Alaric Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England: Matters of Belief, Health, Gender and Identity* (Anglo-Saxon Studies 8), The Boydell Press: Woodbridge 2007. 232 pp.

Elves used to abound in the world; however, as Chaucer's Wife of Bath tells us, thanks to the friars and other blessers, they have all been frightened away, replaced in their sexual transgressions by the friars themselves. How one finds elves in the post-Conversion world is a tricky question; the son in Halldór Laxness' *Independent People* whispers to all the rocks, because he is not certain which ones have elves under them. Of course he was in Iceland, where elves have always fared better than in England, the subject of Alaric Hall's new impressive volume, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England.*

Hall's study should become standard reading in all fields touching on Anglo-Saxon interests for a number of its merits. Although the thought of a book on elves might cause one to think first of Tolkien studies or now Harry Potter, Hall's book is not at all concerned with the realm of modern fantasy, but rather the literary, cultural, and anthropological evidence for what exactly elves may have been in the Anglo-Saxon mind. It is an admirably careful, measured study with a strong focus on primary evidence, lexical items and good philology. Hall offers a valuable corrective to many assumptions that scholars and casual medievalists alike have about elves, as well as advancing strong new arguments concerning the cultural perception of elves in Anglo-Saxon England.

In his introduction, Hall begins with *Wið færstice*, an Old English charm "Against a stabbing pain," and returns to this seminal text repeatedly

throughout his study as a locus for investigating elves in their cultural contexts. As Hall indicates early on, and demonstrates throughout the book, the implications of the study are wide-ranging; "they tell us about Anglo-Saxon constructions of illness, mental health, and healing; of group identities; and even of gender and sexual relationships" (p. 4). The precise manner in which he goes about unearthing long-unexamined texts, and reexamining some texts whose interpretations have long been taken for granted, is based on his assertion that "[a] key contention of this study is that attention to linguistic detail is important" (p. 5). This is perhaps one of the greatest merits of this volume, which he demonstrates throughout and to which he consciously returns in the final chapter: the use of primary language study as the key to understanding medieval history and culture.

The first chapter begins by stepping back from Anglo-Saxon England and establishing the notion of elves in the wider Scandinavian context. Here Hall is as careful as he has promised to be, acknowledging the difficulties in using the much later Scandinavian evidence to try to establish a context in which to consider pre-Christian English perceptions of elves. Adeptly drawing from the fields of linguistics and anthropology, Hall posits semantic fields and suggests that the Old Norse cognate of Old English *ælf* — *álfr* — would be considered supernatural but human-like, non-monstrous beings, that are thus, anthropologically speaking, part of an in-group with humans, in contrast to the monstrous giants and dwarves.

Chapter 2, "The Earliest Anglo-Saxon Evidence," begins with a consideration of the etymology of the Old English word *ælf* and its connection to whiteness — which has already been seen in the previous chapter on Scandinavian contexts. Hall then considers the role of the word element *ælf* in Anglo-Saxon personal and place names, especially in light of the fact that Old English names are generally lexically transparent and potentially lexically meaningful. Hall concludes by finding a similar semantic overlap in Old English as in the Old Norse material — that *ælfe* are supernatural, but not monstrous. The one glaring exception to this scheme is the famous passage in *Beowulf*, lines 102–114, in which *ylfe* ("elves") are explicitly linked with monstrous beings in connection to Grendel. While assuming an early date for *Beowulf*, Hall does not believe this passage suggests an early Anglo-Saxon "established tradition of monstrous *ælfe*," but rather reads this passage as a "self-

conscious (and perhaps ostentatious) realignment of the *ælfe*, demonising them by association with monsters" (p. 73).

Chapter 3 moves on to consider "Female Elves and Beautiful Elves," opening with Chaucer and seeking to discover whether a conception of the beautiful, seductive elf is one which had any currency in Anglo-Saxon England, or if it is a purely post-Conquest phenomenon. There are two primary sources of evidence for the former view: the rare Old English poetic compound *ælfscyne*, and a set of glosses which use the base *ælf* for glossing "*nympha*" and related words for beautiful supernatural females. Hall's introduction to his discussion of the glosses and his caveats for using glosses as evidence generally should be required reading for all Anglo-Saxonists, especially those who use resources such as the Toronto *Dictionary of Old English Electronic Corpus*. Tools such as these allow users to search for Latin terms like *nympha* and find a number of Old English "equivalents" — such as "wood-elven" and "water-elven" — which may seem to suggest a developed mythology of female sprites current in Anglo-Saxon England. What Hall, and other careful scholars, realize of course is that the context of the gloss must be appreciated before any conclusions can be drawn. Working with these glosses on a list of nymphs from Isidore, Hall finds that these glosses actually support the *absence* of any such Anglo-Saxon conception, and that their term for a female *ælf* — namely *ælfen* — is not a part of the Old English lexicon, but a nonce word created to fill a semantic void. After considering the different glossators faced with the term *nympha*, Hall concludes that "the difference between the strategies which they adopted strongly suggests that there was in eighth-century Old English no word with a female denotation corresponding in sense to *nympha*" (p. 83), and indeed, "female *ælfe* had a low cultural salience in early Anglo-Saxon England" (p. 87).

