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CALLING THE SHOTS: THE OLD ENGLISH REMEDY *GIF HORS
OFSCOTEN SIE* AND ANGLO-SAXON ‘ELF-SHOT’

1. Introduction

‘Elf-shot’ is a concept which will need little introduction to students of Anglo-Saxon culture, and the thrust if not the words of Singer’s statement in his British Academy lecture of 1919, ‘Early English Magic and Medicine’ (1919–20, 357), will be familiar:

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 repeated his lecture in a condensed form as the introduction to his edition, with Grattan, of the Old English medical text in British Library, MS. Harley 585 known as *Lacnunga* (1952, esp. 52–62). His views were also substantially repeated by his one-time student Bonser, originally in 1926 (esp. 350–57), but again in 1963 in his *The Medical Background of Anglo-Saxon England*, which was for thirty years the standard work on Anglo-Saxon medicine (esp. 158–67; superceded by Cameron 1993, which, while more cautious, does not dispute Singer’s portrayal). Jolly’s recent and detailed consideration of ‘elf-charms’ in the Old English medical texts has maintained the tradition (1996, 134):

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.

Thus accepted by Anglo-Saxonists, ‘elf-shot’ has become a staple of general histories of medieval European popular religion, witchcraft and folklore (e.g. Thomas 1973, 725; Kieckhefer 1989, 65; Mayr-Harting 1991, 28–29; Flint 1991, 87, 115, 165), and has even given rise to the neo-Old English word *ælfscot*.¹

¹ Cited, I presume inadvertently, by Lecouteux 1987, 17–19 and Swanton 1988, 297. Notwithstanding Müller’s emendation of a fifteenth-century form *vluekecche* to *vlue<sc>hotte* (1929, 89), implicitly rejected by the *MED*, which linked it instead with *elf-cake* (s.v. *elven*), *elf-shot* occurs first in Rowll’s *Cursing* (ed. Craigie 1919–27, I 163; cf. *DOST*, s.v. *elf*). The poem





But ‘elf-shot’ is not as clearly attested in Anglo-Saxon England as has been thought – and what is attested does not necessarily imply what it has been thought to. Here I reassess one group of texts which has been taken to support the claims of Singer and Jolly quoted above.² These texts centre on a remedy *Gif hors ofscoten sie* (‘If a horse be *ofscoten*’) in the second of the two books of Bald’s *Læceboc*, an extensive vernacular collection of medical texts preserved in British Library, MS. Royal 12 D. xvii, from about the mid-tenth century. Bald’s *Læceboc* was probably compiled around 900, arguably at the court of King Alfred (Wright 1955, 12–27; Ker 1957, 332–33 [no. 264]; cf. Meaney 1984, 250–51; Cameron 1993, 30–31; Pratt 2001, 69–71), but it is not certain that *Gif hors ofscoten sie* originally belonged to it.³ A third book of remedies concludes the manuscript, known as *Læceboc III*, but is a separate (albeit sometimes textually related) collection. *Gif hors ofscoten sie* has been the impetus for the identification of ‘elf-shot’ in several other remedies, but, as I show, it alone affords evidence for it. This may, however, be supplemented by my re-analysis of the meaning of Old English *ælfsgoða*, which argues that *ælfsgoða* is consistent with *Gif hors ofscoten sie* in important respects. One other text which may offer a convincing basis for imagining an Anglo-Saxon tradition of ‘elf-shot’, in the sense of disease-causing missiles shot by *ælf*,⁴ is the charm *Wið færstice*,

is probably datable to the papacy of Alexander VI (1492–1503) by its mention of ‘paip alexander’ in line 8, but the relevant line appears in only one of the two manuscripts, the Maitland Folio Manuscript, of 1570–86 (Craigie 1919–27, II 1–6). The line may therefore be a later addition, and is only attested at this time. See further Hall 2005, 23–24.

² A further contribution in this direction is Jolly 1998, which refutes the long-standing misconception that illustration of psalm 37 in the Eadwine Psalter depicts ‘elf-shot’.

