The Meanings of *Elf* and Elves in Medieval England

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Submitted for the degree of Ph.D.

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October, 2004
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Abstract

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This thesis investigates the character and role of non-Christian belief in medieval societies, and how we can reconstruct it using written sources. It focuses on Anglo-Saxon culture, contextualising Anglo-Saxon material with analyses of Middle English, Older Scots, Scandinavian and Irish texts. We lack Anglo-Saxon narratives about elves (ælfe, singular ælf), but the word ælf itself is well-attested in Old English texts. By analysing these attestations, it is possible to discover much about the meanings of the word ælf—from which, I argue, it is possible to infer what ælfe were believed to be and to do, and how these beliefs changed over time. Using methodologies inspired by linguistic anthropology (discussed in Chapter 1), I develop these analyses to reconstruct the changing significances of non-Christian beliefs in medieval English-speaking societies, affording new perspectives on Christianisation, health and healing, and group identity, particularly gendering.

The body of the thesis, chapters 2–9, is in three parts. Because of its historiographical prominence in discussions of Anglo-Saxon non-Christian beliefs, I begin in Chapter 2 by reassessing Scandinavian comparative evidence for elf-beliefs. I also show that it is possible to correlate the meanings of Old Norse words for supernatural beings with other Scandinavian mythological sources for world-views, providing a case-study supporting similar approaches to Anglo-Saxon evidence.

Chapters 3–6 reassess Anglo-Saxon linguistic and textual evidence, tackling in turn prehistoric naming patterns and morphological developments, poetry, glosses, and medical texts. The long-standing assumption that ælfe were incorporeal, small and arrow-shooting proves to be both unfounded and implausible. Traditionally, ælfe were conceptually similar both to gods and to human ethnic others, all of whom were opposed to monsters in Anglo-Saxon world-views. They were probably only male. In textual evidence, ælfe are paradigmatic examples of dangerously seductive beauty and they are possible causes of prophetic speech and certain kinds of ailments. They inflicted ailments at least at times by a variety of magic called siden, cognate with the much-discussed medieval Scandinavian magic seiðr. Both of these points associate ælfe with feminine-gendered traits, and I show that by the eleventh century, ælf could also denote otherworldly, nymph-like females. These otherworldly females seem to have been new arrivals in Anglo-Saxon belief-systems. Demonisation is clearly attested from around
800, but ælfe were not conflated with demons in all or even most discourses, even after the Old English period.

Chapters 7–9 develop this core evidence to argue for the cultural significance of the beliefs it reveals. By adducing comparative texts from medieval Ireland and Scandinavia and from the early modern Scottish witchcraft trials, Chapter 7 shows how the characteristics of ælf in Old English could occur together in coherent, ideologically significant narratives. Chapter 8 considers the Old English charm *Wið færstice* in a similar comparative context, focusing on the trial of Issobel Gowdie for witchcraft in 1662, and considering the importance of elf-beliefs in Anglo-Saxon healing. These chapters emphasise cultural continuity in North West European beliefs, questioning inherited scholarly constructions of fairy-beliefs as distinctively ‘Celtic’, and showing striking continuities between Anglo-Saxon and early modern Scottish beliefs.

Chapter 9 concludes by combining earlier findings to make new assessments of Anglo-Saxon Christianisation and constructions of group identity, danger and power, and gendering. I examine gender in particular, combining evidence from throughout the thesis with comparative textual and archaeological material to argue that mythological gender transgressions were important to early Anglo-Saxon gendering. Beliefs in effeminate ælfe helped to demarcate gender norms, but also provided a paradigm whereby men could in real life gain supernatural power through gender transgression. I link the subsequent rise of female ælfe to changes in Anglo-Saxon gendering, whereby gender roles were enforced with increasing strictness.

