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GLOSSES, GAPS AND GENDER: THE RISE OF FEMALE ELVES IN ANGLO-SAXON CULTURE

Abstract

It is difficult to detect lexical change within Old English, since most of our texts derive from a relatively short period, but lexical change can afford valuable insights into cultural change. This paper identifies changes in the semantics of the Old English word *ælf* ('elf') through a rigorous analysis of two textual traditions in which Old English words based on *ælf* are used to gloss Latin words for nymphs. Around the eighth century, it appears that Old English had no close equivalent to words for the supernatural, feminine and generally unthreatening nymphs: words for supernatural females denoted martial, monstrous or otherwise dangerous beings, while *ælf* seems not to have denoted females—at least not with sufficient salience to be used as a gloss for words for nymphs. Glossators instead found ways of altering *ælf*'s gender in order to create a vernacular word for nymphs. By the eleventh century, however, things had changed, and *ælf* had come to have the female denotation which was to prove prominent in Middle English. Tracing these lexical changes allows us to trace changes in Anglo-Saxon non-Christian belief-systems, and implicitly in Anglo-Saxon gendering more generally.

1. Introduction

When it comes to detecting changes of meaning in English lexical semantics, Old English has long played a prominent role: imagined as effectively a synchronic block, it has provided a baseline for understanding English words' earliest meanings and so for detecting later semantic change. This role is exemplified by the publication of the *Thesaurus of Old English* (Roberts *et al.* 2000), which does not

differentiate between earlier and later stages of Old English, as the first major stage in the publication of the *Historical Thesaurus of English*. This is not unreasonable, especially as the vast majority of our Old English was composed or copied in the relatively short period of about two centuries, in a fairly restricted southern and midland area. However, Old English was being written during a time of great cultural, economic and social changes. Eliding the lexical changes which accompanied these upheavals leaves Old English and its study divorced from wider historical themes; conversely, by focusing on lexical change, we may hope for new insights into both Old English linguistic change and Anglo-Saxon history.¹ Solutions for this methodological problem are unlikely to be found in large surveys like the *Thesaurus of Old English* (cf. Hall 2007a: 9–11): what is required is close analysis of particular words and the particular texts and manuscripts where they are attested. This is the approach adopted here, with a focus on the challenging evidence of Old English glosses on Latin words.

To map semantics is at one level to map one of the main systems through which people categorise the phenomena they encounter in the world—to map a key part of people’s world views (cf. Lakoff 1987). This is not a claim to be made lightly, and I begin this paper with a discussion—albeit, necessarily, a brief one—of my assumptions and methods here (see further Hall 2007a: 6–20). I then proceed to the detailed analysis of Old English data which is required to successfully detect semantic change. My topic is specifically the Old English word *ælf* (plural *ælfes*), the etymon of modern English *elf*, and the evidence for how its meaning extended during the historical Old English period to include females where before these were peripheral to or even absent from its semantic range.² My decision to refer to *ælfes* rather than updating the word to *elves* is pointed, of course: in a study of semantic change, it is inappropriate to elide the distinctions between the word-forms of different periods. I have studied the semantics of *ælf* more fully elsewhere (2007a), arguing

¹ For the dearth of such work see Frantzen 1990; Gretsche 1999: 131, 159 n. 66, 425–26. For some exceptions see however Foot 2000: I 29–30, cf. 97–107.

² For my use of the citation forms *ælf*, *ælfes*, see Hall 2007a: 4–5.

that the long-standing conception of *ælf*e as mischievous, arrow-shooting sprites—while not demonstrably wrong—is groundless (see also Jolly 1998). While *Beowulf* in particular attests to a demonised conception of *ælf*e (lines 102–14; ed. Klaeber 1950: 5), other evidence attests to a pre-conversion conception of *ælf*e as human-like otherworldly beings. Later evidence (admittedly including the material presented here, but also post-Conquest material) attests clearly to similar conceptions throughout the medieval and early modern periods, and continuity of belief seems assured (see also Hall 2005). More specifically, while *ælf*e were potentially dangerous to members of Anglo-Saxon in-groups, they were perceived in traditional culture to be aligned with in-groups in contradistinction to the chaotic threat of monsters.

The evidence considered here concerns the use of *ælf* in glosses on Latin words for nymphs, and the evidence of this material for the gendering of *ælf*e. This evidence shows that the meanings of *ælf* changed during the historical Old English period, a female denotation becoming more prominent or perhaps even arriving for the first time in its semantic range. This change in semantics arguably reflects a change in what we might for want of a better term call Anglo-Saxons' non-Christian beliefs, a stratum of their culture which is notoriously difficult to reconstruct from the texts and material culture which Anglo-Saxons left to us. Moreover, a development in belief is likely to relate in turn to changes in Anglo-Saxon culture and society.

2. Assumptions

The potential of words to attest to beliefs was, of course, realised long ago; it underpinned, for example, Grimm's seminal, and largely unsurpassed, *Deutsche Mythologie* (1882–88). But more recent commentators, responding to the seminal propositions of semantic field theory and linguistic determinism in the 1920s and '30s, have questioned the theoretical validity of this approach, while the increasingly important field of cognitive science has yet to produce a

consensus on the issue.³ It is important, however, to distinguish the problematic idea that language determines thought from the better 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 and Luckman 1967: esp. 49–61). While people can conceive of things for which they lack words, and the absence of a word does not prove the absence of corresponding concepts, it is reasonable to suppose that the distribution of words in a lexicon attests to the relative cultural salience of the concepts which they denote, with absences suggesting low salience (Lyons 1977: I 246–50). This observation is sufficient to underpin the use of semantic evidence as evidence for wider aspects of culture.