³ Jolly found the ailments included in section 65, which opens with *Gif hors ofscoten sie*, an ‘odd collection’ (1996, 151–54 at 154); certainly they seem both to be rather miscellaneous, and more so than is usual in Bald’s well-organised *Læceboc* (cf. Cameron 1993, 82–83). They could, therefore, be seen as marginal to the text. Section 65 is the last section of remedies proper in the collection, being followed only by a tract on the properties of agate and another on weights and measures. If extra remedies were added to the text in transmission, then, this would be a likely point for their insertion. Moreover, at least one seems to be oral in origin, the oft-noted ‘læcedom dun tæhte’ (‘remedy which Dun taught’; ed. Wright 1955, f. 106v). Others seem to derive from a text which is also reflected by British Library, MS. Cotton Galba A.xiv (Meaney 1984, 240–41). Moreover, *Gif hors ofscoten sie* seems, as I discuss below, to be for the same ailment as a remedy *Gif hors sie ofscoten oppe oper neat* which occurs in the last section of Book I of Bald’s *Læceboc*, section 89 (f. 58rv), but it would have been characteristic of the compiler of Bald’s *Læceboc* to have included such related remedies together if he meant to include them at all.

⁴ In view of the uncertainty as to the meanings of Old English *ælf*, and its particular relevance here, I avoid updating the form to Modern English *elf*. The usual citation form for Old English, as here, is *ælf* (Bosworth–Toller 1898, s.v.; Clark Hall 1960, s.v.; *Dictionary of Old English*, s.v.), but commentators citing the plural form often use the West Saxon form *ylfe*. This is reasonable insofar as the Anglian plural **ælfe* and the West Saxon singular **ylf* are not attested until the Middle English period. However, the inconsistency causes confusion. Thus, for example, the *Middle English Dictionary* says (s.v. *elf*) that ‘OE had a masc. *ælf*, pl. *ylfe*’, as though the word shows a systematic vowel alternation, as is genuinely the case in the etymological note for *fōt* ‘OE *fōt*; pl. *fēt*’. This being so, I use the plural citation form *ælfe*.



preserved in *Lacnunga* (ed. Grattan–Singer 1952, 173–76). However, new approaches to this unique and much-discussed text should, I think, follow the reanalysis of more mundane comparative material, such as the texts studied here, and so I comment on it only briefly.

2. *Gif hors ofscoten sie*

Here is *Gif hors ofscoten sie* in full;⁵ here and elsewhere, translations are my own, and issues arising from them which are irrelevant to the main discussion are considered in the footnotes to each:

Gif hors ofscoten sie. Nim þonne þæt seax þe þæt hæfte sie fealo hryperes horn & sien .III. ærene næglas on. Writ þonne þam horse on þam heafde foran cristes mæl þæt hit blede. Writ þonne on þam hricge cristes mæl & on leoþa gehwilcum þe þu ætfeolan mæge. Nim þonne þæt winestre eare þurh sting swigende. Þis þu scealt don. genim ane girde sleah on þæt bæc þonne biþ þæt hors hal. & awrit on þæs seaxes horne þas word. Benedicite omnia opera domini dominum. Sy þæt ylfa þe him sie þis him mæg to bote.

If a horse be *ofscoten* [as I argue below, meaning something like ‘badly pained’]. Take then a dagger whose haft is of fallow-ox’s horn and in which there are three brass nails. Write/inscribe on the horse, on the forehead, Christ’s mark, so it bleeds. Write/inscribe then Christ’s mark on the spine and on each of the limbs which you can grasp.⁶ Then take the left ear, pierce

⁵ Since there is no up-to-date edition of Royal 12 D. xvii, since facsimiles (Wright 1955; Doane 1994, no. 298) are at least as easily available as Cockayne’s edition, and since folio references will easily be found in Cockayne, I cite from Wright’s facsimile (1955, f. 106r), taking the usual editorial liberties of expanding abbreviations, normalising spacing and ignoring lineation. The present text serves neatly to emphasise the problems with Cockayne’s edition, as Cockayne omitted the words ‘þæt hit blede . Writ þonne on þam hricge cristes mæl’ (1864–66, II 291), presumably by eye-skip. Although correct in this instance (1948, 248), Storms’s edition is much inferior to Cockayne’s generally. The use of his edition where available in preference to Cockayne’s for the *Corpus of Old English* text of the *Læcebooc* is not only odd in this respect, but in producing electronic texts exhibiting very different editorial approaches for a manuscript text showing very consistent ones, a problem further exacerbated by the use of the Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records edition in preference to either of these where that is available.