By combining detailed linguistic and textual analyses in a suitable comparative context, I reconstruct aspects of non-Christian belief which are marginalized in our early medieval sources, and detect how they changed over time. Such beliefs illuminate various aspects of medieval culture, including social identity, health and healing, the sources and use of supernatural power, and Christianisation. My methods, meanwhile, provide paradigms for taking similar approaches to studying belief and ideology in other areas of medieval Europe.
Contents

Abstract 1
Contents 3
List of figures 7
Abbreviations 7
Acknowledgements 8

1. Introduction 10
   1. Historiography 15
   2. Fundamental assumptions 17
   3. Methodologies 18
      3.1 Categorising from the bottom up 18
      3.2 Language and belief 21
      3.3 The dynamic nature of belief 23
      3.4 Comparison 25
   4. Popular belief? 26

Part 1: An Old Norse context 29

2. An Old Norse context 30
   1. Snorri’s writings 31
      1.1 Snorra Edda and Ynglinga saga 31
      1.2 Snorri and the vanir 35
   2. Álfir in skaldic verse 37
   3. Álfir in Eddaic verse 42
      3.1 Formulae, and Freyr 43
      3.2 Völundarkviða 46
   4. Interpretations 50

Part 2: The Old English textual evidence for ælfe 55

3. The earliest Anglo-Saxon evidence: etymology, onomastics and morphology 56
   1. Etymology 56
   2. Personal names 57
   3. Old English morphology 62
   4. Contexts and interpretations 64
4. The Poetic Evidence
   1. Beowulf
   2. Ælfsyne

5. Glosses
   1. Demonisation: elf and satanas
      1.1 Texts
      1.2 Origins
      1.3 Evidence for the semantics of elf
   2. Ælfe and nymphs: dunælfa and landælfe
      2.1 Texts
      2.2 Origins
      2.3 Evidence for the semantics of elf
   3. Nymphs again: from ælfe to ælfenne to ælfen
      3.1 Texts
      3.2 Origins
      3.3 Evidence for the semantics of elf
   4. Ælfe and prophecy? Ylfig
      4.1 Texts
      4.2 Origins
      4.3 Evidence for the semantics of elf
      4.4 Ælfþone
   5. Ælfe and delusion: ælfsisc

6. Conclusions

6. Medical texts
   1. The elf-shot conspiracy: Bald’s Leechbook II, f. 106r., Gif hors ofscoten sie
   2. Other elf-ailments: Leechbook III, ff. 123a–25v
      2.1 Ælfadl
      2.2 Ælfsoða
      2.3 Wæterælfadl
   3. Ælfsiden
      3.1 Comparative linguistic evidence
      3.2 Harley 585, ff. 137r–38r
      3.3 Leechbook III, ff. 120v–21r and lenctenadl
      3.4 Bald’s Leechbook I, section 64, f. 52v: the semantics of leodrune and the association of maran with ælfe
3.5 Wið ælfcynne 126
3.6 Wið ælfe ð wiþ uncuþum sidsan 129

4. Interpretations 130

Part 3: North-West European contexts; interpretations; and conclusions 132

7. Narratives and contexts 133

1. Sex, sickness, seiðr and mórur; and their analogues 136
   1.1 Ynglinga saga 136
   1.2 Serglige Con Culainn 138
   1.3 The Southern English Legendary 141
2. Males and magic 144
   2.1 Skírnismál and the Bergen rune-stave 145
   2.2 The Gesta Danorum 147
   2.3 Evidence for ælfe 150
3. Vǫlundarkviða again 152
4. The Scottish witchcraft trials 157
   4.1 Andro Man 159
   4.2 Elspeth Reoch 162
5. Conclusions 165

8. Wið færstice 168

1. What is ylfa gescot? And the coherence of the charm 170
2. The hægtessan 171
   2.1 What is a hægtesse? 171
   2.2 Medieval analogues for the hægtessan in Wið færstice 174
3. Issobel Gowdie: the smiths, the elves and the witches 179
4. Healing and the supernatural in Anglo-Saxon culture 186
5. Conclusions 188

