dumb but gained special knowledge; Andro Man lost a cow to the Quene of Elphen. More tangentially, Vǫlundr punishes Níðuðr's social transgression and takes advantage of Bǫðvildr's spatial one, but according to other accounts, Bǫðvildr receives a son from this event who brings glory to his kin. Limited though they are, then, the Anglo-Saxon hints that *ælfe* could be positive sources of supernatural power are well contextualised. *Ælfe*'s power to harm suggests that they

established boundaries which it was dangerous to cross, but the comparative evidence
helps to suggest that risking transgression could bring benefits instead or as well.

Whether people could martial the powers of *ælfe* to harm others is unclear. *Ælf* occurs
often enough as a simplex in the Old English medical texts to show that *ælf*-ailments
were at least sometimes caused by *ælfe* themselves; but would-be magic-workers in
medieval Scandinavia invoked *álfar*, and Luther's *Tischreden* attest to *elbe* acting as
witches' familiars, as they did in some Scottish trials.[241] The idea of sending *ylues* to
afflict an individual may also underlie the verse lament of the hero Wade quoted in a
sermon *Hvmiliamini sub potenti manu dei ut vos exaltet in tempore visitationis* in the
twelfth-century manuscript Peterhouse College Cambridge 255 (ed. Wilson 1972, 15; on
dating see James 1899, 314; collated with MS, II f. 49r):

Su*m*me sende ylues & summe sende nadderes.	Some send *elves* and some send snakes; some
sumne sende nikeres the bide*n* pates[242] punien.	send *nikeres* which dwell by the water [reading
Nister man nenne bute ildebrand onne.	p*ater*]; no one knows but Hildebrand alone.

The impliction here seems to be that some hostile force sent *ylues* to beset Wade,
implying an ability to co-opt them into causing harm to members of the in-group. Though
early and English, however, Wade's complaint is too short and ill contextualised to be
developed.

It is also worth noting an area where there is no evidence for *ælfe* causing harm.
Although there is circumstantial evidence for associating *ælfe* with socially unsanctioned
pregnancy, no Anglo-Saxon comparisons emerge for the prominent later association of
supernatural beings with changelings—replacing healthy children (or occasionally
adults) with sickly or deformed ones (see Purkiss 2000, *passim*; Skjelbred 1991, 219–21)
—or even for harming children especially. Our Anglo-Saxon evidence is not without
mention of malformed or ailing children,[243] and though the silence concerning
changeling-lore still proves nothing, we should be cautious about assuming that it already
existed in early medieval culture. The idea that the children begotten on members of the
in-group by otherworldly beings would be malformed is attested in England by the
thirteenth century and exemplifed by my quotation above from the *Man of Law's Tale*.[244]
Meanwhile, associations of supernatural beings with changelings in Europe are attested
back into the thirteenth century (Schmitt 1983 [1979], esp. 74–82), and in Antiquity; but
such associations begin to be attested for *elves* only in the fifteenth century.[245] Perhaps

[241] Cf. Edwards 1994, 21; Wilby 2000; Hall forthcoming [d]; §§6:1, 7:4, 8:3.
[242] The last letter is ill-formed and unclear.
[243] See Meaney 1989, 20–22; Crawford 1999, 98–100 (whose reference in n. 28 should be to
Cockayne 1864–66, III 145).
[244] §6:3.1; cf. *De nugis curialium* ii.11 (ed. James 1983, 158–60); *Þiðreks saga* ch. 169 (ed.
Bertelsen 1905–11, I 319–22); and the rise of *elf* as a term of abuse, see *OED* (s.v. *elf* §§2b, 3, *oaf*).
[245] Beginning with associations of *elf* with *lamia* in the *Promptorium parvulorum* (ed. Way 1843–

Anglo-Saxons had other traditional discourses handling babies' malformity or failure to thrive. Comparison with Scandinavia suggests culturally-sanctioned abandonment; if so, non-Christian changeling lore might have been a response to the strong Christian opposition to abandoment.[246]

The combined Old English evidence, thus contextualised, suggests something of the potential significance of *ælfe* as a source of supernatural power, hinting at complex interrelationships between *ælfe*'s power to help and their well-attested power to harm. The power available from contact with *ælfe* may have been proportional to the risks which that contact entailed, and possibly indeed to the harm which it caused. If so, *ælf*-beliefs potentially also afforded not only a means to manipulate illness at a psychological and social-psychological level to facilitate curing the afflicted, but a means of constructing certain kinds of suffering in a positive way, as sources of knowledge and power in themselves. These are themes which can be explored through the evidence for the relationship between *ælfe*, Anglo-Saxons, and the social boundaries of gendering.

2. Gendering

Our evidence concerning the relationship between *ælfe* and gendering gives rise to two main issues. Firstly, it seems that early Anglo-Saxon *ælfe* were exclusively male, but that they were associated with traits which Anglo-Saxons considered effeminate (see §§4:2, 5:3.2–3, 6:3; cf. 7). What does this mean? Secondly, *ælf* came by the eleventh century to be able to denote females as well; this usage seems not only to exhibit a change in *ælf*'s semantics, but a new addition to Anglo-Saxon inventories of belief (§5:3.2–3; cf. 7:1.3, 7:4.1, 8:3). What does *this* mean? These are difficult questions, so it is worth emphasising first of all that the very fact that we can now ask them is an exciting development. Whereas nineteenth-century historians' assumptions about gendering have in other fields been revised because they proved incompatible with the primary sources— as in Norse or ancient Hellenic material—the Anglo-Saxon written sources challenge them less obviously (see respectively Meulengracht Sørensen 1983 [1980]; Halperin– Winkler–Zeitlin 1990; Magennis 1995). Our perspectives on womens' positions in

65, I 138; for later evidence see Green 2003, 41–45).
[246] Crawford downplayed the prospect of abandonment in her recent *Childhood in Anglo-Saxon England*, emphasising parental love (1999, 92), and oblation was of course generally accepted by Churchmen (Boswell 1988, 228–55); but these are not necessarily exclusive of practices of abandoment. Problematic sources though they are, Ine's laws explicitly cover infanticide, along with at least one recently-noted hint in an anonymous homily (Caie 1998; contrast Crawford 1999, 93–94). See further Boswell (1988, esp. 198–227, 256–66) and compare recent assessments of infanticide in medieval Scandinavia: Clover 1988, 150–72; Pentikäinen 1990; Jochens 1995, 85– 93; Wicker 1998.

