

Chapter 1

Introduction

One assumes that when, around the first decade of the eleventh century, somewhere in the south-west of England, the scribe began what was probably the last stint on his manuscript of medical recipes, he did not guess that it would remain in use for over six centuries—more or less until it came into the hands of Reverend Robert Burscough, who, passing it on to his friend Humphrey Wanley, transformed it from a practical text into an object of scholarship.¹ But he knew that he was making a book to be used: his parchment was stiff, his script functional and the finished codex portable: a practical reference work for day-to-day use, in treating and protecting both people and animals. Having already copied the Old English translations of the *Herbarium* and the *Medicina de quadrupedibus*, the scribe was making or copying a large, miscellaneous collection of medical texts, known since Cockayne's edition as *Lacnunga* ('remedies'; 1864–68, III 2–80). Some parts of the collection were already old. One case in point may be the remedy which he copied onto folios 175–76v, which is dominated by a charm which alliterates the palatal and velar realisations of Old English /ʁ /, a practice which apparently declined during the tenth century, ceasing by the end.² One wonders where the scribe registered any surprise as he copied this entry; it has, at any rate, intrigued and challenged scholars since the nineteenth century (ed. Doane 1994b, no. 265; collated with Grattan–Singer 1952, 173–76):

Wið færstice feferfuige 7 seo reade netele ðe þurh ærn inwyxð 7 wegbrade wyll in buteran.	For a ?violent, stabbing pain: ³ feverfew and the 'red nettle' [L. <i>Lamium purpureum</i>] ⁴ that grows through the ?corn, and plantain. Boil in butter. Loud, they were, yes, loud, when they rode over the (burial) mound; they were fierce when they rode across the land. Shield yourself now, you can survive this strife. Out, little spear, if there is one here within. It ⁵ stood under lime-wood (i.e. a shield), under a light shield, where those mighty women marshalled their powers, and ?they sent shrieking spears. ⁶ I will send another back,
Hlude wæran hy la hlude ða hy ofer þone hlæw ridan wæran anmode ða hy ofer land ridan	
scyld ðu ðe nu þu ðysne nið genesan mote	
ut lytel spere gif her inne sie	
stod under linde under leohtum scylde	
þær ða mihtigan wif hyra mægen beræddon	
7 hy gyllende garas sændan	
ic him oðerne eft wille sændan	

¹ See Doane 1994b, 26–36 [no. 265]; cf. Grattan–Singer 1952, 206–9; Ker 1957, 305–6 [no. 231].

² In *gyllende* and *garas*. Amos 1980, 100–2; cf. Fulk 1992, 258–59; Minkova 2003, 113–21; the instance may admittedly reflect the repetition of an older formula: see n. 6.

³ This is usually translated 'sudden stitch' (e.g. Grattan–Singer 1952, 173). However, *stitch* in

fleogende flane forane togeanes	a flying arrow ahead in opposition.
ut lytel spere gif hit her inne sy ·	Out, little spear, if it is here within.
sæt smið sloh seax	A smith sat, forged a dagger; ?a
lytel iserna wund swiðe	small [one] of swords, violent
ut lytel spere gif her inne sy	thewound. ⁷ Out, little spear, if it
syx smiðas sætan wælspera worhtan	should be here within. Six smiths sat,
ut spere næs in spere	wrought slaughter-spears. Be out,
gif her inne sy isenes dæl	spear, not in, spear. If there is here
hægtessan geweorc hit sceal gemyltan	within a bit of iron, the work/deed of
gif ðu wære on fell scoten oððe wære on flæsc scoten	<i>hægtessan</i> , ⁸ it must melt. If you were
oððe wære on blod scoten	<i>scoten</i> ⁹ in the skin or were <i>scoten</i> in
oððe wære on lið scoten næfre ne sy ðin lif atæsed	the flesh, or were <i>scoten</i> in the
gif hit wære esa gescot oððe hit wære ylfa gescot	blood, or were <i>scoten</i> in the limb
oððe hit wære hægtessan gescot nu ic wille ðin helpan	(?joint), may your life never be
þis ðe to bote esa gescotes ðis ðe to bote ylfa gescotes	injured (i.e. ‘may your life not be
ðis ðe to bote hægtessan gescotes ic ðin wille helpan	threatened’?). If it was the <i>gescot</i> ¹⁰
fleo [?MS <i>fled</i>] þær on fyrghenhæfde	of <i>ese</i> or it was the <i>gescot</i> of <i>ælfe</i> or
hal westu helpe ðin drihten	it was the <i>gescot</i> of <i>hægtessan</i> , now I
nim þonne þæt seax ado on wætan ·	want to (?will) help you. This for

Modern English, when denoting a pain, denotes a ‘sharp spasmodic pain in the side resulting from running or exercising’ (*Collins Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v.). But the connotations of *fær-* are suggested by the translations suggested by Bosworth and Toller: ‘Sudden, intense, terrible, horrid’ (1898, s.v.; cf. *DOE*, s.v. *fær*). As for *stice*, Bosworth and Toller gave the primary meanings ‘a prick, puncture, stab, thrust with a pointed implement’ (1898, s.v.), though the only Middle English descendant of these meanings seems to have been ‘A sharp, localized pain’ (*MED*, s.v. *stiche*). These considerations suggest that *færstice* denoted something more serious than a stitch.

⁴ Cameron 1993, 142–43.

⁵ Hitherto, commentators have assumed an unstated pronoun *ic* (‘I’) as the subject of *stod* (e.g. Grendon 1909, 165; Kennedy 1943, 9; Storms 1948, 141; Meaney 1989, 33 n. 34). This is an odd assumption, however—probably an uncritically repeated misinterpretation of Grendon’s. The obvious subject is that of the preceding sentence, *spere*. The three other occurrences of *Ut, lytel spere* are all followed by lines which seem to concern the *spere*. This reading also removes an ill-motivated switch in person.

⁶ This reading is supported by the half-line ‘giellende gar’ in *Widsith* (line 128; ed. Chambers 1912, 223) and by the half-line formula *af/með geiri gjallanda* (‘from/with a yelling spear’) in stanzas 5 and 14 of the Eddaic *Atlakviða* (ed. Neckel 1962, 241, 242); it has the attraction of producing a parallelism with the *fleogende flane* returned by the speaker of the charm. However, the phrasing inferred by Doane from the manuscript spacing—‘and.hy.gyllende | garas sændan’ (ed. 1994a, 139; cf. 143)—suggests ‘and they, shrieking, sent spears’. This is no less plausible syntactically.