While it is not a theoretical prerequisite for my arguments here, however, it is worth emphasising that this theory can be pushed harder. As Berger and Luckmann emphasised, language influences how people communicate their thoughts and so how communities construct their shared realities; we can even glimpse such processes in some medieval sources (e.g., Gurevich 1992). As a component in discourse, words and lexical structures can help to shape belief at a social level. Moreover, it is reasonable to assert that *ælfes* were a ‘social reality’.⁴ They were not an objective reality, like houses and trees, which can be readily perceived in the physical world and, insofar as anything can be, objectively proven to exist. Rather, as my society holds the monetary value of coins to be real, a critical mass of Anglo-Saxons accepted the reality of *ælfes*, and this collective belief made *ælfes* a social reality—a reality no less significant in shaping people’s perceptions and behaviour, potentially, than money or the Christian God. This is not to say that concepts of *ælfes* had no experiential dimension: there is evidence that beliefs in supernatural beings (or, to adopt the terminology of the cognitive science of religion, ‘counter-intuitive agents’) are a natural bi-product of cogni-

³ For surveys of earlier work see Lyons 1977: I 245–61. For surveys of recent work see the articles in Gentner and Goldin-Meadow 2003 and Banich and Mack 2003.

⁴ For the seminal discussion see Berger and Luckmann 1967; also Searle 1995.

tive processes (e.g., Barrett 2000; Boyer 2003). But it also seems that all concepts of counter-intuitive agents across cultures have lexical labels (Boyer 2002: 101–2). It is not, therefore, unreasonable to suggest that the culturally specific characteristics of a class of supernatural beings will be constructed through language, and that in studying words, we are viewing not only reflections of beliefs, but media of beliefs. This view is consistent with 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 symbolisation 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.

As Searle argued, the symbol-system *par excellence* is language. Although, then, we may reliably accept that the semantics of *ælf* reflect concepts of *ælf*, it may equally be the case that concepts of *ælf* reflected the semantics of *ælf*. Either way, we can, by studying the changes of the meanings of the word, access directly changes in the concept; and through them, changes in Anglo-Saxon society which conventional sources do not record.

3. Methods

It follows from the discussion above that we must investigate the meanings of Old English words by paying rigorous attention to the primary evidence and minimising (or at least identifying) interference both from our own assumptions and those of lexicographers and similar intermediary sources (see further Hall 2007a: 9–12). The particular sources under study here are Old English glosses on Latin texts. Because the implicit equivalence between an Old English gloss and its lemma facilitates inferences about the gloss's meanings, glosses have historically been fundamental to the modern interpretation of Old English (e.g., Graham 2000: 102); they continue to provide some of the most powerful sources of primary evidence for the

meanings of Old English words and their semantic interrelationships. However, this evidence is far from simple. My main methodological concerns, then, arise from the handling of glosses. Although most core research on Old English glosses remains available only in unpublished doctoral dissertations, their editions can now be martialled using the *Dictionary of Old English Corpus*, and their discussions afford a firm foundation for the glosses' analysis and interpretation. This paper seeks to implement five methodological desiderata:

1. Although glosses were intended as equivalents to their lemmata, this does not mean that the reverse is true: inversions like 'Wælcyrge is ... glossed with Bellona' are misguided and misleading.⁵ Nor do glosses generally attempt to 'define' their lemmata (e.g., Kiessling 1967–68: 194; Neville 1999: 105, 106): they gloss them.
2. The meaning of a gloss is not the only variable, since the glossator's interpretation of the lemma cannot be taken for granted. A lemma's source must be discovered, so that its contextual meaning when the gloss originated can be inferred. Fortunately, most sources have now been traced; but glossators and their copyists also mis- or reinterpreted lemmata.
3. The provenance and textual history of glosses must be established. This is especially difficult with glosses and glossaries, which redactors could freely excerpt, conflate or re-order, but no less important than usual: copies of a text must not be mistaken for independent evidence. Such information is rarely considered (see Hall 2007b: 300). Of course, where a redactor maintained a gloss while revising his exemplar(s), he may affirm its continued validity, but corrupt and meaningless glosses were repeated too often for us to assume this as a rule.
4. The occurrences of *ælf* in the glossaries are often in non-compounds, coined specifically as gloss-words, and may relate only indirectly to *ælf*'s everyday use. Such gloss-words afford quite different evidence from those reflecting everyday usage, and must as far as possible be identified. This generally relies on the

⁵ Price 2002: 345–46 at 346; cf. Damico 1984: 44; Kiessling 1967–68: 194; 1977, 17; Morris 1991: 25; Neville 1999: 106.

absence of evidence (such as attestations in other Old English genres, in later periods of English, or in cognate languages). Odenstedt argued that, in Anglo-Saxon England, ‘a woman could be a musician (*glīwmāden*), such as a fiddler (*fiðelestre*) or a harp player (*hearpestre*); she could be a singer (*sangestre*), an actress (*scernicge*), a dancer (*hlēapestre*, *hoppestre*, *sealticge*) or even an athlete (*plegestre*)’ (1995: 134–35). His dataset then led Norberg to infer that between the Old English period and the late fourteenth century, the number of jobs available to women in English society diminished (1996). But most of Odenstedt’s Old English words are gloss-words.

5. Finally, one must also ask which Old English words glossators chose *not* to use to gloss a given lemma, and why. A gloss chosen out of desperation for an even vaguely appropriate vernacular term offers very different evidence from one selected as the ideal choice from a range of possibilities. Even with the *Thesaurus of Old English* (Roberts *et al.* 2000), spotting absences in this way is extremely difficult. Fortunately, the material considered here affords unusual leverage on the problem.

4. The glosses

The evidence which I consider here comprises two textual traditions of Old English glosses on Latin words for nymphs. These afford our only clear Old English evidence for the gendering of *ælf*. One tradition certainly derives from the eighth century if not before, and combines the basic root *ælf* with a feminising suffix *-en* (earlier *-inn* < **-injō*), used to form feminine derivatives from masculine nouns, to make *ælfen*, literally ‘female *ælf*’.⁶ The other may also be eighth century but could be later. It too uses *ælf*, but feminises the word by transferring it to the feminine *ō*-stem declension. In both traditions, these *ælf*-derivatives specify different kinds of nymphs, and these are distinguished by the further formation of compound nouns using words for topographical features. Crucially, the two traditions were then conflated in the eleventh-century Antwerp-London Glossary,

⁶ See especially Lindheim 1958: 480–83; also Campbell 1959: §592c.

the morphological developments attested there providing major insights into the changing meaning of *ælf*.