Anglo-Saxon culture are concomitantly limited. Serious efforts have begun in recent years to redress this, but our approaches are very much in a process of transition, meaning that there is no firm framework in which to assess the new evidence.[247] Recent work has proceeded through new analyses of under-used texts such as the Anglo-Saxon penitentials, and through the use of cultural and critical theory to try to penetrate the ideologically dominant discourses of Anglo-Saxon writers—principally those associated with the tenth- and early eleventh-century monastic reform movement—to assess what they conceal and reveal about the multifarious Anglo-Saxon constructions of gender which they sought to control. What the evidence assembled in this thesis allows us to do is return to issues of Anglo-Saxon gendering from an entirely new standpoint. Doing so is daunting, not least because it involves projecting closely-reasoned conclusions drawn from difficult evidence into another evidentially problematic, and ideologically charged, area. But if nothing else, the evidence for *ælfe* encourages us to ask new questions and to look for new answers.

An important preliminary concern is how far it is appropriate to talk of 'masculine' and 'feminine' gender in Anglo-Saxon culture. Clover has argued that in early medieval Scandinavian cultures, before Christianisation and what she tentatively called 'medievalisation' prompted a departure on the long road towards the alignment of gender with sex, gender could better be divided into the two groups *hvatr* and *blauðr*. *Hvatr* meant 'bold, independent, powerful, vigorous', and *blauðr* 'weak, soft, powerless' (1991). The alignment had more to do with power and independence than biological sex, but aristocratic men dominated the *hvatr* group, and women the *blauðr* group. Although this approach is certainly useful (cf. Woolf 1997; Whitney 1999; Gradowicz-Pancer 2002), I have preferred the traditional terms *masculine* and *feminine*, as these are established in work on Anglo-Saxon gendering, and have generally proved appropriate labels for objectively observable groupings in Anglo-Saxon societies (e.g. Stoodley 1999). But Clover's work provides important caveats. I neither claim, then, nor intend to offer definitive interpretations of the data presented here. But I do aim to show the kinds of new perspectives which we can gain through evidence like that assembled already in this thesis, and through integrating it thoroughly with evidence from other kinds of souces, such as archaeology and legal texts.

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[247] Stafford 1994 marks the historiographical shift. For some major contributions see Frantzen 1997; 1998; Lees–Overing 2002; Taylor 1998, 33–52; 1983; Godden 1995. For work on gender and the Benedictine reformists see further Stafford 1999; Cubitt 2000b; Foot 2000, esp. I 85–110; Wareham 2001; cf. Jayatilaka 2003. See also the late and, in origin, non-Anglo-Saxon—but at times refreshingly lewd—*Carmina Cantabrigensia* (ed. Ziolkowski 1994).

2.1 The effeminacy of *ælfe*: early Anglo-Saxons and mythological transgressions

As I have said, *ælfe*'s associations with seductive feminine beauty, nymphs, *siden* and the eventual semantic development of *ælf* to denoting females as well as males make the conclusion that *ælfe* had feminine traits—at at least some times in some discourses—hard to avoid. If nothing else, this poses a powerful challenge to the image of Anglo-Saxon culture dominant in our sources, which generally minimises any hint of gender disturbance or transgression. But one would wish at least to attempt to interpret the meaning of this cultural construct of effeminate *ælfe* further. Fortunately, *Wið færstice* situates *ælfe* in a comparatively fully-articulated system of belief (§8). *Wið færstice* juxtaposes *ælfe* (who may, moreover, be identical with the charm's non-combatant and arguably magic-working *smiðas*) with armed and violent women (themselves well-paralleled). That this juxtaposition was not unique to the charm is suggested by its recurrence in Issobel Gowdie's confessions and by hints that *álfar* and *dísir* were also systematically juxtaposed as male and female counterparts in Norse traditions (§§2:2). What is striking for present purposes is that *Wið færstice* ostentatiously inverts everyday Anglo-Saxon gendering. Weapon-bearing was associated with masculinity, and freedom, at profound and ideological levels—but in *Wið færstice*, it is women who bear and use weapons.[248] We do not simply have evidence, then, that in Anglo-Saxon belief *ælfe* were effeminate: we also find them juxtaposed with *hægtessan* who are in important respects masculine, arguably as co-authors of supernatural harm, in what is conceivably a systematic structural pairing.

We may interpret the contrast between effeminate *ælfe* and martial *hægtessan* as a feature in a system of belief, whereby otherworldly beings were believed to trangress the gender boundaries experienced in everyday life. These otherworldly beings, then, were not an idealised image of society or a straightforward model of proper behaviour. But nor were they monsters—though there may, of course, have been a degree of ambiguity about these categories. Rather, we may understand *ælfe* and *hægtessan* as society's mirror-image: in the mirror, we do not see ourselves distorted, but we do see ourselves, on one axis, inverted. This was presumably not the only system through which these groups could relate in Anglo-Saxon cultures. Its concern with weapon-bearing is arguably (male) aristocratic in its orientation. My assumption of symmetricality between male and female

[248] The gendering is clear in early Anglo-Saxon burial assemblages, weapons correlating with male skeletons and weaving-kit with female (Stoodley 1999, esp. 77–80); likewise, Old English specified male *menn* with *wæpnedmann* ('armed person', as opposed to *wifmann*, 'woman-person'); one's patrilineal ancestry was the *sperehealf* or *sperehand* ('spear-side', as opposed to *spinelhealf*, 'spindle-side'). A variety of sources point to the further ideological association of weapon-bearing with freedom (Brooks 1978, 82–83). The association of weapon-bearing with masculine gender has continued in England since that time.

mythological transgression is reminiscent of Bynum's argument that in later medieval sources, men 'use images of reversal to express liminality', one of the main reversals being in gender. The male experience of liminality or crisis could involve adopting feminine traits. Moreover, men 'tended to assume that reversal was symmetrical… men writing about women assumed that women went through sharp crises and conversions and that their liminal moments were accompanied by gender reversal' (1984, at 110, 111). This provides a neat parallel to my reading: male Anglo-Saxons construed the liminality of the supernatural beings around their societies through gender reversal. In liminal space, males were seductively beautiful and worked magic, and females bore and used weapons. But Bynum also argued that women and other less powerful groups in fact did not experience liminality as gender reversal (1984, 112–18). If my model of a belief-system involving systematic gender inversion holds, then, it may do so only for the aristocratic men who created our sources.