⁷ *Lytel* was taken by Dobbie to describe *seax* (‘sæt smið, | sloh seax lytel, / * * * iserna, | wundrum swiðe’; ed. 1942, 122); this has been the basis for aspects of interpretation since (e.g. Doskow 1976, 325; Weston 1985, 179). But Dobbie’s reading needlessly posits textual corruption. My analysis is closer to Doane’s (1994a, 143).

⁸ Witches, female supernatural beings: see §8:2. I take *-an* here and elsewhere in the charm as a genitive plural, to provide parallelism with *ylfa* and *esa* (cf. Grendon 1909, 165; Jente 1921, 295; Kennedy 1943, 9). Although the manuscript includes no other example of genitive plural *-an*, similar inflexional levellings are not uncommon there (see Grattan-Singer 1952, 224–27; Vriend 1984, lxviii–lxxii) and there is a good number of examples elsewhere (Hoed 1994; Lapidge–Baker 1995, xcvi).

This text—known now as *Wið færstice*—is among the most remarkable of its kind in medieval Europe. Prominent among the threats which it seeks to counter are *ælf*e, the beings whose name has come into Modern English as *elves*. The seriousness with which *Wið færstice*, and presumably its eleventh-century copyist, treats these beings challenges our conceptions of rationality and reality, of health, healing and Christianity. What were *ælf*e? What were *gescotu*, and why did *ælf*e cause them? What were the *ese* and *hægtessan* with which they are associated and why were they grouped in this way? Moreover, although unique in many respects, *Wið færstice* is only one of a range of Anglo-Saxon texts using the word *ælf*, and these too bring both answers and questions.

In the preface to his 1850 edition of *The Fairy Mythology*, Thomas Keightley admitted that ‘writing and reading about Fairies some may deem to be the mark of a trifling turn of mind’ (1850, vii); over a hundred and fifty years later, one shares his concerns. But one notes with pleasure (and relief) that ‘beings neither angelic, human, nor animal’ now merit a section even in so established a series as the New Oxford History of England (Bartlett 2000, 686–92): without taking medieval non-Christian beliefs seriously and developing methodologies to reconstruct them from our patchy and unbalanced records, we can hope only for the most partial understanding of how our ancestors thought and lived. This thesis is the first attempt to consider the references to *ælf*e in the detail which they require, through suitably rigorous linguistic and textual analyses. By integrating linguistic and textual approaches into an anthropologically-derived theoretical framework, I provide a history both of the word *ælf* and of the concepts it denoted—the *ælf*e—throughout the Anglo-Saxon period, from pre-conversion times to the eleventh century. Insofar as space and relevance permit, I also consider English-language evidence from the rest of the Middle Ages, and the early modern Scottish witchcraft trials. It proves possible to delineate important features of pre-conversion world-views; besides bringing new evidence to bear on early Anglo-Saxon societies, this early evidence makes it possible to trace reliably some of the changes, continuities and tensions in belief experienced in English-speaking cultures in the

⁹ As I argue below (§6:1), *scoten* is probably polysemic, meaning both ‘shot’, and ‘badly pained, afflicted with a sharp pain’. The same goes for the noun *gescot*, which could probably denote both projectiles and sharp, localised pains (§6:2.2).

¹⁰ See preceding note.

¹¹ The text is unsatisfactory here and the translation merely a conjecture; see Doane’s discussion (1994a, 144–45).

¹² Read literally, and taking ‘þæt seax’ to be the one forged by a *smip* in the charm, the implication of this is that the charmer is to take the *seax* from the patient, presumably in the manner of healers observed anthropologically to draw magical weapons from their patients, and put it in the liquid. For this conception of supernatural illness in Anglo-Saxon culture see Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* v.13 (ed. Colgrave–Mynors 1991, 498–502 esp. 500 n. 2). Other readings are possible.

centuries following conversion. Such beliefs do not bear witness to processes of Christianisation alone: they tell us about Anglo-Saxon constructions of mental health, illness and healing; of group identity and space; and even of gender and sexual relationships.

The rest of this introduction discusses my methodologies, and what I think they can and cannot reveal. Hereafter, the study falls into three parts. Historiographically, Old Norse evidence has dominated reconstructions of the beliefs of Germanic-speaking peoples, and has made its mark on interpretations of *ælf*. It is important, therefore, to assess what use can really be made of this material at the outset, and this comprises my first part. This does not merely clear the way for reassessing the Anglo-Saxon evidence, however: the reanalysed Norse material also provides a proximate and reasonably well-documented body of comparative material, relating both to the semantics of *ælf* and to the Anglo-Saxon world-views in which *ælf* had meaning. The second part focuses on detailed reanalyses of all our primary Old English evidence for the meanings of *ælf*. For methodological transparency, these analyses are grouped by kind of source material—non-textual evidence, poetry, glosses and medical texts (excluding, on account of its unique importance, *Wið færstice*)—though at times this arrangement admittedly produces semantically rather heterogeneous groupings. The third part develops the wider significance of this data so as to move from the semantic meanings of *ælf* to the social and cultural meanings of *ælf*. First, comparative narrative material is discussed. This provides models for understanding what kinds of narratives and beliefs the semantics of *ælf* are likely to reflect. Next, *Wið færstice* is reassessed in detail, in the light both of the preceding analyses and of comparative evidence from the early modern Scottish witchcraft trials, providing further important perspectives on *ælf*. Finally, my conclusions are drawn together, and some of their further implications for the character of *ælf* and their roles explored.

Two appendices present relevant material excluded from the main study. As several of my arguments involve detailed reference to linguistic variation which will not always be familiar to readers and has at times been poorly reported, Appendix 1 describes the grammatical history of *ælf*. In principle, the occurrence of *ælf* in place-names could be a valuable source of evidence for *ælf*'s semantics. In practice, however, the likelihood that examples represent a personal name *Ælf* is too great for the data to be useful; I demonstrate this in detail in Appendix 2. *Ælf*-words where *ælf* is a hypercorrect form of *æl-*, excluded from the main study in consequence, are assessed in Appendix 3.

As my usage above will suggest, the Anglian form *ælf* is the usual citation form for the *elf*-word in Old English (*DOE*, s.v. *ælf*; Bosworth–Toller 1898, s.vv. *ælf*, *ilf*), but for the plural, commentators often use the West Saxon form *ylfe*. This is reasonable insofar

as the singular **ylf* and the plural **ælfē* are probably only attested in later reflexes, but the inconsistency has caused confusion.¹³ Therefore, I use *ælfē* here as my plural citation form. Two compounds, **ælfisc* and **ælfīg*, are never attested in Anglian forms, but these normalised alternatives have been used by the *Dictionary of Old English*. I adopt *ælfisc*, as its existence in Old English is shown by Middle English reflexes, but since *ylfīg* appears only in this West Saxon form, it seems excessive, and potentially misleading, to abandon it. The usual citation form for Middle and Modern English is *elf*, plural *elves* (*MED*, *OED*, s.v.), and for Scots *elf*, *elvis* (*DOST*, s.v.). However, where the texts under discussion demand it, I also use other Middle English citation forms.