4.1. *The ælfen glosses*

To take the *ælfen* tradition first, the earliest manuscript of the glosses is in Leiden, Bibliothek der Rijksuniversiteit Vocius Lat. 4° 106, being a Continental manuscript of twenty-five leaves whose two main hands (in one of which the glosses are written) are agreed to be ‘not later than the first half of the ninth century’ (Parkes 1972: 215; cf. Ker 1957: 479 (appendix, no. 19)).⁷ The manuscript seems certainly to have been at Fleury in the tenth century (Parkes 1972: 212–13), and was likely enough produced there, but despite this continental origin, the glosses are Old English. They occur together in a blank space on folio 10r which follows a text of the Latin riddles attributed to Symphosius (ff. 2v–8v) and the contents list of Aldhelm’s *Enigmata* (themselves covering ff. 10v–25v; ed. from MS; cf. Meritt 1945: 61):

- (1) Nimphae . aelfinni eadem . & muse
 Oreades duun . aelfinni .
 Driades . uudu . aelfinne
 Amadriades ua&er . aelfinñ
 Maides feld . aelfinne
 Naides sâe . aelfinne
 ‘*Nymphae*: *ælfenne*, and at the same time *musae*;
Oreades: mountain-*ælfenne*;
Dryades: wood-*ælfenne*;
Hamadryades: water-*ælfenne*;
Maides: open-land-*ælfenne*;

⁷ Additionally, Laurence Nowell’s *Vocabularium Saxonicum* of 1565 contains the entry ‘bergælfen’ (‘hill-*ælfen*’; cited by Peters 1963: 255; cf. Somner 1970, ‘Berg-*ælfenne*. Oreades. *Elves or Fairies of the mountains*’). This is unattested in known Anglo-Saxon manuscripts but it is a plausible formation (cf. the attested gloss *Oreades . muntælfen*). Nowell presumably either took *bergælfen* from a manuscript now lost or mis-remembered *muntælfen*. Without an Anglo-Saxon context, it can add little to the present discussion.

Naiades: sea-ælfenne'

These lemmata derive from Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* (ed. Lindsay 1911: I 8.11.96–97):

- (2) Nymphas deas aquarum putant, dictas a nubibus. Nam ex nubibus aquae, unde derivatum est. Nymphas deas aquarum, quasi numina lympharum. Ipsas autem dicunt et Musas quas et nymphas, nec inmerito. Nam atque motus musicen efficit. Nympharum apud gentiles varia sunt vocabula. Nymphas quippe montium Oreades dicunt, silvarum Dryades, fontium Hamadryades, camporum Naides, maris Nereides [naides *BCT*].

'They reckon *nymphae* to be goddesses of waters, so called from clouds [*nubes*, but cf. *nimbus* 'storm(cloud)']. For waters [come] from clouds, whence [*nympha*] is derived. [They reckon] *nymphae* goddesses of waters, just like the spirits of water. But they also call these *Musae* who are also *nymphae*, not without cause. For, in addition, [their] movements create music. There are varied terms for *nymphs* among pagans: for they call *nymphae* of mountains *Oreades*, of woods *Dryades*, of springs *Hamadryades*, of plains *Naides* and of the sea *Nereids* [*naides BCT*].'

They faithfully gloss the *BCT*-texts of the *Etymologiae* (for whose diverse affiliations see Lindsay 1911: I vi–xii), with the sole divergence (perhaps by some scribal dissimilation) of *Maides* for *Naides*. The glosses were presumably added to the Leiden manuscript to elucidate Aldhelm's ensuing mention of *Castalidas nymphas* in the preface to the *Enigmata* (quoted below, section 4.2). The glosses must originally have been composed after the arrival of Isidore's *Etymologiae* in Britain, by the late seventh century (Herren 1998: 90–91), glossing of which was underway by the time of our earliest evidence for vernacular glossing, in the later seventh century (Pheifer 1987; cf. Lapidge 1996: 183–85, 188–93; Hall 2007b: 302–6). As with the language of the Leiden Riddle, a later addition to the same manuscript (Parkes 1972: esp. 211–16), their orthography is characteristic of the seventh and eighth centuries, showing <uu> for /w, u:/, <ae> for later <æ>, and <i> in unstressed syllables. The nominative plural inflection *-e* is non-West-Saxon (Campbell 1959: §590).

The glosses are next attested in the First Cleopatra Glossary, from BL Cotton Cleopatra A.iii, probably compiled and written at St Augustine's, Canterbury. The manuscript has generally been dated to the mid-tenth century, but Rusche has recently argued specifically for the 930s (Rusche 1996: 2–6, 33–38; cf. Ker 1957: 180–82 (no. 143); Dumville 1994: 137–39). The compiler of the First Cleopatra Glossary drew on a diverse range of sources, including the same tradition of glosses on Isidore's *Etymologiae* as the Leiden manuscript, giving: “Amadriades : feldælbinne ꝛ elfenne” (*Hamadryades*: open-land-*ælbinne* or *elfenne*); “Maides : sæelfenne” (*Maides* : sea-*ælfenne*); “Nymfæ : wæterælfenne”, “Naiades : sæelfenne” (*Nymphæ*: water-*ælfenne*, *Naiades*: sea-*ælfenne*); and “Oreades : wuduælfenne” (*Oreades*: wood-*ælfenne*; ed. Rusche 1996: 184 (A463); 373 (M356); 384 (N200, N201); 396 (O215)). Archaic forms are again apparent, in the form *feldælbinne*, itself glossed with a tenth-century Kentish form familiar to the scribe, *elfenne* (see further Kittlick 1998: §§4.2, 6.1.1, 14.2.5). Accordingly, Kittlick considered the *ælfen* glosses in the First Cleopatra Glossary to be part of a tranche of around 200 *Etymo-logiae*-glosses, which source he numbered S21, concluding that “dieses Glossar ... nicht nur sehr alt, sondern auch anglischer, evtl. merzischer Provenienz ist” (‘the provenance of this glossary is not only very old, but also Anglian, evidently Mercian’; 1998: §§2.2, 14.2.5, at 14.2.5; cf. Rusche 1996: 129–34). As comparison with the Leiden text suggests, however, not only were the lemmata re-ordered in Cleopatra, but subjected to the redactor's habitual revision, so that the Old English glosses not only diverge from those in Leiden, but also from Isidore's own definitions (cf. Kittlick 1998: §2.1; Rusche 1996: 35–36). It is not necessary to explain these divergences fully here; sound knowledge of Classical mythology may underlie some (cf. Stryker 1951: 69 n. 463), but this is not assured. The third manuscript of these glosses is Antwerp-London Glossary, which I consider separately below.

