

The Meanings of *Elf* and Elves in Medieval England

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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 (*ælf*, 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 *ælf*e 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 *ælf*e were incorporeal, small and arrow-shooting proves to be both unfounded and implausible. Traditionally, *ælf*e 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, *ælf*e 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 *ælf*e 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 *ælf*e 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 *ælf*e 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 *ælf*e 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.

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Abbreviations

| | |
|--------------|---|
| <i>AHDWB</i> | <i>Althochdeutsches Wörterbuch</i> |
| BL | British Library |
| <i>DMLBS</i> | <i>Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources</i> |
| <i>DOE</i> | <i>Dictionary of Old English</i> |
| <i>DONP</i> | <i>A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose/Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog</i> |
| <i>DOST</i> | <i>Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue</i> |
| L. | Linnaean name |
| <i>MED</i> | <i>Middle English Dictionary</i> |
| <i>OED</i> | <i>Oxford English Dictionary</i> |
| S | Precedes reference-numbers in Kelly 1999 |

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