As for cognate languages, Old Icelandic dictionaries may use *alfr* (Sveinbjörn Egilsson 1931, s.v.; *DONP*, s.v.) or *álfr* (Cleasby–Vigfusson 1957, s.v.; Finnur Jónsson 1926–28, s.v.). *Alfr* was the normal form until perhaps the twelfth century, when lengthening to *álfr* took place (Noreen 1923, §124.3). Being otherwise unable to be consistent, I have preferred the more familiar *álfr*, despite the incongruity of using it regarding early texts. Medieval German dialects may have the citation forms *alp* (Lexer 1869–76, s.v.) or *alb* (*AHDWB*, s.v.; Lloyd–Springer 1988–, s.v.)—*alp* is preferred here; medieval Frisian has *alf* (Verwijs–Verdam–Stoett 1885–1941, s.v.) or *elf* (de Vries 1971, s.v.); I prefer *alf*.

I represent phonetic and phonemic reconstructions using the International Phonetic Alphabet. Translations are my own unless otherwise stated, and are not intended to have any literary merit. Occasionally, in texts not requiring a translation, I gloss unfamiliar terms and forms, and false friends, in curly brackets { } to distinguish my interventions from the parentheses and square brackets of authors and editors. Finally, some conventions of capitalisation, mainly for Old Icelandic, can be prejudicial to my investigations: most importantly, one normally reads of *Æsir* and *Vanir*, terms for pagan gods marked by capitalisation as ethnonyms, but of *álfar*, implicitly a race. To maintain these conventions in the present thesis is untenable. Although it would be most consistent with my arguments to capitalise all terms, it seems less prejudicial and more consistent with the conventions of the primary sources to abandon capitalisation in all cases: thus *æsir*, *vanir*, *álfar*.

¹³ The *MED* says that ‘OE had a masc. *ælf*, pl. *ylfe*’ (s.v. *elf*), as though it showed a systematic vowel alternation, as is genuinely the case in the etymological note for *fōt* ‘OE *fōt*; pl. *fēt*’. Perhaps in consequence, Kitson (2002, 105 and n. 25) seems to have inferred a West Saxon singular **ealf* alongside the plural *ylfe*, and alongside the Anglian singular *ælf* a plural **elfe*.

1. Historiography

The range of sources handled here is too disparate for a single historiographical survey to be appropriate, each of the following chapters considering past scholarship as required. But it is worth glancing at the consensus on Anglo-Saxon *ælf*, for which *Wið færstice* has provided the inspiration. *Wið færstice*—and, despite his protestations, it alone—was the basis for Singer’s statement in his British Academy lecture on ‘Early English Magic and Medicine’ (1919–20, 357; cf. Grattan–Singer 1952, esp. 52–62),

a large amount of disease was attributed ... to the action of supernatural beings, elves, Æsir, smiths or witches whose shafts fired at the sufferer produced his torments. Anglo-Saxon and even Middle English literature is replete with the notion of disease caused by the arrows of mischievous supernatural beings. This theory of disease we shall, for brevity, speak of as the *doctrine of the elf-shot*. The Anglo-Saxon tribes placed these malicious elves everywhere, but especially in the wild uncultivated wastes where they loved to shoot at the passer-by.

Singer’s comments are the fount of a long tradition. ‘In Anglo-Saxon times’, Bonser reported, ‘diseases were erroneously attributed to many causes which were usually of a supernatural nature ... The evil was most usually attributed to the elves (who attacked with their arrows) or to “flying venom” ’ (1963, 158; cf. 1926; 1939). Introduced into Middle English in 1929 by Müller’s emendation of *vluekecche* (‘elf-cake’, apparently denoting an enlargement of the spleen) to *vlueschotte*, ‘elf-shot’ made a late debut in the Old English lexicon in the nineteen-eighties as *ælfscot*.¹⁴ Most recently, according to Jolly’s study of Anglo-Saxon ‘elf-charms’ (1996, 134; cf. 1998, 20, 26),

elves were thought to be invisible or hard-to-see creatures who shot their victims with some kind of arrow or spear, thus inflicting a wound or inducing a disease with no other apparent cause (elfshot). They appear to be lesser spirits than the Æsir deities, but with similar armaments in spears and arrows. ... This attack by elves was eventually linked with Christian ideas of demons penetrating or possessing animals and people, who then needed exorcism.

These interpretations have become a staple of histories of medieval European popular religion, witchcraft and medicine.¹⁵ Moreover, Singer’s ‘doctrine of the elf-shot’, not merely contagious between scholars, has spread to editions and translations of primary texts which do not mention *ælf*, taking the ‘malicious elves’ with it.¹⁶ Jolly has shown that the illustration to psalm 37 in the *Eadwine Psalter*, long imagined to depict ‘elf-

¹⁴ Müller 1929, 89; Lecouteux 1987, 17–19; Swanton 1988, 297. The genuine first attestation of *elf-shot* is in Scots in the last quarter of the sixteenth century (Hall forthcoming [d]).

¹⁵ e.g. Thomas 1971, 725; Kieckhefer 1989, 65; Mayr-Harting 1991, 28–29; Flint 1991, 87, 115, 165; Cameron 1993, 10, 141–42.

¹⁶ See below, §6.1; more fully Hall forthcoming [c]. The earliest Scottish evidence for traditions of elf-shot has long been supposed to correlate with the English material, but here too, many cases which offer no evidence for such traditions have mistakenly been accepted, while the evidence of others has been misunderstood (Hall forthcoming [d]).

shot', is really a conventional depiction of demons, straightforwardly illustrating the psalm: 'the later iconography of elves as delightfully mischievous little figures playing tricks on people has caused scholars such as Grattan and Singer to read an Anglo-Saxon elf into this picture of demonic affliction' (1998, at 20, citing Grattan–Singer 1952, frontispiece). The reassessment of our other evidence is one of my principle tasks here.

As my quotations show, current assessments of *ælfes*'s roles in Anglo-Saxon medicine derive directly from the early twentieth century. Reflecting on that period in her anthropological classic *Purity and Danger*, Douglas observed (1966, 30) that

comparative religion has always been bedevilled by medical materialism. Some argue that even the most exotic of ancient rites have a sound hygienic basis. Others, though agreeing that primitive ritual has hygiene for its object, take the opposite view of its soundness. For them a great gulf divides our sound ideas of hygiene from the primitive's erroneous fancies.