Commentators in recent decades have rightly been confident that *ælfen* was compounded with words for topographic features specifically to gloss Isidore's terms (e.g., Thun 1969: 380), a reading consistent with the punctuation in Leiden, which puts a point between the two elements of each compound: we need not postulate typographies of wood-elves, mountain-elves and sea-elves in Anglo-Saxon

beliefs. However, the element *ælfen* has hitherto been taken as a member of the common Old English lexicon: it is paralleled elsewhere in medieval West Germanic languages, where forms like *elvinne* are also used, amongst other things, to translate *nympha* (Verwijs *et al.* 1885–1941 s.v. *elvinne*; Grimm and Grimm 1965–s.v. *ELBE*), and it is thought to be represented in Middle English, being enshrined in the *Middle English Dictionary* under the headword *elven* (cf. OED s.v. *elven*; DOE s.v. *ælfen*). This view would demand the reconstruction of a West Germanic **alβ(i)injō*, whose history would then extend from West Germanic into Middle English. It seems unlikely, however, to be correct. Cooke has recently reassessed the Middle English evidence for a reflex of *ælfen*, finding all but one of the alleged examples simply to show the transference of *ælf* to the weak declension, a common development in southern and western Middle English, whereby plurals and some oblique forms naturally emerged as *aluen* or *eluen(e)* (2003). This was a natural development, since the long-stemmed masculine *i*-stem declension (with nominative plural *-e*) to which *ælf* belonged was morphologically rather anomalous. That the weak declension was growing generally in spoken (Southern) Old English despite the conservatism of the written language is suggested by its popularity as a declension for loan-words, second only to that of the *a*-stem declension (Gneuss 1996: ch. 6). Other members of the declension occasionally exhibit weak forms already in early West Saxon (e.g., *leodan*, *seaxan*, *waran* for *leode*, *seaxe*, *ware*; Campbell 1959: §610.7). This development is contextualised by the fact that in the plural, they were identical in non-West Saxon dialects to the feminine *ō*-stem declension (a declension to which the long-stemmed masculine *i*-stem *leod* was being attracted already in Old English: Campbell 1959: §610.7 n. 3); as unstressed vowels collapsed in later Old English, this would often have become the case in West Saxon too. This is noteworthy because the feminine *ō*-stems were particularly prone to transference to the weak declension (e.g., d'Ardenne 1961: 213–14). The sole example accepted by Cooke as an attestation of Middle English *elven* is line 14278 of *Lazamon's Brut*, “To Argante þere quene, aluen swiðe sceone” (ed. Brook and Leslie 1963–78: II 740). Why he accepted it is not clear to me. Our

manuscripts of the *Brut* are, of course, far from regular in their use of weak inflexions, and in theory *aluen* here could derive from *ælfen*. But it is surely better explained as a weak dative singular—thus ‘to the queen Argante, a very beautiful *elf*’—as with another innovative weak dative singular noun in line 11272, “And forð he gon wenden; to Arðure þan kingen” (< OE *cyning*, dative singular *cyninge*; ed. Brook and Leslie 1963–78: II 588). Other readings are possible, such as a weak genitive plural: ‘to the queen Argante, a very beautiful [woman] of the *aluen*’. But either way, Cooke’s acceptance of the line as evidence for a Middle English reflex of *ælfen* is less convincing than reading it to contain another example of a weak reflex of *ælf*.

Ælfen, then, is attested in English only in the textually interrelated Anglo-Saxon glossaries just listed. Meanwhile, although there is no doubt that the West Germanic forms are potential cognates of *ælfen*, they would also be natural independent formations: the **-injō* suffix has remained the normal suffix for forming nouns denoting females from nouns denoting males throughout the history of continental West Germanic. It is perhaps telling that on the occasions where we have early medieval Continental West Germanic glosses on words denoting nymphs, *elbin* is not attested—it rather appears, translating words for nymphs, later in the Middle Ages.⁸ *Ælfen* has no Norse cognate; Scandinavians, faced with terms such as Marie de France’s *fée* (*Guigemar* line 704; ed. Cook–Tveitane 1979: 34), instead used—and arguably coined—*álfkona* (‘elf-woman’). That an Anglo-Saxon glossator seeking to feminise *ælf* should have utilised the suffix *-en* is no surprise. Other Old English examples of the suffix are *gyden* (‘goddess’ < *god* ‘god’), *mennen* (‘handmaid, female slave’ < *mann* ‘person’) and *mynecenu* (‘nun’ < *munuc* ‘monk’, with irregular

⁸ The principle gloss is “*êkmagadi*” (‘oak-maidens’) for *dryadas* (ed. Steinmeyer–Sievers 1879–1922: II 580; cf. AHDWB s.v. *êkmagad*). The early medieval corpus was searched using Köbler 1972; Götz 1999. For the later use of *elbin* see, e.g., 6.9.814 of Wickram’s rendering of Albrecht von Halberstadt’s *Metamorphoses*, “die elben und auch die elbinnen” (ed. Bolte 1901–6, VII 274); cf. Ovid’s “... fauni / et satyri fratres ... et nymphae” (*Metamorphoses* 6.392–94; ed. Miller 1984: I 314).

transference to the feminine *ō*-stem declension; cf. Campbell 1959: §592c). The last example seems to have been coined in the tenth century, demonstrating the long productivity of the suffix;⁹ likewise the unique *mettena*, which Alfred used to gloss *Parcae* in chapter 35 of his translation of Boethius's *De consolatione philosophiae*, seems likely to be a nonce-word (ed. Sedgefield 1899: 102; the other manuscript gives *gydena* 'goddesses'). That *ælfen* was indeed a nonce-word, formed by a glossator with no extant word suitable for glossing *nympha* and the like, is further suggested by the second textual tradition.