Imagining a range of Anglo-Saxon discourses besides medical texts like *Wið færstice* —a range like the one which we have attested for Scandinavia—we might suppose that sexually transgressive mythological figures could, depending on context, have been discomforting, laughable or even contemptible. But it is clear from all our sources—for *ælfe*, *hægtessan* and analogous figures—that they were powerful. In the cases of both *hægtessan* and *ælfe*, gender transgression is associated with gaining the powers associated with the other sex: martial skills on the one hand and magical ones on the other. The putative systematic contrast between *ælfe* and *hægtessan*, then, was arguably one of the ways in which Anglo-Saxon social mores were enculturated and maintained: these beings showed what the in-group was not.

Cultural strategies of this sort are not what the monstic reformers would have had us think of when we thought of Anglo-Saxon England, but sparse though the evidence is, it is sufficient to suggest that such non-Christian belief-systems did operate in shaping and maintaining Anglo-Saxon norms. Moreover, this reading suggests a new context for approaching an increasingly prominent issue in debate on early Anglo-Saxon gendering. A number of confidently-sexed male skeletons from the period in which grave-goods were still deposited with bodies, from the fifth century to the earlier part of the eighth, have been found with artefacts associated in the vast majority of cases with female skeletons, such as dress fasteners and jewellery; furthermore, they lack artefacts associated with males—principally weapons. There are also a few females with weapons; these are too few for reliable interpretation, but one case remains noteworthy because the osteological sexing has now been confirmed by DNA analysis, encouraging the idea that such transgressive burials are not to be dismissed as accidents by bone-specialists (Lucy 2001, 89; see further §8:2.2 n. 227). These inhumations have been most extensively

studied in Stoodley's recent analysis of 1636 undisturbed adult Anglo-Saxon burials, from forty-six sites covering most of early Anglo-Saxon England.[249] Stoodley counted nineteen confidently-sexed males buried with women's dress accessories—1.16% of his whole sample and 4.63% of his confidently-sexed males—and there are other cases.[250] How well these statistics reflect either Anglo-Saxon burial practices (in particular, they exclude cremation burials) or everyday life (of which mortuary practice is a notoriously problematic indicator) is an open question, but the figures suggest that a demographically significant proportion of early Anglo-Saxon biological males sometimes dressed in ways normally associated with women, such cross-dressing being ideologically important enough to find expression in burial practice.

   This sort of mismatch has traditionally been explained as mis-sexings; the burials do not generally show special treatment in other respects.[251] Comparisons from other regions are hard to come by, as the establishment of sexing without reference to grave-goods is nascent (cf. Effros 2000; Solli 2002, 218–21)—though examples are emerging from the Germanic-speaking Continent and Scandinavia.[252] But the recent studies by Stoodley, Lucy, Shepherd, and Knüsel and Ripley emphasise that we would be unwise simply to dismiss this unexpected data. There are also a few females with weapons; these are too few for reliable interpretation, but one case remains noteworthy because the osteological sexing has now been confirmed by DNA analysis, encouraging the idea that such transgressive burials do not solely represent the uncertainties inherent in skeletal sexing (Lucy 2001, 89; see further §8:2.2 n. 227). Moreover, there is comparative evidence suggesting contexts in which a proportion of men may dress in ways which transgress their gender. Knüsel and Ripley emphasised anthropologically-observed societies containing biological men who routinely dress as women, usually because they have a ritual status in the society in question as a shaman or in a similar function.[253] The same interpretation has been plausibly offered in a Scandinavian context, in particular regarding the man buried at Vivallen in Sweden between around 800 and 1100 wearing a woman's linen dress, with other artefacts associated with female burials, as well as with more unusual objects (Price 2000, 18–21; Solli 2002, 221). The potential correlation between a burial like this and the Scandinavian association of men performing *seiðr* with cross-dressing (see §§6:3.1; 7:2.2) has not gone unnoticed, and Wiker has recently

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[249] I am grateful for Dr Stoodley for clarifying the character of this sample.

[250] 1999, 76–77, 218 table 45; Lucy 1997, 157–62; 2000, 89; cf. Shepherd 1999, 231–41; Knüsel–Ripley 2000, 188–91.

[251] e.g. Härke 1997, 132–33; Dickinson 2002, 83; cf. Stoodley 1999, 10, 33–34. Even the figure of 4.6% does not transcend the 6% error rate conventionally reckoned with in osteological sexing.

[252] Lucy 2000, 89–90; Zachrisson and others 1997, 57–58; cf. Price 2000, 18–19; Jesch 1991, 21–22, 30; more generally Solli 2002, 218–31.

[253] 2000, esp. 164–69; Shepherd 1999, esp. 222–27, 242–43; for other anthropological examples see Saladin D'Anglure 2003 [1992]; Balzer 2003 [1996].

contextualised this by pointing to the blurring of borders between genders and between human and animal prominent in Iron-Age Scandinavian small arts up to around the mid-sixth century (2001). Other, problematic, linguistic and textual hints suggesting similar conceptions elsewhere in medieval Europe do exist,[254] but what is more important is the undoubted fact that, not unlike the saints studied by Bynum, various men at various times have gained liminality through sartorial gender-transgression, and in gaining liminality, they have also gained supernatural power. It is important to recognise that the male gender transgression which these sources suggest need not necessarily have involved the assumption of female identity. The fact of transgression may have been more important than the outcome; it could rather be interpreted as a show of special independence predicated on the symbolic transgression of cultural boundaries, bringing with it special power.