Douglas's objection to derogation and demythologisation alike was that, adopting these approaches, we fail consciously to orientate own cultural perspectives in relation to the cultures being studied (1966, esp. 30–36, 74–78). In both of the approaches which she outlined, the world-view of the student is imposed on the source material, which is, probably inevitably, found wanting; and both occur in the historiography of Anglo-Saxon medicine. Falling into the second of Douglas's camps, Singer and others considered Anglo-Saxon medicine 'a mass of folly and credulity' (Grattan–Singer 1952, 92; cf. Cameron 1993, 2–3). However, since the nineteen-sixties scholars have increasingly revealed the deep Latin learning underlying many Anglo-Saxon medical texts (see Jolly 1996, 99–102). Cameron in particular has argued that many remedies contained clinically effective ingredients, and that from the perspective of clinical medicine, Anglo-Saxons' 'prescriptions were about as good as anything prescribed before the mid-twentieth century' (1993, 117). For all its merits, however, Cameron's work is a case-study in Douglas's other bug-bear, medical materialism (cf. Glosecki 2000, 92–93). Cameron argued that 'we should ... put ourselves as far as possible in the Anglo-Saxons' place, and ... arrive at our assessments through the medical and physiological background of their time, not of ours' (1993, 3–4, at 4). But for historians to try to abandon their own belief-systems is a hopeless endeavour, leaving them and their audiences to impose their preconceptions unconsciously on the material studied (cf. Gurevich 1992 [1988], 6–9). Thus Cameron divided Anglo-Saxon medical practices into 'rational' and 'magical' categories, but found that 'it is sometimes difficult to decide whether a remedy is amuletic or rational in intent' (1993, 134)—presumably because he sought to impose an anachronistic distinction on his sources. Moreover, the quotation implies that much Anglo-Saxon behaviour was irrational—but *a priori* this seems no more likely to be true of Anglo-Saxons than of us (cf. Sjöblom 2000, 61). Douglas accepted that 'there is no

objection' to medical materialism 'unless it excludes other interpretations' (1966, 33)—a point amply supported by Cameron's insights. But his lip-service to the psychological importance of ritual (esp. 1993, 157–58) is insufficient for comprehending the elements of Anglo-Saxon culture which do not fit into its limited framework.

Facing the approaches to healing which differ between our societies and Anglo-Saxons'—of which *ælfes* are symptomatic—offers a different way into producing a more comprehensive and plausible assessment of Anglo-Saxon healing. *Ælfes* are neither to be explained away or ignored; nor are they to be reconstructed by imposing unwarranted assumptions upon the evidence, or by repeating those of earlier scholarship. The rigorous collection and reassessment of our evidence for *ælfes*—for what *ælfes* were thought to be and for what uses or effects those concepts had in Anglo-Saxon culture—is the subject of the following chapters. But it must be done in the context of an explicit theoretical framework.

2. Fundamental assumptions

Douglas's observations on the anthropology of medicine apply, *mutatis mutandis*, generally in the study of past societies: to avoid either dismissing past societies 'as irrational or as unworthy of serious historical consideration', or dismissing evidence contradicting the assumption that their members 'must "really" have thought in the same ways as we do', we need to invoke the concept of world-views (Burke 1997a, 169). By *world-view* I mean the sum of the conceptual categories which members of a society impose on the physical reality in which they exist. Change in the structuring of these categories is change in world-views; reconstructing these categories and their developments might conveniently be labelled *historical anthropology* (for a programmatic statement see Gurevich 1992 [1988]). A major methodology in this thesis is the integration of linguistic analyses into the reconstruction of Anglo-Saxons' world-views. Much of my work is founded on historical linguistic or literary critical methods, but my ultimate aims are neither linguistic, in the sense of documenting and explaining linguistic change, nor literary, in the sense of exploring the means by which texts affect their audiences. Literary and linguistic methods are means towards a wider understanding of belief in Anglo-Saxon societies—a combination of approaches and goals well-established in anthropology (see Duranti 1997).

Within this framework of historical anthropology, my guiding assumption is that *ælfes* were a 'social reality'.¹⁷ They were not an objective reality, like houses and trees, which

¹⁷ For the seminal discussion see Berger–Luckmann 1967; also Searle 1995.

can be readily perceived in the physical world and, insofar as anything can be, objectively proven to exist. But, as I and my society believe that coins have monetary value or that I am English, a critical mass of Anglo-Saxons accepted the reality of *ælf*, and this collective belief made *ælf* a social reality. Social realities are not mere fantasies: we cannot, as individuals, wish them away, any more than Beowulf could the dragon; *ælf*, no less than the Christian God, could have played a significant role both in societies' constructions of the world and individuals' constructions of experience. Indeed, what looks like a social reality from an outsider's perspective may become an objective reality when the insider's perspective is adopted (cf. Turner 2003 [1992]). But the insider's perspective on *ælf* can no longer be experienced, only reconstructed, and I have no choice but to admit my disbelief in *ælf*'s objective reality, while accepting that objective experiences of Anglo-Saxons could have been construed as experience of *ælf*. In this perspective, since there was no objective reality forcing societies to recognise the existence of *ælf*—only cultural and social impulses—the study of *ælf* is potentially especially illuminating for Anglo-Saxon culture and society: *ælf* were, amongst other things, reflections and abstractions of Anglo-Saxons' changing ideals, concerns, and survival strategies.

3. Methodologies

The methodologies employed in this thesis are guided by the varying demands of the evidence, and are discussed at the appropriate junctures. However, some general themes should be discussed here. Crucially, this thesis not structured around a pre-defined category—'superstitions', 'monsters', 'pagan gods' or the like—but around a word, *ælf*. This involves two premises: that to reconstruct early medieval concepts and conceptual categories, we should build our reconstructions up from our primary evidence, rather than positing categories and then seeking evidence for them; and that one way of doing this is to examine the meanings of words in the vernacular languages of the cultures in question.