4.2. *The landælf and dunælfa glosses*

The source of the lemmata in this tradition is the invocation with which Aldhelm opened his *Carmen de virginitate*, composed by Aldhelm's death in 709/10 (lines 23–30; ed. Ehwald 1919: 353):

- (3) Non rogo ruricolas versus et commata Musas
 Nec peto Castalidas metrorum cantica nimphas,
 Quas dicunt Elicona iugum servare supernum,
 Nec precor, ut Phoebus linguam sermone loquacem
 Dedat, quem Delo peperit Latona creatrix;
 Versibus infandis non umquam dicere dignor,
 Ut quondam argutus fertur dixisse poeta:
 'Pandite nunc Elicona, deae, cantusque monete!
 'I do not ask country-dwelling Muses for verses and parts of lines,
 nor do I seek songs in metre from the Castalian nymphs, who, they
 say, guard Helicon's celestial brow; nor do I beg that Phoebus,
 whom Latona his mother brought forth on Delos, grant my tongue
 loquacity of speech. I never deign to speak with vile verses, as once
 the clear-sounding poet is supposed to have spoken—"Throw open
 Helicon, goddesses, and bring song to mind!"

The earliest manuscript to contain the glosses is the Cleopatra Glossary, probably from the 930s, which I have mentioned already in connection with the *ælfen* glosses. Of the three different glossaries

⁹ Foot 2000: I 29–30, cf. 97–107; cf. Stafford 1999: 10. Foot did not address the *i*-mutation in *myneceñu*, which must be analogical.

contained in the manuscript, the first and third attest to the glosses. The Third Cleopatra Glossary (folios 92–117) contains *glossae collectae*—interlinear glosses, in this case to Aldhelm’s *Prosa de virginitate* and *Carmen de virginitate*, extracted in sequence to form a glossary (Rusche 1996: 95, 156; Kittlick 1998: §2; cf. Ker 1957: 182). Despite its name, it or its exemplar was a source for the First, making its attestation probably the earlier (Gretsch 1999: 139–41). The Third Cleopatra Glossary includes ‘Ruricolus musas : landælf; Castalidas nymphas : dunælf; Elicona : swa hatte sio dun’ (ed. Rusche 1996: 51 (nos 1100–2); note that despite the arrangement of the lemmata, the *dun* of *dunælf* refers to Mount Helicon, not to the spring Castalia).

The First Cleopatra Glossary (ff. 5–75), as well as including material from a range of other sources, partially repeats the Third with the entry “Castalidas nymphas : dúnælf” (ed. Rusche 1996: 225 (C460)). This reduced form of the gloss from the Third Cleopatra Glossary was to have a long history. At about the same time as its first attestation in the Cleopatra Glossary, it is attested to have influenced the Latin of a medical text in the mid-tenth-century Anglo-Saxon medical manuscript BL Royal 12 D.xvii, known as Leechbook III, which coins the word *castilides* to denote *ælf* (ed. Wright 1955: f. 124v; Hall 2007a: 106). It was utilised in an Old English invocation which Byrhtferth of Ramsey included in his *Enchiridion* (ed. Lapidge and Baker 1995: 134), Byrhtferth basing his work on a glossed text of Aldhelm’s closely related to that in the Third Cleopatra Glossary (Lapidge and Baker 1995: lxxxiii–lxxxiv, 319; Rusche 1996: 99–104; Gretsch 1999: 139–41). It recurs in the eleventh-century BL Harley 3376, the now-fragmentary ‘Harley Glossary’, in the modified gloss on *Castalidas nymphas*, “þa manfullan gydena . † dunelfa .” (‘those sinful goddesses, or mountain-ælf’; ed. Oliphant 1966: 59 (C475); collated with MS), the whole gloss written above the lemma on folio 17r. The Harley Glossary shows alterations to and careful conflation of various sources, including texts related to the Cleopatra Glossaries (Cooke 1994: 134–35, 144–45, 151; 1997: 456–57): the use of *gydena* here seems to derive from a different gloss in the First Cleopatra Glossary, ‘Nymphas : gydena’ (ed. Rusche 1996: 381 [N124]; cf. the once probably corresponding ‘Castalidas : þa dúnlican’, 229 [C558]),

deriving from another glossary to Aldhelm's *Carmen de virginitate* (numbered S12 by Kittlick 1998: §2.2; see §14.4.1 for provenance).¹⁰ Finally, the gloss occurs in the Antwerp-London Glossary, considered below. Why all texts apart from the Third Cleopatra Glossary give *Castalidas nymphas: dunælfa* but not *ruricolas musas: landælfæ* is not clear: *ruricolas musas: landælfæ* could equally well have been added to the Third Cleopatra Glossary or dropped from the rest of the textual tradition.

The compounds *landælfæ* and *dunælfa* were doubtless coined specifically to translate Aldhelm's Latin phrases (cf. Thun 1969: 380), sometime between the composition of the *Carmen de virginitate* (sometime before 709/10), and the earlier part of the tenth century, when the Third Cleopatra Glossary was written. Kittlick identified the source of this stratum, which he numbered S11, as Anglian in dialect, with features conventionally identified both as Mercian and Northumbrian, and strong later influence from West Saxon and Kentish, probably in that order (1998: §§2.2, 14.3.2, at 2.2). The glossary also contains a scattering of features suggesting origins in the eighth century. Not all the glosses attested in the Third Cleopatra Glossary, however, need go back to this eighth-century original. They maintain the order of the lemmata of Aldhelm's texts, so if they were added after the original stratum of glosses, they were probably added as interlinear glosses to an already-glossed manuscript. But this could have been done almost as late as the composition of the Cleopatra Glossary.