⁶ Most of the *Dictionary of Old English* citations for *æt-fēolan* (s.v.) come under meanings 1 ‘to adhere, cleave, stick’ or 2 ‘of action carried on: to apply oneself’. Following earlier dictionaries, and ultimately Cockayne (who, of course, was working before any Old English research dictionaries had been published; 1864–66, II 291), the *Dictionary* does give a third meaning, ‘to press’. Its only citation for a literal form of this meaning (3a, ‘to press, i.e. apply pressure to, feel (a limb)’) is the present text, and this strikes me as a dubious interpretation. It seems much more appropriate to imagine the healer of the horse grasping each limb, much as Beowulf ‘him þæs georne ætfealh’ in his efforts to prevent Grendel escaping Heorot (cited under 1a ‘to cling, stick, adhere to (someone/something)’). The relevance of carving only into limbs which can be pressed – which is surely all of them – is doubtful; but one can well imagine difficulty in grasping a horse’s legs after a cross has just been carved into its forehead, this being accommodated by the remedy.



it in silence. This shall you do: take a staff; strike on the back; then the horse will be well. And write/inscribe on the dagger's handle these words: *Benedicite omnia opera domini dominum* [bless all the works of the lord of lords]. Should it be *ælfes*, which is on it, this will do as a remedy for it.

Despite the obvious title for this remedy, *Gif hors ofscoten sie*, found both here and in Book II's contents list on folio 64v, the remedy was entitled *Wið ylfa gescot* by Grendon (1909, 208–9) and *Wipylfa gescotum* by Storms (1948, 248–49). Moreover, the first clause, for which I suggest the literal translation 'If a horse be badly pained', was translated by Cockayne as 'If a horse is elf shot' (1864–66, II 291), by Grendon as 'If a horse is elf-struck', by Storms as 'If a horse is elf-shot', and, circumspectly but essentially in accordance of this tradition, by Jolly as 'If a horse is [elf]shot [*ofscoten*]' (1996, 152). This translation has also entered the dictionaries (Bosworth–Toller 1898; Clark Hall 1960, s.v. *ofsceotan*).

However, Cockayne's glossary to the texts of the 'Leech Book' shows that he did not intend his translation 'elf shot' to imply the agency of *ælfes*: nor is this a surprise, since lexically *ofsceotan* in no way suggests the presence of *ælfes*.⁷ Cockayne added a rather elliptical footnote to the translation reading 'elf shot in the Scottish phrase' (1864–66, II 291 n. 1), but his long glossary-entry for *ofscoten* is in this regard unambiguous:

properly *badly wounded by a shot*, but specially used ... for *elf shot*, the Scottish term, that is *dangerously distended by greedy devouring of green food*. It is spoken of cattle; sheep are very subject to it if they get into a clover field at full freedom.

Cockayne then added two citations from folklore collections (1864–66, II 401). It appears, then, that in using 'elf shot' Cockayne was simply seeking an idiomatic translation of *ofscoten*, which he took here to mean something like 'dangerously distended by greedy devouring of green food'. Bosworth and Toller seem to have had the same thing in mind, but their dictionary-entry for *ofscoten* also introduces the 'elf' as an independent being: '*elf-shot, diseased from an elf's shot* ... The disease consists in an over-distension of an animal's stomach from the swelling up of clover and grass, when eaten with the morning dew on it' (1898, s.v. *ofsceotan*). Subsequently, 'elves' were increasingly taken to be connoted by *ofsceotan*. The misunderstanding is evident in Thun's study of 'The Malignant Elves', which includes a laudably transparent, though ultimately unacceptable, argument for inferring 'elves' in *ofscoten*, and is presumably representative of the reasoning behind Grendon and Storms's (mis)translations of *ofscoten* cited above (1969, 384):