3.1 Categorising from the bottom up

The theoretical importance of reconstructing medieval conceptual categories rigorously on the basis of primary evidence—from the bottom up, as it were—is neatly illustrated by the recent *Thesaurus of Old English*. While an important achievement, this work proceeds from the top down, positing lexical categories based on Roget's *Thesaurus*, and using Bosworth and Toller's dictionary definitions to situate Old English words within

them (Roberts–Kay–Grundy 2000, I xvi–xx). This is the main *Thesaurus* entry concerning *ælf* (Roberts–Kay–Grundy 2000, I §16.01.03.04):

16. The extrasensorial world

16.01 A divine being

16.01.03 A spectre, ghost, demon, goblin

16.01.03.04 Elfin race: Ælfcynn^o

..Elf, goblin, etc.: ælf(en), pūca^g, pūcel^{og}

..Of elves: ælfisc^{og}

..Mountain elf: beorgælfen^q, dūnælf(en), muntælfen^{og}

..Field elf: feldælfen^g, landælf^{og}

..Wood elf: wuduælfen^g, wudumær^g, wuduwāsa^g

..Water elf: sæælfen^g, wæterælfen^g

..Nightmare caused by elf: ælfād^o, ælfsiden

..An incubus: ælf, mera

..A succubus: lēof

Notwithstanding a few points of fact,¹⁸ my main concern is with the entry's assumptions about categorisation. One wonders first what an 'Elfin race' is. The term is presumably intended concisely to render something like 'the races of *ælf*e and like beings', but its members are a motley collection. The ghost-word *mera* is presumably included because Bosworth and Toller defined both it and *ælf* with *incubus* (1898, s.vv. *mæra*, *ælf*); *wudumær*, attested only to gloss the name of the nymph Echo, perhaps appears because *ælfen*, derived from *ælf*, likewise glosses only words for nymphs. One imagines that *leof* ('beloved') is included because it once glosses *succuba* (ed. Meritt 1959, 41 [no. 395]), being taken therefore as a feminine counterpart to words for *incubus*, and so also to denote an 'Elfin' being. One wonders why *mære* was excluded, being categorised instead under 02.05.04.02 *A dream*, since *mære* denotes beings like *succubae*, and its strong variant *wudumær* and putative masculine counterpart *mera* are included in the entry. *Mære*'s categorisation as 'a dream' is predicated on its modern survival in *nightmare* rather than its Old English usage, correctly reported by Bosworth and Toller, which permits no doubt about *maran*'s corporeality (cf. Bosworth–Toller 1898, s.v. *mære*; §§6.3.4, 7.1.1). The inclusion of *wuduwasa* and *puca* is mysterious. In short, the *Elfin race* of the *Thesaurus of Old English* is a modern and not an Anglo-Saxon construct.

Still, these objections might merely reflect the *Thesaurus*'s implementation rather than its premises. More telling, then, are the assumptions built into the *Thesaurus*'s

¹⁸ Principally, *feldælfen* and *landælf* are considered to attest to the 'field elf', but in the period when the words were coined (see §§5:2.2, 5:3.2), *feld* probably still meant 'open, unobstructed land'—though the translation 'field elf' may hold for *landælf* (see Gelling–Cole 2000, 269–74, 279–81). The interpretation of *ælfadl* and *ælfsiden* requires revision (see below, §§6:2.1, 6:3). *Ylfig*, defined by Bosworth and Toller as 'affected by elves [?], mad, frantic' (1898, s.v. *ylfig*), seems to have been omitted by mistake. *Mera* is a ghost-word: it occurs only in the Épinal Glossary, as a scribal error (or Germanising) of the early weak feminine *merae* most clearly attested in the Erfurt Glossary (ed. Pheifer 1974, 30 [no. 558]; Bischoff and others 1988, Épinal f. 99v, Erfurt f. 7v; for the ending see Campbell 1957, §§616–17); a masculine form should show the retraction of */æ/ giving ***mara* (see Hogg 1992a, §5.37.4).

structure. *Ælfe* are located in an ‘extrasensorial world’. However, while we might infer an extrasensorial world in Christian Anglo-Saxon world-views (though see Mearns 2002, 97–100), it is not evident that *ælf* belonged there; on the contrary, there is good evidence that they were to be found in the tangible world. The use of *divine being* may be justifiable, but divinity is an ideologically charged concept whose applicability to non-Christian Anglo-Saxon culture I doubt (cf. esp. §§2:4, 8:2.1). Some texts might justify the inclusion of *ælf* under ‘spectre, ghost, demon, goblin’, but others attest to quite different meanings, while we might question whether spectres, ghosts, demons and goblins, insofar as these words are applicable to Anglo-Saxon concepts at all, would have been grouped in this way: even if the *Thesaurus*’s categories are justifiable, they are not necessarily the most appropriate.

The *Thesaurus* shows the problems inherent in defining conceptual categories first and asking questions later. My focus in this thesis on one word proceeds from this position: we must try to judge with what words *ælf* overlapped semantically, and with what words it was systematically contrasted, by tracing these overlaps and contrasts in the primary evidence. That said, I do employ an analytical category of the ‘supernatural’, using *supernatural* in what seems to me its usual modern English usage: to denote phenomena viewed as transcending (or transgressing) normal (or natural) existence, as defined by the subject’s observation of everyday life, and of what is possible in it. This must be briefly discussed here, not least because Neville has recently argued that ‘on a basic level the Anglo-Saxons did not have a word or expression for the modern conception of the natural world because they did not conceive of an entity defined by the exclusion of the supernatural’ (1999, 2–3). She had the Anglo-Saxons distinguishing only between the human world and the natural world, aligning beings such as monsters with the latter (1999, esp. 2–3, 31–35, 70–74). This interpretation can be questioned in various ways, but the crucial criticism is that it does not work: in practice, Neville did use the term *supernatural*, particularly in discussing *Beowulf* (e.g. 1999, 73, 118; cf. 107–9).¹⁹ Anglo-Saxon culture could not have been Christianised as it was without adopting or adapting some conception of the supernatural: concepts of miracles, supernatural by definition, were fundamental to medieval Christianity, while Neville herself rightly

¹⁹ Implicit in Neville’s argumentation (e.g. 1999, 71–73) is the etymologising objection also voiced by Tolkien (1983 [1963], 110), Lewis (1967, 64–68) and Ármann Jakobsson (1998, 54–55) that *supernatural* is paradoxical, as by definition everything is included in nature, such that nothing can be ‘above’ it. This argument is insubstantial, as it is precisely the paradox which it seeks to deny (and which Lewis accepted of miracles) that gives *supernatural* its significance. At a lexical level, Old English had the prefix *el-* ‘foreign, strange; from elsewhere’, and compounds using it form a substantial lexicon of otherness (*DOE*, s.v. *el-*); Mearns has argued from semantic evidence that although there are important differences between early medieval and modern English conceptions of the supernatural, the conception itself remains important to understanding Anglo-Saxon culture (2002, 101, 108–37, esp. 123–27).

placed God outside nature in Anglo-Saxon theology (1999 170–77). Her exclusion of these features from her conception of the supernatural world resulted in a strict focus on monsters (esp. 1999, 107–9), producing a reading in which Anglo-Saxons viewed nature and the supernatural solely as threats to humanity. But this overlooks the mediating role of Christian supernatural forces in Anglo-Saxon literature, as in nature-miracles. I argue for subtler reconstructions of the relationship between Anglo-Saxons and their world, in which the concept of the supernatural remains valid and necessary.