I have been careful to cite the plural *dunælfa* in its manuscript form. Although the sole attestation of *landælfæ* uses the *-e* plural

¹⁰ This gloss may itself have been partly inspired by another tradition on which the First Cleopatra Glossary drew extensively (Rusche 1996: 16, 49–61), which is represented among Anglo-Saxon glossaries primarily by the early ninth-century Corpus Glossary (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 144), but which derives from the Abstrusa Glossary, compiled on the Continent around the seventh century (Lindsay 1921b: 62). To quote from the Corpus text, this tradition offered the gloss 'nimpha dea aque .' (ed. Lindsay 1921a: 120 [N109]; Bischoff *et al.* 1988: f. 43r), and this seems likely to have influenced or suggested the First Cleopatra Glossary's 'Nymphas : gydena'.

proper to the long-stemmed masculine *i*-stem declension to which *ælf* belonged, ***dunælfe* does not appear: rather the form in all cases (except the Antwerp-London Glossary, which witnesses another development again) is *dunælfa*, with the West Saxon *ō*-stem *-a* plural. If *dunælfa* does derive from an Anglian original, this West Saxon plural must be a later introduction by a Southern redactor. Even so, given its suitability and consistency, it is surely a deliberate declension-change. In Old English, feminine words for humans invariably denoted females, while feminine words for animals were almost as consistent (Curzan 2003: esp. 45, 60–66, 91 n. 7; Platzer 2001). The innovation of *-ælfa* looks, then, to be a deliberate feminisation of the denotation of *ælfe*, sharing its intent with the form *ælfen* but not its means. Where *landælfe* fits into this is not clear: it could represent an original Anglian form (potentially feminine) which, by some slip, was not altered along with *dunælfa* (and if so, the consequent semantic disjunction between gloss and lemma might explain its removal from the textual tradition), or a later addition to the tradition by a redactor who chose not to use the *-ælfa* form, perhaps because it was a neologism.

5. Interpretations

It appears that two glossators (or conceivably one glossator of wavering determination) were faced with words denoting the nymphs of Classical mythology, and both opted to gloss them with *ælf*. However, the glossators and/or their redactors were dissatisfied with using *ælf* alone, and found ways of feminising it. The difference between the strategies which they adopted strongly suggests that in eighth-century Old English, there was no existing word corresponding sufficiently closely in sense to *nympha*. There is no need to doubt that the glossators knew what nymphs were: youthful, female, non-monstrous minor goddesses whose beauty was liable to attract the sexual attentions of gods and men. The glossator of the *Etymologiae*, of course, had Isidore's description before him, and both Aldhelm

and his glossators made extensive use of this text.¹¹ Aldhelm's invocation is ostentatiously modeled on classical ones, particularly the opening of Virgil's *Georgics* (I.1–42; ed. Fairclough 1999–2000: I 98–100); he was familiar with the *Aeneid*, at least parts of Ovid's nymph-packed *Metamorphoses*, and other pertinent texts (see Orchard 1994: esp. 130–35, 200–202, 225–28). Admittedly, the most prominent *nympha* known to the Anglo-Saxons must have been Circe, the witch-nymph who turned Ulysses's men into animal forms, but her exceptional status will have been clear.¹² The recognition of *nymphae*'s non-monstrous character is suggested by their pointed omission from the *Liber monstrorum*, produced in an intellectual milieu associated with Aldhelm's.¹³

Nor was it in the interests of the original glossators to represent anything but the Classical mythological meanings of *nympha*. Aldhelm inverted Classical conventions by refusing the aid of *musae* and *nymphae* in composing his poetry, implying their worship to be unacceptable among Christians, while the later Harley Glossary version of the *dunælf*a gloss explicitly calls the *Castalidae nymphae* 'þa manfullan gydena' ('those sinful goddesses'). But for the pointed inversions of Aldhelm's invocation to be conveyed effectively, the vernacular glosses needed to represent the Classical semantics of the

¹¹ For Aldhelm's use see Howe 1985; Marenbon 1979: 86–88; for glossators' Gretsch 1999: 160–63, 165–71; Stork 1990: 56–58; on Isidore's informative structuring of mythological hierarchy and divinity Chance 1994–2000: I 141–45.

¹² For example, *Aeneid* 7.1–24 (ed. Fairclough 1999–2000: II 2); *Metamorphoses* 14.223–434 (ed. Miller 1984: II 316–30); *De consolatione philosophiae* 4, metre 3 (ed. Moreschini 2000: 111–12). These stories were well-known, as to Alfred the Great (Irvine 1996: 387–93; Grinda 2000 [1990]), Aldhelm (*enigma* 95; ed. Ehwald 1919: I 142), and the composer of the late tenth- or early eleventh-century gloss to his *enigma* in BL MS Royal 12 C xxiii (Page 1982: 160–63; ed. Stork 1990: 220–21, cf. 68–69). It is unfortunate that Circe's name is nowhere glossed, and that Alfred the Great, in chapter 38 of his translation of the *De consolatione philosophiae*, called her by the generic term *gyden* (ed. Sedgefield 1899: 116, 195).

¹³ Lapidge 1982: 165–76. The *Liber monstrorum* contains *nympha* once, in entry I.34 (ed. Orchard 2003: 276)—but it is used, contrary to the reader's expectation, with the punning sense of 'spring' (see Hall 2007b: 312 n. 3).

lemmata, so it is reasonable to take the glosses, in origin, to represent these meanings. Likewise, of the batches of Isidore glosses in the First Cleopatra and Antwerp-London glossaries deriving from S21, the *ælfen* glosses are almost alone in glossing lemmata which denote Classical mythological beings, so we have little other evidence for how the glossator who composed S21 tended to handle words for Classical mythological figures.¹⁴ But the glossator's intention was presumably the same as Isidore's: to explain Classical mythology to a Christian audience. As with *dunælf*a and *landælf*e, then, we may infer that the *ælfen*-glosses understand their lemmata in their Classical senses.