Our evidence for *ælfe*, then, presents us with supernatural males with clear effeminate traits, arguably part of a systematic belief-system, while early Anglo-Saxon culture appears, if mis-sexing of skeletons does not wholly deceive us, to have included a number of men who wore women's clothes. The possibility that there was some cultural connection between the two phenomena demands exploration. If beliefs concerning *ælfe* served to establish gender norms by showing what normal men were not, they also provided potential paradigms for men's socially meaningful gender transgression.

As Stoodley noted, we do have a tempting Anglo-Saxon textual comparison for the male skeletons with feminine burial assemblages: Bede's account of the pagan Northumbrian 'primus pontificum' ('chief of bishops') Coifi (1999, 76; for *pontifex* as 'bishop' see Page 1995, 119). Coifi, deciding to convert, takes up a sword and a spear, mounts a stallion, and attacks his own *fanum* ('shrine'). Bede explains the symbolism of this action with the comment 'non enim licuerat pontificem sacrorum uel arma ferre uel praeter in equa equitare' ('for the bishop of [their] religion was not permitted to bear arms or to ride except on a mare'; ed. Colgrave–Mynors 1991, 184–86 at 184); and, as Hines concluded, 'the two constraints upon the priest … impose an emblematic feminization upon him'—potentially a striking parallel to our putative cross-dressing Anglo-Saxon ritual specialists.[255] Unfortunately, it is altogether possible that this episode

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[254] The note 'Hos Galli Eluesce wehte uocant' ('the *Galli* call these [hallucinations] *Eluesce wehte*') discussed above ostensibly envisages some Anglo-Saxon speech-community equivalent to the castrated priests of Cybele (§5:5), but can hardly be relied on. The possible further meaning of the Old High German *hagazussa* as 'in weiblicher Kleidung auftretender fahrender Schauspieler, Spielmann' ('a travelling actor, minstrel, performing in women's clothing'; *AHDWB*, s.v. *hagazussa* §5) may hint that men might have dressed as women in order to be *hagazussan*. As Bullough noted, the early medieval Penitential of Silos includes an intriguing reference within a list concerning incantations, consultation of demons and proscribed healing practices to men who dance wearing women's clothes (Bullough 1976, 362; Bullough–Bullough 1993, 61; see also Dumézil 1973b, 114–21).

[255] 1997, 379–80. Page questioned the representativeness of Coifi's portrayal on the grounds that

is purely Bede's invention—a device whereby he imposed his own conceptions of a priesthood on the pagan past, developing distinctive features for it in his narrative so that Coifi could transgress them at the dramatic moment of conversion (cf. Page 1995, 121–22).

But even disregarding Bede, we do have Anglo-Saxon comparisons for the idea that early Anglo-Saxon ritual specialists acquired power through gender transgression: monks and to some extent priests were expected to do just this. At least in theory, monks established their ritual status by taking on celibacy, distinctive haircuts and dress, and eschewing weapons. This practice was usually construed theologically in terms of the transcendence rather than the transgression of gender, and Ælfric, doubtless mindful that 'non … vir utetur veste feminea abominabilis enim apud Deum est qui facit haec' ('a man must not use womanly clothes, for he is abhorrent to God who does these things', Deuteronomy 22:5; ed. Weber 1975, I 264), certainly did not see it as gender transgression (cf. ch. 206 of his first Old English letter to Wulfstan and ch. 114–15 of his pastoral letter for Wulfsige; ed. Whitelock–Brett–Brooke 1981, 300, 219). However, section 35 of Alfred's law-code suggests that other Anglo-Saxons—perhaps because they lived earlier, but perhaps also because they were laymen—construed the marks of the Christian ritual specialist otherwise (ed. Liebermann 1903–16, I 68–69 at 68):

> Gif mon cierliscne mon gebinde unsynnigne, gebete mid X scill.
> […]
> Gif he hine on bismor to homolan bescire, med X scill. gebete.
> Gif he hine to preoste bescire unbundenne, mid XXX scill. gebete.
> Gif he ðone beard ófascire, mid XX scill.gebete.
> Gif he hine gebinde ⁊ þonne to preoste bescire, mid LX scill. gebete.

> If anyone binds an innocent man of the *ceorl*-class, he will compensate with 10 shillings.
> […]
> If, as an insult, he cuts his hair/shaves him to a make him a *homola* (?man with head-hair shaven off),[256] he will compensate with 10 shillings.
> If he cuts his hair/shaves him, unbound, (as though) to make him a priest, he will compensate with 30 shillings.
> If he completely shaves the beard, he will compensate with 20 shillings.
> If he binds him and then cuts his hair/shaves him (as though) to make him a priest, he will compensate with 60 shillings.

This law is in a widespread tradition of legislation in early medieval law-codes against certain insults, many of which, particularly in Scandinavia, involved impugning

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'in the violent life of the times few prominent men could afford to renounce self-defence' (1995b, 117–18 at 117), but if random violence really were an ever-present threat, Anglo-Saxon women, children, slaves and clerics would have had to be armed no less than men. In fact, the access to and direction of violence in Anglo-Saxon society must have been culturally constructed, certain groups as a rule being spared it.
[256] The meaning of *homola* is unclear (cf. *DOE*, s.v. *bysmor* §A.4), but as Bosworth and Toller (1898, s.v. *homola*) pointed out, the word must be related to *hamelian* ('mutilate') and to Older Scots *hommill*, *hummill* (of livestock, 'with horns removed'; of ears of corn 'with the bristles removed'; *DOST*, s.vv.)