9. The meanings of ælfe 190

1. Ælfe as sources of danger and power 192
2. Gendering 195
   2.1 The effeminacy of ælfe: early Anglo-Saxons and mythological transgressions 197
   2.2 The female ælfe~elven 204
3. Christianisation 208
4. Future directions

Appendix 1: The linguistic history of elf
   1. The phonological and morphological history of elf
   2. Germanic cognates

Appendix 2: Place-names ælf

Appendix 3: Two non-elves

Works cited
List of figures

Figure 1: componential analysis of Norse words for beings 41
Figure 2: semantic field diagram of Norse words for beings 41
Figure 3: monstrosity in medieval Scandinavia 54
Figure 4: componential analysis of Old English words for beings 64
Figure 5: semantic field diagram of Old English words for beings 65
Figure 6: the phonological development of ælf 213
Figure 7: the morphology of ælf 216

Abbreviations

AHDWB Althochdeutsches Wörterbuch
BL British Library
DMLBS Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources
DOE Dictionary of Old English
DONP A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose/Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog
DOST Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue
L Linnaean name
MED Middle English Dictionary
OED Oxford English Dictionary
S Precedes reference-numbers in Kelly 1999
Each time I have begun studying at another university, I have realised how much the last shaped my thought. This thesis is a product of three. 2001–2003 saw me frequently returning to my alma mater, the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic at Cambridge University, where my thesis and I profited considerably from acquaintances old and new, and of course from the wealth of books there. Sandra Cromey is a pearl among librarians. I had the privilege to spend 2003–2004 in the Department of English at the University of Helsinki, where I was supervised by Matti Kilpiö and Leena Kahlas-Tarkka. I am much indebted to both; both they and my other friends there, I hope, have some idea of how much they gave me, and of my gratitude. My students taught me more than I taught them, as I wish I had said at the time. The beneficence and patience which I met at Helsinki is perhaps best summed up by the willingness of its librarians to keep speaking to me in Finnish.

Above all my research has been in and of the University of Glasgow. Enumerating the contributions of my supervisors there, Graham Caie and Katie Lowe, would inevitably leave too much unsaid; I am fortunate to have worked with them. The Department of English Language was a blessedly pleasant environment to work in; listing the assistance I enjoyed from its other members would be too long a task, but my progress owes much to Alison Bennett and Pauline Maridor. I have benefited too from teaching and otherwise lurking in the departments of History and Celtic, whose contributions to this thesis have been considerable. I took my M.Phil. in the Glasgow Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, which has remained my intellectual home; my convivual home has remained the Hetherington Research Club; and my enjoyment of the last three years owes much to the friends I have made in each.

The attenders of the Late Antique and Medieval Postgraduate Seminars at the University of Edinburgh have listened about elves more often than could reasonably have been hoped, as have the members of Glossa in Helsinki. Besides benefiting from the attentions of my supervisors, drafts of the thesis have been read in whole or in part by Paul Bibire, Dimitra Fimi, Bethany Fox, Carole Hough, Alistair McLennan, Ben Snook and Harriet Thomsett. Ben and Beth along with Dave Cochran, Rory Naismith and Charles West have assisted with research materials. Richard Burian, Simon Horobin, Katie Lowe, Rod McConchie and Mark Zumbuhl have proved assiduous elf-spotters. The original idea for the project was Alex Woolf’s. The research was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board, with an additional contribution in 2002–2003 from the SOCRATES programme. I thank individuals and organisations alike; further specific
debts are noted in the thesis itself. Needless to say, however, its defects and errors are my own. Tell me about them via <http://www.alarichall.org.uk>.

The longer I spend in education, the more I observe that academic achievement is directly proportional to parental support. Depressing though the point is in general, I am grateful and glad to acknowledge that in my case it is certainly true. Bethany Fox has been mentioned in another context above. I don’t know how differently the thesis would turned out without her; but the time spent writing it wouldn’t have been half as fun. Thanks, one and all.