3.2 Language and Belief

The principle of taking care over establishing the meanings of the words which comprise our source-texts will meet no objection. I make use of all available evidence for semantics, including comparative philology and literary and manuscript contexts, and this too is probably accepted as the best approach to the semantics of less well-attested medieval words (cf. Mearns 2002, 1–39). Although we must often speak tentatively of *ælf*'s semantic 'associations', without always being able to specify whether these are denotations, connotations or patterns of collocation, such associations are illuminating nevertheless. What is less straightforward is my use of lexical semantics as a basis for mapping Anglo-Saxon beliefs. The potential of words to attest to beliefs was of course realised long ago, underpinning Grimm's seminal, and largely unsurpassed, *Deutsche Mythologie* (1882–88 [1875–78]). But since the heady days of Grimm's linguistic nationalism, or the seminal propositions of semantic field theory and linguistic determinism in the 1920s and '30s (surveyed by Lyons 1977, 1245–61; cf. Trier 1973; the articles in Whorf 1956), the theoretical validity of this approach has been questioned. A prelinguistic child can have a concept of a house; people perceive the difference between red and pink when their language uses one word of both; I may say that I am angry, while acknowledging that no word precisely denotes my experience.

Thus the medievalist who would, for want of alternative data, use the lexis as evidence for past world-views is in an uncomfortable position. In the cognitive sciences, debate over the extent of linguistic determinism is ongoing, and experiment has focused on issues which are not usually relevant here: categorisation and encoding of spatial relationships in grammar; closed lexical sets such as colours; or the role of language in learning to perform tasks.²⁰ In the face of these problems, linguistically-minded medievalists have either simply ignored the theoretical difficulties (e.g. Green 1998), or avoided making any assertions about the relevance of their linguistic studies to past societies (cf. Frantzen 1990; Gretsche 1999, 131, 159 n. 66, 425–26). Thus, surveying

²⁰ For recent surveys see the articles in Gentner–Goldin-Meadow 2003 and Banich–Mack 2003.

approaches to medieval popular religion, Lees commented that ‘these studies do not conform to one methodological or theoretical school. They are instead feminist, historical, materialist, psychoanalytic, cultural, theological, and literary’ (1999, 11). Lees’s list is catholic, but linguistics is absent. Bloch, rightly observing of that in anthropological research informants’ descriptions and explanations of their behaviour may not reflect the subconscious processes which can be observed through the study of behaviour itself, not only warned against using linguistically-articulated evidence in anthropology, but also against using language itself (1991).

Fortunately, linguistic determinism is not a theoretical prerequisite for the integration of lexical semantics into a social context. There is instead a well-established and theoretically-justified supposition that language reflects culture. This, as a generalisation, can hardly be denied—if language did not reflect culture then it would be an absurdly ineffectual tool for communication (cf. Berger–Luckman 1967, esp. 49–61). People can of course conceive of things for which they lack words, and the absence of a word does not prove the absence of corresponding concepts. However, it is reasonable to suppose *a priori* that the distribution of words in a lexicon attests to the relative cultural salience of the concepts which they denote, with absences at least suggesting low salience (Lyons 1977, 1 246–50). Moreover, as Berger and Luckmann emphasised, language influences how people communicate their thoughts and so how communities construct their shared realities (1967, 51–52):

the common objectivations of everyday life are maintained primarily by linguistic signification. Everyday life is, above all, life with and by means of the language I share with my fellowmen. An understanding of language is thus essential for any understanding of the reality of everyday life.

Language not only reflects societies’ world-views, therefore, but affects their form at a social level. However idiosyncratic an individual’s experience, it will tend to be communicated and constructed within the community through the linguistic resources at the community’s disposal. These premises provide basic theoretical underpinnings for the use of *ælf* as evidence for Anglo-Saxon culture.

That said, pending conclusive evidence on the subject, I accept Searle’s argument that by definition, social realities cannot exist without symbols (1995, esp. 59–78, at 75):

symbols do not create cats and dogs and evening stars; they create only the possibility of referring to cats, dogs, and evening stars in a publicly accessible way. But symbolization creates the very ontological categories of money, property, points scored in games and political offices, as well as the categories of words, and speech acts.

And as Searle argued, the symbol-system *par excellence* is that of language. As social realities, *ælf* existed because the word *ælf* existed; it follows that, barring relationships

with objective realities or with innovative concepts not otherwise reflected in language, an *ælf* was what the word *ælf* meant.

An additional advantage to using language as evidence for belief is its structured character. Lévi-Strauss's pioneering structuralism in anthropology was, appropriately enough, inspired by the linguistic structuralism pioneered by Saussure,²¹ and though no longer in vogue as such, structuralism has provided insights fundamental to both disciplines. 'No particular set of classifying symbols can be understood in isolation, but there can be hope of making sense of them in relation to the total structure of classifications in the culture in question' (Douglas 1966, vii). Structures in language, whether reflecting or encoding wider cultural classifications, offer important insights into classifications. The correlation of linguistic structures with wider belief has been demonstrated, for example, in the traditional grammatical structuring of Dyirbal, an aboriginal Australian language (Lakoff 1987, 92–104), and can be argued for in the correlation of grammatical gender and cultural gender in Indo-European and other languages (e.g. Curzan 2003, esp. 19–30). Such categorial structuring also extends to lexical semantics, in the overlaps of and contrasts between words' semantic fields. Though we lack, for example, Anglo-Saxon non-Christian mythological narratives—a point to which I return below—Old English texts containing *ælf* are relatively rich in evidence for linguistic systems. As I show below, these linguistic systems can be correlated with similar evidence in medieval Scandinavia which can itself be correlated with the rich Scandinavian mythological corpus, emphasising the validity of using linguistic categories to reconstruct Anglo-Saxon beliefs. As Schmitt wrote, 'it is not so much the documents that are lacking as the conceptual instruments necessary to understand them' (1983 [1973], 171).