masculinity (see e.g. Meulengracht Sørensen 1983 [1980]), and many of which again concern forcible hair-cutting.[257] Alfred's law, which does not seem hitherto to have been noted in this context, shows that while it was well and good for an Anglo-Saxon to have a priest's haircut if he were a priest, it was an insult to impose such a haircut on a layman —as James also found in his wider survey of early medieval Germanic-speaking Europe (1984, 89–95). It was an insult of the same order as tying someone up (depriving him, amongst other things, of his physical power) or shaving off his beard (depriving him of an outward marker of masculinity, which would appear to have been worse; cf. the importance of beards in early Irish society, Sayers 1991, 165–67). Indeed, if the fines imposed do not simply reflect the implicit disrespect done to the Church, then giving someone a priest's haircut was a worse insult than either of these. My juxtaposition of Bede's account of Coifi with Alfred's law is not to argue for any direct crinicultural continuity between pre- and post-conversion Anglo-Saxon ritual specialists—though Mc Carthy's recent and detailed study of the Insular tonsure has rescued precisely this prospect from its not entirely venerable historiography.[258] Rather Alfred's law-code shows convincingly that it would not be at all inconsistent with what we know of later Anglo-Saxon culture to hypothesise that earlier Anglo-Saxon ritual specialists also marked their special status by taking on appearances which would ordinarily be considered degrading, and arguably transgressive of normal gender-practices.

To press the analogy between pre-conversion Anglo-Saxon ritual specialists and monks, monks had a mythological paradigm for their transcendence of gender: the angels of the heavenly city. The evidence for *ælfe* offers a basis for supposing that earlier Anglo-Saxon men likewise had a mythological model for their systematic gender transgressions. In taking on feminine trappings to gain supernatural power, they were undertaking a transgression for which *ælfe*, in their world-views, provided a model. Whether or not *ælfe* dressed as women to effect *siden* as Óðinn seems to have done to effect *seiðr*, *ælfe*'s evident supernatural power and feminine characteristics are sufficient to suggest that they could have provided a powerful model for systematic male cross-dressing in early Anglo-Saxon society in pursuit of ritual and/or supernatural power. Indeed, we might even speculate that the early Anglo-Saxon men dressed as women gained power not only from a gender transgression conceptualised through mythologies

[257] See section 33 of Æthelberht's laws (ed. Liebermann 1903–16, I 5), which has close Frisian analogues (Stanley 1976); Sayers 1991, 174–77 on medieval Ireland (cf. the examples concerning horses in medieval Wales, Hall 2002, 31–32); more widely James 1984, 89–93. On the symbolic power of early medieval hair more generally, see Bartlett 1994, esp. 57–59; Diesenberger 2003.
[258] Mc Carthy emphasised how not only various Irish writers but also Aldhelm and Ceolfrid identified Simon Magus—the prototypical sorcerer in early Medieval Christian ideologies—as the originator of the Insular tonsure. The basis for this seems not to be any tradition about Simon, however, but an identification of the Insular tonsure with that of native, albeit possibly only Irish, *magi* (2003, esp. 161–63, 166; cf. Venclová 2002, esp. 466–70).

concerning *ælfe*, but specifically from *ælfe* themselves—which would fit neatly with the evidence of *ylfig* that *ælfe* might bring about states of prophetic speech.

Before concluding this topic, it is worth emphasising that it is risky to speculate further on how beliefs in *ælfe* related to more formal elements of what we might, for want of better terms, label pre-conversion public religion: our evidence at this point is vanishingly slight. We may at least recall the interrelationships in early medieval Scandinavian belief of Yngvi-Freyr, *álfar* and *vanir* discussed above. Though parts of his arguments are untenable, North has shown that there was probably a deity Ing in early Anglo-Saxon belief-systems, and that he was arguably an especially prominent deity (1997a). This figure seems not only to be cognate with Freyr in name (insofar as Freyr is also referred to as Yngvi-Freyr), but to have shared with him and his mythological relatives the motifs of travel in a wagon (see for example Turville-Petre 1969; North 1997a, 44–48) and possibly a *hieros gamos* (Tolkien 1983 [1964], 127–28; for other resonances between *Beowulf* and Old Norse mythological material see Orchard 2003b, 116–23). The Norse mythological parallel to this marriage is itself most fully recounted in the Eddaic *Skírnismál*, which further involves *seiðr*-like magic, and many other features of which seem to have close Anglo-Saxon counterparts (§7:2.1 n. 187). The paradigmatic importance of the *Skírnismál* myth in ritual is suggested by Adam of Bremen's association of Fricco with the celebration of marriages (§2:1.2). Our evidence is not inconsistent, then, with a hypothetical pre-conversion Anglo-Saxon god paralleling Yngvi-Freyr, lord of the *álfar* and arguably an *álfr* himself, associated with the use of *seiðr* in seduction: a god Ing and a people of *ælfe*, the latter at least associated with *siden* and seduction. While, as I have indicated above, Taylor and Salus's analyses are unsatisfactory (see §4:1 n. 98), it is also worth noting that their argument that the putative *alfwalda* of *Beowulf* is to be identified with Freyr fits well into this reading (1982, 441; cf. Taylor 1998, 99–106). Our Anglo-Saxon evidence is not, however, of a kind which will permit the confident reconstruction of mythologies of this sort.

Although certainty is impossible, then, there are reasons to think that male, effeminate *ælfe* were of systematic social significance in Anglo-Saxon society, as a model of unmasculine behaviour. They were also paired with supernatural females most prominently called *hægtessan*, who transgressed female norms of behaviour by exhibiting masculine traits; I have argued that this represents a systematic symmetry, these females presumably serving as models of unfeminine behaviour. There is also reason to think that men might gain supernatural powers like *ælfe*'s by entering liminal cultural space through gender transgression. If this was the case, it certainly did not last: insofar as the Christian ritual specialists who dominated post-conversion Anglo-Saxon

culture used similar techniques, they constructed them through ostentatiously different mythological paradigms.