Ælf was felt by a glossator or glossators to be an appropriate basis for creating a gloss for words for nymphs. My brief discussion above of the semantics of Old English *ælf* notes my argument that they, like nymphs, were otherworldly, rather than monstrous, supernatural beings. Old English poetry composed around the ninth and tenth centuries attests to the (feminine) beauty of *ælf*e in the compound *ælfscyne* and that too correlates with characteristics of the nymphs, while *ælf* also occurs in compounds and collocation with Old English cognates of Old Icelandic *seiðr*; *seiðr* was magic seen in medieval Scandinavian traditions as fitting for women but not for men, which hints once again at feminine associations for *ælf* (Hall 2007a: 119–56). But on the evidence of the glosses, *ælf* in its normal form connoted male gender too strongly for the word to be used unaltered to gloss words for nymphs. This, too, is consistent not only with the fact that *ælf* is grammatically masculine, but that the early attestations of Old Icelandic *álfr* seem consistently to be associated with denoting males (Hall 2007a: esp. 28–31). This does not necessarily mean that *ælf* could not denote females—merely that glossators did not feel that it denoted them clearly enough for their purposes and in their register. Even this tentative conclusion, however, is revealing: it suggests that female *ælf*e, if they existed at all, had low salience in early historical Old English; and moreover that there was no other word in Old English more suitable than *ælf* to

¹⁴ The certain exception is ‘Furiæ : burgrunan’; ed. Rusche 1996: 300 [F440]; ‘Parce . hægtesse’ in Antwerp-London appears to be another example; ed. Kindschi 1955: 247; collated with MS, f. 21v.

denoting nymphs. This suggests in turn that beings like nymphs—feminine, otherworldly females, had low salience in Anglo-Saxon conceptual systems.

We have two other textual traditions of Old English glosses on or translations of words for nymphs. I have mentioned above the Aldhelm gloss ‘*Nymphas gydena*’, which may reflect an older Latin glossing tradition and recalls Alfred the Great’s decision to call Circe a *gyden* (see above, p. 155 and n. 12). This shows that *gyden* (‘goddess’) could be used to denote nymphs; but the term is a general one which conveyed little detail about the lemmata in question. The other tradition, going back to the seventh century, glosses *Echo*—which I have shown elsewhere to have been understood as the name of the nymph rather than the word meaning ‘reflected sound’—with *wudumær* (‘wood-*mær*’). *Mær(e)* denoted monstrous female supernatural beings which assaulted people in their sleep, suggesting that *mær(e)* might be an appropriate gloss for words for nymphs. However, in its original context (chapter 16 of Evagrius’s *Vita Sancti Antonii*), *Echo* was used to denote demons, which is a sense quite different from how the words for nymphs are used in the textual traditions studied here (Hall 2007b: 308–11). *Echo: wudumær* instead hints at the extensive lexicon of monstrous, dangerous and/or martial supernatural females available to Anglo-Saxons. Faced with Latin goddesses such as the *Parcae* and the *Furiae*, or words for monstrous females such as *incubae* and *strigae*, they adduced besides *gyden* words such as *hægtesse*, *wælcyrige*, *burgrune* and *wicce*.¹⁵ It appears, then, that early Old English was well-endowed with words corresponding to these kinds of supernatural female, where it was not for the nymphs. A similar point is suggested by the portrayal of powerful, violent, weapon-bearing women in the remarkable Old English charm *Wið færstice*, where they are called *hægtessan*, who are well-paralleled in medieval beliefs (Hall 2007a: 85–87; more fully Hall 2004: 168–85). A wider context again for this apparent gap is suggested by the fact that whereas *Parca*, *Furia*, *Incuba* and *Striga* were all etymologically Latin, the words for nymphs were loans from

¹⁵ Cf. Fell 1984: 29–31; n. 14 above. I hope to survey this evidence fully in a future article.

Greek, once perhaps as unfamiliar in Roman culture as they were later to be in Anglo-Saxon culture.

6. The female elves

The Antwerp-London Glossary (Antwerp, Plantin-Moretus Museum M 16.2 and its *disiectum membrum* BL Additional 32,246) affords a crucial perspective on this evidence: it suggests that by the eleventh century, *ælf* could denote females, as it could not before. Antwerp-London combined both of the textual traditions discussed above: both the *ælfen* glosses and *Castalidas: dunælfæ*.¹⁶ Among the various glossaries written in the margins of the manuscript's main Latin texts is a large Latin-English class glossary (organised by subject), based either on Ælfric's class-glossary or a shared source, written by the second of the two glossing hands and called *article 6* by Porter and *d* by Ker (see Porter 1999: esp. 181–88; Lazzari 2003; Ker 1957: 1–3 [no. 2]). The glossaries seem to have been written in at Abingdon in the earlier part of the eleventh century (Porter 1996: 163–64). In a miscellany at the end of the glossary, preserved now in London, the redactor gathered a group of words for prophets, workers of magic and otherworldly beings, which included the following sequence: 'Oriades . muntælfen . Driades . wuduelfen . Moides . feldelfen . Amadriades . wylde elfen . Naides . sælfen . Castalidas . dunelfen' (ed. Kindschi 1955: 246; collated with MS, f. 21r).

This recension shows some subtle but significant changes. Some are phonological: it seems likely that the scribe's exemplar had *ælf*-forms, which the scribe altered to the *elf*-forms of his own dialect only from the second word onwards. But more striking is a morphological change: the form of *ælfen* in Leiden and Cleopatra is the plural *ælfenne*, but the form used in the Antwerp-London Glossary is *elfen*. If this word was understood to be in the same

¹⁶ For the glossator's use of the Isidore-glosses see Porter 1996: 183–86. Porter did not note Aldhelm glosses as a source for the manuscript, but as the same scribe seems to have worked on the extraordinary collection of Aldhelm glosses found in Brussels, Royal Library 1650 (Ker 1957: 7), their presence is no surprise (though that manuscript does not itself include the gloss on *castalidas nymphas*).

declension as *ælfenne*, it would, as the *Dictionary of Old English* concluded, be a nominative singular, despite the plural forms of its lemmata (s.v. *ælfen*). But Antwerp-London does not normally gloss plurals with singulars. *Elfen* must, therefore, have been intended as a plural form. Nor is it likely to reflect some miscomprehension of the exemplar's *ælfenne* forms, since the *-en* ending was extended to the inherited gloss *Castalidas nymphas: dunælfæ*, giving the form 'castalidas dunelfen'. The only likely explanation for Antwerp-London's *elfen* plurals is that *ælfenne* was deliberately altered to become a weak plural, because *ælf* had become able to denote females. I have already discussed the growth of the weak declension in southern and western Middle English in the context of Middle English *elven*-type forms above, emphasising that it is entirely to be expected. At a graphical level, the emendation would have been facilitated by the phonological leveling of unstressed vowels and the shortening of unstressed long consonants widespread in eleventh-century English (Hogg 1992: §§6.62, 7.80), which not only encouraged the identification of <-enne> with <-an>, but permitted their replacement with <-en>. This <-en> spelling is surprising, as although it is consistent with Early Middle English spellings of weak inflections and probably more representative of eleventh-century phonology, it does not occur for etymological *-an* elsewhere in the glossary. Presumably, the redactor of the Antwerp-London Glossary, rather like the later Tremulous Worcester Scribe, copied *-an* inflections in his exemplar conservatively, but when formulating his own weak plurals opted for a spelling more representative of his own speech (see Franzen 2003), perhaps being encouraged in this by his exemplar's spelling <-en->. When Lazamon wrote his *Brut* around the early thirteenth century, *ælf* had, as I have discussed above, unambiguously entered the weak declension and become able to denote females. By the late thirteenth century, the composer of the *Southern English Legendary* could write at length about *elven* as seductive fallen angels (ed. d'Evelyn-Mill 1956–59: II 409; cf. Horstmann 1887: 306–7). We are told that