The remainder of this chapter deals with the compound *ælfscyne*, "elf-beautiful," which occurs only twice in Old English poetry — in *Genesis A*, referring to Abraham's wife Sara, and referring to the heroine of the poetic *Judith*. Hall subtly seems to suggest that the term is a coinage of the *Genesis A*-poet, which was later borrowed by the *Judith*-poet, but backs away from opening the "oral-formulaic" versus "literate composition" can of worms. Hall concludes that "someone who was *ælfescyne* was beautiful in a dangerously seductive way" (p. 93).

Chapters 4 and 5 return to the heart of the matter, especially where evidence is concerned — medical texts and the "elf-shot conspiracy". Hall's

loaded use of "conspiracy" to refer to the belief in sickness being dealt by invisible arrow-wielding elves offers a valuable check to past scholarship in this field of study, which has been traditionally overzealous to find "pagan" influences, which can more reasonably be explained with reference to more mainstream sources. Hall opens the chapter with a famously misunderstood image of a psalm illustration which had been alleged to be a picture of an elf shooting his "elf-shot," but was later shown to be nothing more than the devil and his own arrows (p. 96). This chapter focuses on three texts concerned with elves and healing: Harley 585 (containing *Wið færstice*, with which Hall introduced this volume); the Royal Prayerbook; and London, British Library, Royal 12 D. xvii, the manuscript containing *Bald's Leechbook* and *Leechbook III*. A single example from *Bald's Leechbook*, section 65, is indicative of how valuable Hall's careful study is: the remedy in question begins "*gif hors ofscoten sie*", "if a horse is badly pained", but contains no reference to elves. Although the verb "*ofsceotan*" does etymologically refer to the shooting of missiles, in later Old English it had developed a purely medical sense of "to afflict, cause pain; have darting pains" (p. 100). But because of modern editors' titles for this remedy — such as *Wiþ ylfa gescotum* and *Wið ylfa gescot* ("Against elves' shot") — this instance entered the modern world and dictionaries as one of the primary examples of the notion of a pre-Christian "elf-shot."

After discussing a handful of other medical terms containing the word "elf" — which was likely only understood metaphorically — Hall returns to the text "*Wið færstice*", and argues that this text "can be contextualised with thinking in medical anthropology, which has established clearly the power of ritual, particularly in manipulating social forces with a bearing on an individual's health; of the diagnosing and concomitant naming of ailment; and of placebo and nocebo effects" (pp. 108–109). He then develops a convincing argument that this text offers an approach to healing "which not only deploys metaphor at a discursive level, but underpins it with polysemy at a lexical one" (p. 112). The terms employed in the remedy can refer not only to projectile wounds, but also to internal pains, thus at the same time dealing with the ailment as medical problem, as well as one caused by supernatural beings; the sufferer's experience is thus construed in martial and heroic terms. Such a strategy "gave the ailment an ultimate as well as proximate source, and created a narrative in which the healer tackled the disease at its root — neither treating merely the symptoms

nor merely defending the patient against supernatural beings, but mounting a dramatic counter-offensive." (p. 115)

Chapter 5 deals with the term *ælfsiden*, which occurs in three different remedies: once in each of *Lacnunga*, *Leechbook III*, and *Bald's Leechbook*. The second element of this word is almost certainly related to the Old Norse terms *síða*, "to work magic", and *seiðr*, "magic". After examining each of the three Anglo-Saxon texts in question, Hall contextualizes these pieces, showing how they fit in the wider Germanic world, as evidenced by Old Norse texts and texts from the wider British Isles — drawing on an Old Irish tale of Cú Chulainn, later English texts such as Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*, and the South English Legendary — and discovering that the closest parallels for these tales involve seduction.

The book concludes with two short chapters: Chapter 6, "Anglo-Saxon Myth and Gender", and Chapter 7, "Believing in Early-Medieval History", which, more than simply summarizing or concluding, point in the directions in which this valuable book can take Anglo-Saxon studies, and Medieval historiography generally.

This book is a careful and meticulous study which will be of interest to Anglo-Saxon and medieval scholars in many fields. The book concludes with a rich works-cited, which handily compliments the very full footnotes throughout the book, as well as a thorough index. The book is relatively free of errors, although there is a sentence on p. 41 beginning "If the formula is related to the repeated alliteration …" which I find impossible to construe,; I suspect a typo of some sort. I will not dwell on criticisms, because they are few and insignificant in comparison with the book's value. Some readers — especially non-Anglo-Saxonists, who I do hope will read this book — may be distracted by Hall's use of the Old English word *ælf* throughout (rather than giving its modern English equivalent); however, he makes an excellent argument for doing so. Hall explains early on that it "is intended to circumvent the problems inherent in defining conceptual categories first and asking questions later" (p. 11). His translations are likewise often full of alternative translations, untranslated words, and question marks. Some readers, especially those without a working knowledge of Old English or other Germanic languages, may find this distracting. Nevertheless, this reviewer believes that such an approach is valuable for its insistent refusal to obfuscate the many difficulties which thousand-year-old texts present to modern readers. It also highlights the

polysemy often found in these texts. Indeed, as Hall concludes, "my arguments go beyond [prioritizing primary language research in medieval studies], to claim that semantics is itself a key to the historical study of past cultures" (p. 170). If this volume — which is essentially focused on one word — is any indication, I wholeheartedly agree.

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