2.2 The female *ælfe~elven*

These changing patterns in Anglo-Saxon society advert to the possibility that Anglo-Saxons' norms and constructions of gender were changing between the migration and the Norman Conquest. This being so, it is of especial interest that at some point in the early Middle Ages, female equivalents of male *ælfe* entered Anglo-Saxon belief-systems, attested first as equivalents of *nymphae*. Around the eighth century, at least in written registers, there was no common Old English word for a nymph-like female, or a female *ælf*. But by around 1200, Laȝamon's female *aluen* enjoyed supernatural powers to shape the child Arthur's future and to heal him in their otherworld over the sea (cf. Edwards 2002). By the time when Edward I commissioned his own round table, *elven~elves* were seducing men and dancing through woods and meadows, daisies flowering in their wake (§§7:1.3; 8:3). How early this change began is hard to guess, but my demonstration that it appeared in writing by the early eleventh century demands that we revise previous assumptions that it represents 'Celtic' influence through the rise of folklorically-inspired literature in the Anglo-Norman twelfth-century renaissance (§5:3.3). We must now situate the arrival of female *elven* in the changing culture of Anglo-Saxon England prior to the early eleventh century. If nothing else, this is powerful evidence against the traditional assumption that non-Christian belief survived conversion only in a more or less fossilized state: female *elven* show rather that it continued to live and change. However, they may also be added to the growing evidence that, contrary to older views, we are not to look to the Norman Conquest to explain major changes in English gendering.

Detecting whether there may be a link between developments in the gendering of *ælfe* and that of Anglo-Saxon society is difficult. The history of Anglo-Saxon women is overwhelmingly the history of queens and nuns; neither group need be very representative of women and femininity generally, and while their positions in Anglo-Saxon society changed over time, the reasons for this and so its significance for the history of gender relations are hard to disentangle.[259] The rise of female *elven* may show developments in how myth reflected society rather than in the structure of society itself. We also know too little about the origins of the female *elven*. Their emergence in the eleventh century could represent the adoption of a popular belief by the aristocracy or of

[259] On queens see Stafford 1983; 1997; on nuns Foot 2000, I esp. 30–34, 61–84; see further the references in §9:2.0 n. 247.

women's belief by men; alternatively, they may have arisen as an innovation in aristocratic society, representing one of many strategies whereby this group effected social change. Nor does the non-Christian character of these changes mean that churchmen were not involved.

However, obscure though the rise of female *elven* is, the prominence of otherworldly females across high medieval Europe suggests that we are dealing with a general trend in, or an English alignment with, wider medieval European culture. Moreover, although the evidence is scanty, this seems likely to have been part of wider reshaping of beliefs. Two relevant developments may be hypothesised: the stripping of gender-transgressing features from male *elven~elves*, aligning their characteristics with masculine ones; and the decline in traditions of martial supernatural females. Our medieval evidence is too scanty to be sure of either of these developments, and *Wið færstice* and Issobel Gowdie's confessions in particular show how slowly beliefs must have changed in some sections of society. But the *heluenbok* in *Non habebis deos alios* seems to denote a grimoire—like the Canon's Yeoman's *elvish nice loore*, in the domain of learned, masculine magic. Chaucer equated his one male *elf* with an *incubus*—an active, violent and demonic being (cf. Yamamoto 1993–94 and the similar Middle High German meanings of *alp*). That male *elves* continued to cause ailments was consistent with the behaviour of indubitably male demons. The Scottish conceptions of *elvis* and *fareis* suggest gender inversion insofar as their female ruler is more prominent than her husband (cf. Purkiss 2000, 66–68; Green 2003, 37). But her power does not extend to making her male subjects seem effeminate; there is no suggestion that their special knowledge or power to cause harm reflects magic-working rather than innate ability. This provides enough evidence to guess, at least, that late Anglo-Saxon *ælfe* were on a road to losing their more markedly effeminate traits.

As for the weapon-bearing women, the words *hægtesse*, and to a lesser extent *wælcyrige*, were to have long histories in English, but are poorly attested in Middle English, so it is hard to trace changes in their meanings; their apparent decline may owe more to restructuring in the Middle English lexicon than to wider cultural change. However, although martial, otherworldly women did enjoy a long life in medieval literature—and only partly because of the revival of Classical traditions of Amazons—otherworldly females whose femininity is not compromised by weapon-bearing are far more prominent.[260] The power of otherworldly females to seduce and patronise heroes

[260] In addition to Icelandic literature, which may have been unusually conservative (see, e.g., Clover 1986; Kroesen 1997), the story of the powerful, unmarried queen who kills her suitors or has them killed is prominent in the late thirteenth-century *Nibelungenlied* (Aventiure 6–7; ed. Boor 1972, 60–85) and occurs in the *lai Doon*, surviving in a late thirteenth-century manuscript (ed. Paris 1879, 61–64). On traditions of Amazons see Crane 1994, esp. 18–26, 76–84; Solterer 1991. For non-martial, otherworldly females, see in addition to those cited here §7:2.0 n. 186.

suggested by Norse and Irish evidence for martial otherworldly females is still attested in high medieval Britain, but while this assistance may constitute advice or magical objects (as with Rhiannon in *Pwyll Pendeuic Dyuet*), finance (as with the anonymous otherworldly woman in *Lanval*), or beneficial prophesying and healing (as with Argante and her *elven* in Laȝamon's *Brut*), it never extends to offering a helping hand in battle: the closest these otherworldly females come to gender transgression is in their occasional achievement of the sovereignty which all their sex, we are told, desire (*Wife of Bath's Tale*, lines 1037–40; ed. Benson 1987, 119). We have just enough continuity of evidence in Ireland from early medieval to modern times to trace how traditions of the valkyrie-like *badb* were combined into traditions of non-martial *síd*-women there (Lysaght 1996, 191–218); some similar development must probably be assumed for Scandinavia.

Perhaps the *meyjar* of *Vǫlundarkviða*, whose lack of weaponry is probably one reason why they have so long been excluded from histories of Scandinavian supernatural females (cf. §7:3, esp. n. 194), lie at the cusp of this change in Anglo-Scandinavian aristocratic culture: they lack the ostentatious armaments of Eddaic heroines like Sigrún, their seductiveness consequently gaining a new prominence, but they retain their formidable power to protect men and determine the course of their actions.