- (4) ofte in forme of womman ·
 in mony deorne weie
 Me sicþ of hom gret companie ·
 boþe hoppe & pleie
 Ðat eleuene beoþ icluped ·
 ‘often in the form of woman
 on many a hidden path
 men see a great company of them
 both dance and play,
 that are called *eluene*’ [following other MSS]

It has long been assumed that the otherworldly women of later medieval English literature are attributable to ‘Celtic’ cultural influence, directly on Old French and Anglo-Norman literature and, either directly or indirectly through this, on English (e.g., Philippon 1929: 78; Larrington 1999: esp. 35–36; cf. Maxwell-Stuart 2001: 10–17, esp. 15–16, *et passim*). But Antwerp-London is from well before the Norman Conquest and indeed the twelfth-century blossoming of the Breton *lais* and French romance. Whatever external influences they may reflect, the female *elfen* came into being in pre-Conquest England.

7. The meanings of change

Eighth-century Anglo-Saxons, then, had no vernacular word closely corresponding to Latin words for nymphs; the closest option was *ælf*, but that only denoted males. But by the eleventh century, the meanings of *ælf* had extended to include a female denotation, later to be well-attested in Middle English. In the theoretical framework which I have outlined above, this semantic change strongly suggests a change in belief, and a change in belief suggests a change in culture. Otherworldly, feminine supernatural beings alike to nymphs either did not exist for early Anglo-Saxons, or at any rate were not prominent in their ideologies—at least among the literate, probably aristocratic Anglo-Saxons who shaped our sources. But they were features of their belief a few centuries later, and, alongside figures like the Old French *fées*, even became prominent. The rise of a female denotation of *ælf* appears concurrently, in the South, with the

transference of *ælf* to the weak declension. But although this morphological change could have been a factor in creating the conditions for semantic change, it is not a sufficient explanation for it: other innovative Early Middle English weak plurals like *cnihten*, *kingen* or *brethren* continued to denote males alone. The arrival of female *elven* in English culture must have involved other factors, linguistic and extra-linguistic.

As I said in my introduction, assessing these factors is a task far beyond the scope of this paper. They link in to a wider history of *ælf*e in Anglo-Saxon gendering which I have developed elsewhere (2004: esp. 195–208). But it is important to sketch something of the possibilities, to emphasise how the study of Old English semantics can afford new evidence on Anglo-Saxon history. One simple but important point is that the rise of female *ælfen* represents a change in non-Christian belief. There is a long European tradition of viewing beliefs in beings such as elves as fossils, relics from pre-Conversion culture, fixed except insofar as they were gradually being eroded away by Christianisation. Here I have been able to demonstrate instead that Anglo-Saxon non-Christian belief was dynamic.

I have also noted that, although early Anglo-Saxons did not have prominent cultural equivalents to nymphs, they did have a well-developed lexicon for martial, monstrous or otherwise dangerous supernatural women (§5). Although the precise processes are masked, there is no doubt that in the long term, beliefs in martial supernatural females like these were on the wane in medieval England. In Ireland we have just enough evidence to trace changes of much this sort. Although the closest equivalents to *ælf*e in our Old Irish evidence, the male members of the *síde*, have otherworldly, feminine female counterparts in our earliest texts, early Irish traditions also attest to the powerful, martial *badb*; but later in the Middle Ages, traditions of the *badb* were subsumed into traditions of non-martial *síde*-women (Lysaght 1996: 191–218). The evidence of the Old English glosses shows that careful attention to our lexical evidence may allow us to construct comparable narratives for England. The suspicion arises that the rise of female *ælf*e in some way represents the replacement of traditions of martial, supernatural women with beliefs in unambiguously feminine supernatural females. This would in turn afford insights into the somewhat

intractable history of the changing positions of women in Anglo-Saxon society, arguably removing mythological paradigms for martial behaviour while developing images of women as the seductive, magic-working threats to men's well-being implied by the *elven* of the *Southern English Legendary*.

As Schmitt wrote of medieval popular religion, 'it is not so much the documents that are lacking as the conceptual instruments necessary to understand them' (1983: 171). I have tried here to outline a methodological and theoretical framework for using the history of the Old English lexicon to illuminate the history of Anglo-Saxon culture. In the Old English lexicon—and particularly the Old English glosses, which are relatively little-studied, but relatively rich in words for social constructs which are little-attested elsewhere in Anglo-Saxon sources—we have an enormously rich resource for early medieval cultural history. The same point doubtless applies to various other medieval cultures—the extensive corpus of Old High German glosses in particular come to mind. Words denoting social realities seem likely to provide major insights into the beliefs and ideologies of the linguistic communities which used them. Through lexical evidence, I have been able to show that early Anglo-Saxon elves were only male, and that early Anglo-Saxons had no lexicalised concept of beings like Classical nymphs—what we might term feminine otherworldly beings. But their beliefs changed between the eighth and eleventh centuries, with the arrival of female elves in Old English and, arguably, in Anglo-Saxon belief-systems. These conclusions yield new insights into the pace of Anglo-Saxon cultural change, particularly Christianisation. I have also been able to sketch a context in which they can be related to wider realms of cultural history, attesting to changes in Anglo-Saxon discourses of gender. Words change, but the meanings of their changes may extend far beyond the lexicon.

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