3.3 The dynamic nature of belief

I also suppose that our texts are not merely articulations or reflections of belief: they were and remain active participants in a dialogue of belief between the members of textual communities, and between the communities and their tools of communication. The better to appreciate this perspective, we may consider some of the opening comments in Henderson and Cowan's recent, and significant, *Scottish Fairy Belief: A History* (2001, 5–6):

Researching Scottish fairy belief is rather like confronting a huge obscure painting which has been badly damaged and worn through time, great chunks totally obliterated and now completely irrecoverable, portions repainted by poorly skilled craftsmen, and other parts touched up by those

²¹ Seminal works are Lévi-Strauss 1968–77 [1945]; 1968–77 [1953]; see further Caws 2000.

who should have known better ... In assembling this material, we have not worked toward some deconstructionist end, but rather have tried to synthesise the individual components, to reconstruct the whole essence of fairy belief as a distinct phenomenon.

This evocative statement undeniably strikes a chord. It is in the tradition of folkloristics which abandoned the early nineteenth-century model for the production of folk literature—in which ancient traditions were inherited and bequeathed almost unconsciously by some undifferentiated ‘folk’—to invoke instead the ‘tradition bearer’ (see Holbek 1987, esp. 23–45; Burke 1994, 3–22; Tangherlini 1994, 29–53). In this model, folk-traditions were seen to interact with society and to be transmitted by its individual members, bringing a new degree of plausibility to approaches to folk narrative. But, as Henderson and Cowan’s comments show, it also introduced a new note of doubt: with the introduction of the humanly fallible ‘tradition bearer’, the quality of the transmission of folklore seemed less assured.

As Tangherlini pointed out, however, a superior model again is that of ‘tradition participants’ (1994, 29–33; cf. Burke 1997b, 188–89, 195–97). Scottish fairy belief may never have looked much more coherent than it does now: our ‘obscure painting’ need not represent degradation by faulty tradition bearers, but the dynamic and variable nature of tradition itself. It is human nature, and so it is scholars’, to try to synthesise disparate evidence to create a coherent interpretation; but to assume that a society’s beliefs have an ‘essence’ is risky. This theoretical development has not been restricted to folklorists, of course: ‘man is not a cog in the wheel of history but an active participant in the historical process’ (Gurevich 1992 [1988], 12); ‘it is *speakers*, not *languages*, that innovate’ (Milroy 1992, 169). Although Anglo-Saxons encountered more, and more varied, resources for constructing their *ælf*-lore than now remain to us, the processes of construction were fundamentally similar: they encountered the word *ælf* and surmised its significance, primarily, from the linguistic and discursive contexts in which it appeared. These were not merely expressions of belief, but became in turn part of the material from which tradition participants constructed and transmitted their own conceptions of the beliefs involved. Moreover, unlike our traditional starting-points for reconstructing beliefs concerning supernatural beings—(archi)episcopal denunciations like Wulfstan of York’s, collections of legends from disparate times and places like Gervase of Tilbury’s, or mythographies like Snorri Sturluson’s—most of the sources I use here were probably not intended to be formative. Glossators trying to elucidate Latin texts had little incentive to deploy Old English glosses in wilfully unusual ways and compilers of medical texts included remedies for what they perceived to be real threats. Our texts are not windows into past beliefs, but paths.

With dynamic belief, of course, comes the prospect of diachronic change. But although changes in the meanings of Old English words have been studied, it is more usual in studies of English semantic change to take Old English as one, effectively synchronic, stage in the history of English. Large projects like the *Thesaurus of Old English* or the *Dictionary of Old English* are, of course, ill-placed to assess diachronic aspects of Old English semantic variation, and our options are in any case limited by the fact that most surviving Old English manuscripts were written in conservative literary registers over just two centuries. However, this habit disengages linguistic evidence from historical change. The present study, therefore, pays careful attention to our evidence, slight though it is, for variation over time.

3.4 Comparison

It would be unwise to interpret the evidence for *ælf*e without reference to a broader cultural context. Not only is a context necessary for the wider significance of linguistic evidence to be assessed, but the sparse nature of our Old English evidence means that appropriate comparative material must provide important controls over its interpretation. Here I use comparative material of two main types, linguistic and narrative—the former primarily as a direct source of semantic evidence, the latter primarily as a source of models. Both of these uses go back to the pioneering linguistic and folkloric research of the nineteenth century; my approaches here differ mainly in the degree of caution exercised about what is suitable for comparison and what we can infer from it.

My comparative linguistic material comprises medieval Germanic cognates of *ælf* and other pertinent Old English words. No interpretation of the Old English evidence should make cognate evidence unduly difficult to explain, and in this way cognates exert a direct control over the interpretation of the Old English material. Additionally, however, correspondences between cognate evidence and Old English evidence can be used to suggest positively what interpretation of the Old English material is most plausible. Comparative narrative material, on the other hand, is rarely useful as direct evidence, as our lack of relevant Anglo-Saxon narratives precludes the comparison of like material with like. But narratives in which *ælf* appeared must not only have helped to determine the word's meanings, but also the wider meanings of *ælf*e. Narratives in medieval Norse, Irish, French and later English and Scots, then, can show what kinds of narratives *ælf*'s semantics are likely to have related to, providing models for the interpretation of semantic data. Although in theory narratives from any culture could provide models for interpreting the Old English material, I have focused on those from medieval North-Western Europe. This reflects my specialisms, but also provides a proximate reading

context for the Old English evidence. With due care to avoid circularity of argument, we can use these narratives not only to help to reconstruct Anglo-Saxon beliefs, but to see what is distinctive about them in their historical and cultural context.

One kind of comparison is excluded here, however: art history. Visual art might in theory have been important in shaping Anglo-Saxon beliefs—Buxton could argue of Ancient Greece, for example, that ‘for the development of the mythological tradition artistic representations were not merely *as* important as verbal narratives, but *more* important’ (1994, 15 n. 24). One thinks also early medieval Scandinavia, with its picture-stones (see Pulsiano 1993, s.v. *Viking Art: Pictorial art*) and poetic responses, such as *Haustlǫng*, to visual portrayals of myths (see North 1997b, esp. xiv, xxiii–xxiv), and of the functions of pictures in Anglo-Saxon Christianity (see Raw 2004). But it is not, at present, possible to identify any images or motifs as *ælf*: as I have said above, the one traditional candidate proves to be a conventional depiction of demons (§1:1; Jolly 1998). Pre-conversion Anglo-Saxon art, where non-Christian belief might most clearly appear, tends to be very abstract, and its significances fiendishly hard to deduce (Hawkes 1997). The Franks Casket and its Scandinavian analogues show that early Anglo-Saxons probably did depict mythical and heroic figures naturalistically on perishable materials,²² while strange beasts and monsters are prominent in early Anglo-Saxon art and demand to be understood within a wider literary and linguistic context (cf. Clemoes 1995, 3–67; Hall 2002, 2–3). We also have Anglo-Scandinavian mythological images, including several of *Vǫlundr*, described as one of the *álfar* in the Old Norse *Vǫlundarkviða* (see Lang 1976; §2:3.2). But to equate depictions of this sort with *álfar* or *ælf* would be tenuous.