It would appear, then, that in aristocratic discourses at least, the martial *hægtessan* of *Wið færstice* and our early glosses were gradually losing their prominence and significance in England during the medieval period. The decline of martial otherworldly females which I have sketched fits neatly with Clover's hypothesis of a process of 'medievalisation' in gendering, whereby Europe's iron-age societies, to which gender transgression was ideologically important and empowering, developed into the medieval societies whose concern was rather to align gender with sex (1993, esp. 385–86). If the Irish situation is anything to go by, however, these *hægtessan* did not leave a vacuum in belief systems: their place was taken by ideologically more acceptable replacements. In England, it is not unlikely that this replacement was the new female *elven*. No longer expressing gender norms by an inversion which also provided models for transgression by members of the in-group, Anglo-Saxons increasingly construed femaleness by constructing paragons of femininity: beautiful, seductive, unarmed but magic-working otherworldly *elven*.

In this model, Anglo-Saxon gender norms do not change substantially. Rather, the means by which they are constructed change. But a change in the means by which gender was constructed inevitably had effects on the ways in which gender could be performed —arguably, in this case, removing the availability of a paradigm for transgressive behaviour. Christian ideologies must, as Clover suggested, have played an important part in these processes. Accordingly, it is tempting to speculate that the putative displacement

of martial *hægtessan* by female *elven* relates to two other developments in Anglo-Saxon culture: a decline in nuns' autonomy and a rise in the fear of female sexuality. The power and autonomy of *virgines*—unmarried or once-married chaste women—in the early Anglo-Saxon Church is striking (Ortenburg 2001, esp. 64 n. 16). Suggesting that this power was paralleled in non-Christian beliefs, and later curtailed, has unfortunate overtones of the narratives still circulating in Norse scholarship whereby mythological women are understood as echoes of some prehistoric matriarchy.[261] But although the argument that martial females in Old Norse literature echo the (one-time) capacity of unmarried or widowed women to become culturally male when required to pursue feuds may hold water (Clover 1986), we have no reliable evidence for Anglo-Saxon institutions of this sort (cf. §8:2.2 n. 227). No simple cut-off for the prominent place of women in the early Anglo-Saxon Church can be argued: as Ortenburg emphasised, women without husbands have continued, as a rule, to have more power than married women in English cultures (2001, 68), and Foot has shown both that the decline in female religious life during the Anglo-Saxon period was not as extensive as it once seemed and that its causes and effects were probably complex (2000, esp. ɪ 61–84). Despite all these caveats, however, it is possible that the power and independence of the armed supernatural females of which we have hints in early Anglo-Saxon beliefs provided mythological paradigms for certain independent actions by early Anglo-Saxon women, attested in the power of women in the early Anglo-Saxon Church, and that the diminution nuns' power is reflected in the rise of *elven* in Anglo-Saxon beliefs.

Turning to sexuality, we cannot tell how far martial, supernatural Anglo-Saxon females were also associated with seduction, but it does seem likely that their loss of martiality if nothing else encouraged a shift in emphasis towards seductiveness. It is difficult to guess how far women were seen as a sexual threat to men in early Anglo-Saxon culture. It is easy to suppose a general ideological trend in early medieval Europe whereby women and sex were increasingly both seen as a threat and ever more intimately linked with one another (e.g. Morris 1991, esp. 129–53), but hard evidence is thin on the ground. Felix, partly modelling his *vita* of the Anglo-Saxon Guthlac on Evagrius's *Vita Sancti Antonii* in the eighth century, dispensed completely with the sexual temptations which Anthony endured (Kurtz 1926, 110–13). This might reflect incompatibility with a culture which did not expect women either to take the sexual initiative, or to pose a threat to men if they did; if so, it would be consistent with a pattern for which Cormak (1992) and Jochens (1995, 77–78) have argued in early Christian Scandinavia. But Kurtz viewed

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[261] e.g. Heinrichs 1986, esp. 113–14, 140; Jochens 1996, esp. 34–35; for the seminal critique of such ideas see Bamberger 1974. It is worth noting, however, that Glosecki has recently offered a careful and detailed case for a degree of matriarchy in the early Germanic-speaking world (2001).

it simply as an example of Anglo-Saxon prudishness, and he may have been right. Anglo-Saxon laws punishing only male seductors, abductors or rapists need not suggest that women were not also punished for their parts in such events, merely that they were outside patterns of reparation; Edward and Guthrum's proscriptions against *horcwenan* (no. 11; ed. Liebermann 1903–16, I 134–35) and the appearance of mutilation and the stripping of property for adulteresses in the law-code II Cnut (no. 53; ed. Liebermann 1903–16, I 348–49), could represent our first codifications rather than innovations. But, taken at face value, evidence of this sort does suggest a growing concern not only with formally regulating secular sexual activity, but with the role of women in it (see Frantzen 1998, 142–44; cf. Fell 1984, 64; Shippey 2001, para 15); and it seems likely that Christianisation introduced concepts of sin and associations of sin with sexual behaviour which had not previously existed in Anglo-Saxon culture and would have encouraged the idea of female seductiveness as a spiritual threat to men. If so, then the rise of female *elven* in Anglo-Saxon beliefs may reflect new constructions of the danger posed by women to men's spiritual well-being—a purpose to which they were certainly put in the *Southern English Legendary*, and one paralleled in Ireland by *Serglige Con Culainn* (§§7:1.2–3). Christianisation is unlikely, however, to be the whole story: thus, for example, the decline in gender-blurring images on Iron-Age Scandinavian small arts analysed by Wiker (2001) dates to around the sixth century, long before Scandianvia's conversion. Christianisation was only one of many forces behind Europe's 'medievalisation', and may be as much a symptom as a cause.

There are, then, plausible contexts in which we can understand the rise of female *ælfe~elven*, principally a drive in Anglo-Saxon culture over time more rigorously to align sex with gender. Their appearance may also relate to the gradual curtailment of women's power and independence, and possibly with more extensive study of Anglo-Saxon gender history, this idea will become testable. What is undoubted, however, is that the female *elven* show Anglo-Saxon non-Christian belief to have remained dynamic after conversion —even among monks—in ways which challenge previous assumptions about the causes and pace of Anglo-Saxon cultural change.

3. Christianisation

Ælfe did not always retain their positive associations: they might be demonised, being aligned with monsters and with the Devil and demons. This demonisation did not take long: our earliest clearly datable example is early ninth-century if not earlier. It may be compared with the later eighth-century Old Saxon Catechism, whose language suggests 'an Anglo-Saxon imperfectly acquainted with OS [Old Saxon] adapting a presumably OE

[Old English] text as best he could for OS addressees' (Green 1998, 345): 'end ec forsacho allum dioboles uuercum and uuordum, Thunaer ende Uuoden ende Saxnote ende allum them unholdum the hira genotas sint' ('and I renounce all the Devil's deeds and words, Thunaer and UUôden and Saxnôt and all those evil beings which are their companions'; ed. Braune 1969, 39). With themes like these in early Anglo-Saxon catechisms, it is no surprise that *ælfe* should have been aligned with the Devil.

However, the implication here that conversion had swift and substantial effects on beliefs in *ælfe* comes with caveats. The first is that the catechism—even where it was heard, understood and remembered—may not have prompted any paradigm shift in those catechised. Evidence for pre-conversion and to some extent post-conversion Scandinavian beliefs suggests that an individual might seek the patronage of one god, and both criticise other gods and face their displeasure (North 2000); transferring the concept to Anglo-Saxon culture, John inferred that 'the nearest parallel to Woden in the modern world would be a Premier League football manager' (1996, 23). The Old Saxon Catechism can be understood in the same way: the catechised transfers his allegiance to one god (and the god's *genôtas*) and denigrates the others (whose existence is not denied). These observations provide some context for the evidence that the demonisation of *ælfe* was an extremely slow process. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, preachers were propounding conservative-looking *elf*-traditions, but trying to convince their audiences that *elves* were at the same time fallen angels—but not necessarily damned ones (§7:1.3). By the seventeenth century in Scotland, witchcraft prosecutors did not refer to *elvis* and *fareis*, labelling them 'devils' and the like as a matter of course, but this was far from the case for the people they tried (see §7:4, cf. 8:3). The evidence of our Anglo-Saxon medical texts shows unease. Not only were Anglo-Saxon clerics—latin-literate men of royal courts—convinced of the power of *ælfe*, but when it came to the crunch they were far from confident that chasing away *deoflas* would also undo the harm of *ælfe* (§6, esp 6:2.2).

It has been possible to show, then, what has long been suspected but hitherto undemonstrated, that beliefs in *ælfe* experienced considerable continuity in Anglo-Saxon world-views. They remained potentially positive forces and sources of power to at least some sections of community for over a millennium after the Anglo-Saxon settlements. Nor did they just remain: they changed with the times, maintaining their relevance to culture and society even as Christianisation proceeded. This does not only tell us about Anglo-Saxon culture. It also illuminates, for example, the history of themes which became so prominent in the early modern witchcraft trials.

4. Future directions

This study opens up a range of new possibilities for understanding the medieval past, only some of which I have developed here. It has provided a case study in the power of detailed analyses of the meanings of medieval vernacular words, when suitably contextualised in an anthropologically-based framework, to afford information about the societies in which they were written and spoken. One hopes that these approaches might be adopted and developed. In particular, the study suggests the value of further examinations of medieval English words for supernatural beings. I have shown that to understand the meanings of *ælf* and of *ælfe*, one needs to understand words of related meaning, and have often wished to understand better what *þyrs* or *wælcyrige* meant. Such detailed studies have become immeasurably easier with the completion of electronic corpora and major research dictionaries of medieval English: one profitable use of the research time saved is to work to integrate this lexical data into Anglo-Saxon cultural history. The place of monsters and supernatural females in Anglo-Saxon world-views is reconstructable and can provide rewarding insights into Anglo-Saxon society; magic and illness also emerge as ripe for close assessment.

The research in this thesis specifically invites fuller extension into post-Anglo-Saxon England and Scandinavia, developing the new potential for assessing change and continuity. But there is more to be said about Anglo-Saxon *ælfe* too. I have only been able to hint at the place-name evidence for the situation of supernatural beings in landscapes, but these hints, alongside my analyses of other evidence for early Anglo-Saxon conceptions of space, are sufficient to show that we may be able to integrate supernatural beings (Christian and non-Christian) into new reconstructions of Anglo-Saxon cosmologies and identity (see Appendix 2). Developing these approaches would afford an excellent opportunity for integrating literary, archaeological and linguistic evidence along the lines recently propounded by Hines (2004, 37–70).

I have also emphasised how Anglo-Saxon traditional beliefs included beings which we have hitherto dissociated from early Germanic-speaking cultures, connecting them instead with early Ireland and the high Middle Ages. I have, of course, used high medieval and Irish comparative material to interpret the Anglo-Saxon material, but our independent Old English evidence is nonetheless extensive enough that the conclusion will stand. Beliefs in otherworldly beings can no longer be assumed to have been peripheral to the powerful Germanic-speaking cultures of early medieval Europe. Much as the rich medieval Scandinavian evidence for witchcraft beliefs has in recent years made Scandinavia something of a case-study for European witchcraft—comprising, for example, one of three contributions to the medieval volume of the Athlone History of

Witchcraft and Magic in Europe series (Raudvere 2002; cf. Ankarloo 2002)—medieval Ireland provides an outstanding candidate for a case-study in what we might call European fairy-belief. This prospect has perhaps been overlooked because of discourses —from within Ireland and outside—emphasising the distinctiveness of its early medieval evidence (or, to put it another way, marginalising it). I do not claim that Irish beliefs were European beliefs, any more than Scandinavian ones were. But they may provide us with a new framework for understanding patchier Continental evidence. Moreover, although witchcraft and witchcraft trials are prominent in the study of early modern Europe, the majority of areas did not experience witch-panics. Among the many explanations which must be adduced for this, Hutton has suggested that some societies conceived of other kinds of supernatural culprits, from outside the community, suggesting a correlation between the prominence of fairy-belief and the dearth of trials in the Gaelic-speaking world (2002, 31–32 at 32). A fuller understanding of medieval Europe's otherworldly beings may yield an extensive harvest for historians.