4. Popular belief?

As Cubitt has recently pointed out (2000a, 57), English historiography exhibits

a curious state of affairs where it is respectable for a historian to discuss popular practices in any period from about 1100 onwards but not for earlier centuries. Anglo-Saxon religion tends therefore to be seen from the top down, in terms of the church’s teaching and regulations. The

²² I am not aware that these analogues have been noted before. Foremost are the almost identical portrayals of Weland on the Franks Casket; of a smith on a fragmentary tenth- or eleventh-century cross-shaft from Iona (*Argyll* 1971–92, iv 212 [no. 95]); and of Reginn on the porch of Hylestad stave-church in Norway, from the thirteenth century (see e.g. Turville-Petre 1964, pl. 34; Pulsiano 1993, s.v. *Wood Carving* §1 fig. 178). Although the Franks Casket is the earliest of these, its image is almost certainly innovative: whereas in the other pictures, the smith holds a hammer in his right hand, Weland holds a cup, the hammer floating above his hand as a blind motif. The casket’s right-hand panel resembles the third scene down on a picture stone in Gotland, *Stora Hammars I* (ed. Lindqvist 1941–42, II fig. 440); it also repeats the motif of the *genii cucullati*, found on carved stones both in Britain and the Rhineland (see Green 1992, s.v. *Genius Cucullatus*).

resulting picture is dominated by the institutional and by the learned. Thus the religious beliefs of the seventh to eleventh centuries look extraordinarily educated and orthodox. But it seems most unlikely that the Christian beliefs of the ordinary lay person in the pre-Conquest period simply consisted of those derived from orthodox teaching.

Providing a new perspective on Anglo-Saxons' beliefs is a central aim of the present thesis, and it is a tendency, if not a tenet, of the historical anthropology with which I have aligned my work (§1:2) that the lower and larger echelons of society are the focus of study. However, I do not claim to have written a study of Cubitt's 'popular practices', or, to take other likely labels, 'popular belief' or 'folklore'; and one quails in the present context at the terminological difficulties of 'popular religion'. The usefulness of the concept of popular belief regarding Anglo-Saxon culture is questionable—because it is either inapplicable or untraceable (cf. Cubitt 2000a, 55–57). While it is evident that learned clergymen had access to different systems of belief, and lay aristocrats more access to clergymen, than the rest of the population, it is not clear that we should hypothesise a division between 'popular' and 'elite' cultures even for early modern Europe (Burke 1994, esp. 3–64), let alone for Anglo-Saxon England with its far slighter social stratification. Conversely, however, most of our evidence for *ælf*e derives from texts produced by a small, learned, clerical, male, Southumbrian and probably noble section of Anglo-Saxon society. Even personal names containing *ælf* are those of the nobility. If we do posit a division between Anglo-Saxon popular and elite culture, then, there is no question that our evidence is entirely of the elite. If the beliefs of this group are reflected among the peasantry in later times, it may be because of an earlier trickle-down process rather than a once-homogeneous belief-system. So although Jolly saw the study of 'popular religion in late Saxon England' as a way of putting 'elf-charms in context' (1996), the evidence concerning *ælf*e is 'popular' only insofar as we habitually abuse this term to refer to beliefs which do not fit post-Reformation expectations of orthodox Christian belief.

One is entitled to wonder whether linguistic evidence might, despite its provenance from a limited section of society, attest better to wider beliefs. As a given language is often a medium of communication across all sections of society, the meanings of words might be more consistent across social divisions than other features of culture. This possibility rests on questions concerning the effects of social divisions in Anglo-Saxon society on language, and on the nature of the interplay between language and belief. But historical sociolinguistics is a nascent discipline, whose major advances relate to later periods (see Machan 2003; Nevalainen–Raumolin-Brunberg 2003, esp. 1–25, 133–35). While evidence is growing for the differences between the lexica of the learned and unlearned in the Anglo-Saxon historical period (e.g. Biggam 1995), we have next to no idea about the effects of other sorts of social division on Old English (cf. Derolez 1989;

1992). It is tantamount to an admission of ignorance that our best evidence is presently Bede's statement concerning the thegn Imma in his *Historia Ecclesiastica* of about 731 that 'animaduerterunt, qui eum diligentius considerabant, ex uultu et habitu et sermonibus eius, quia non erat de paupere uulgo, ut dixerat, sed de nobilibus' ('those who considered him more carefully noticed, from his features, his bearing and his speech, that he was not from among the poor people, as he had said, but from the noble' iv.22; ed. Colgrave–Mynors 1991, 402). Even disregarding the possibility of social register prior to the Anglo-Saxon migrations and the later complications of Scandinavian settlement and the Norman Conquest, we could posit the swift growth of Old English registers following the Anglo-Saxon migrations as society grew more stratified (on which process see Härke 1997, esp. 141–47), dialects gained and lost prestige as kingdoms competed for influence over one another,²³ and arguably as varieties of Old English characterised by substrate influence from earlier languages developed.²⁴ Accordingly, hints have begun to be identified to this effect in our evidence for late Old English phonology.²⁵

Extreme though this scenario might be, it would be unwise at the present stage of research to make assumptions about the value of our Old English evidence for the beliefs of social groups other than the elite producers and consumers of that evidence. This thesis is a study of elite beliefs, elucidating something of their changing meanings and functions, and emphasising the extent to which Christian Anglo-Saxon culture included or incorporated traditional ideologies.

²³ Toon argued for Mercian influence on Kentish speech (1983), but his findings have not generally been accepted (see Lowe 2001). Smith, positing Anglian influence on West Saxon, may fare better (2002). See also Gretsch 2000, esp. 89–106.

²⁴ This prospect long foundered on the dearth of lexical borrowings into Old English. But new approaches to the subject suggest the possibility of grammatical influence (see the studies in Filppula–Klemola–Pitkänen 2002).

²⁵ Hall 2001b, esp. 84. Gretsch has argued in addition that the gloss *burhspæce* for *urbanitatis* presupposes differences in speech between (certain) inhabitants of a *burh* and others (1999, 164). I am not confident, however, that that *burhspæce* has not merely calqued its first element (*burh*, 'stronghold, city') on the *urbs* ('city') implicit in *urbanitas*.