The participle is taken to mean 'elf-shot, diseased from an elf's shot'. Similarly Clark Hall s.v. *ofsceotan* translates *ofscoten* by 'elf-struck (of

⁷ In response to this problem, Bonser suggested that the prefix *of-* here actually derives from *ælf* (1963, 385 n.1). But this is *ad hoc* and unnecessary.



cattle seized with sudden disease’). Moreover, Bosworth-Toller refers to Jamieson’s *Scottish Dictionary*, which (s.v. *elfshot*) amongst other things says: ‘Disease supposed to be produced by the stroke of an elf-arrow’. In his edition of the text ... Cockayne offers the same explanation based on the Scottish word. In spite of the agreement of these authorities one may hesitate to regard the mythical implications of *ofscoten* as proved beyond doubt. Some further discussions will be necessary.

Thun showed scepticism here – rightly – but had actually misunderstood Cockayne’s translation, taking it to be ‘in agreement’ with the interpretation of Bosworth-Toller and Jamieson, and taking all of them to suggest ‘mythical implications’.

Thun’s ‘further discussions’ led him, naturally, to the last sentence of the remedy, which actually does mention *ælf*, and which gives the only support for reading ‘elf-shot’ into the text: ‘Sy þæt ylfa þe him sie þis him mæg to bote’. This sentence has its complexities, but it is at least clear that it has been consistently mis-translated. Cockayne offered ‘Be the elf what it may, this is mighty for him to amends’ (1864–66, 291). This implies that an ‘elf’, which might be one of various sorts, is somehow assailing the horse. Subsequent commentators have basically followed Cockayne, but altered the translation, often imposing their own preconceptions on the text in doing so. Grendon translated ‘Be the elf who he may, this will suffice as a cure for him’ (1909, 209) and Singer ‘Be the elf who he may, this has power as a remedy’ (1919–20, 358); Storms went further, offering ‘Whatever elf has taken possession of it, this will cure him’ (1948, 249), introducing the concept of possession. Most recently, Jolly improved on Cockayne’s handling of ‘þe him sie’ and produced an otherwise more conservative translation with ‘Whatever elf is on him, this can be a remedy for him’ (1996, 152).

However, Cockayne, and accordingly the scholars who have followed him, surely mistranslated the first part of the sentence. The main clause of the sentence (‘þis him mæg to bote’) is hard to render idiomatically in English because of the usage of *magan*, but its meaning is not in doubt. But Cockayne clearly had difficulty with the subordinate clause (‘Sic þæt ylfa þe him sie’, translated ‘Be the elf what it may’), and included a rather obscure note to justify his reading: ‘The construction as in *Ic hit eom, I am he*; combined with the partitive, as *Hwilc hæleða, what hero*’ (1864–66, II 291 n. 2). This note evidently sought to elucidate *Sic þæt ylfa*, but the clearest problem with Cockayne’s reading is his rendering of ‘þe him sie’ as ‘what it may’. It might be possible to take *him* in *Sic þæt ylfa þe him sie* reflexively to refer to the subject (see Mitchell 1985, I §§271–74), producing a literal rendering along the lines of ‘Be that [creature] of *ælf*, which he may in himself be’, but extracting such a sense is tortuous, and the available parallels dubious. Moreover, a much simpler reading is available, as Jolly’s translation suggests. *Him* would naturally be taken to refer to the indirect object of the sentence, as it does in the main clause (as in Cockayne’s ‘this is mighty *for him* to amends’), while clause-initial subjunctives like *sy* (third person singular present subjunctive of *wesan* ‘to be’) were used in inverted conditional



clauses to express uncertainty (cf. ‘Be he alive or dead...’; Mitchell 1985, II §§3678–80). This suggests the reading ‘Be *þæt ylfa*, which may be on it [the horse], this will do as a remedy for it [the horse]’. Similar constructions found by searches of the electronic *Corpus of Old English* are ‘gif hyt þonne sy þæt sio wamb sy aþunden, scarfa ðonne þa wyrte 7 lege on þa wambe’ (‘If it should then be that the stomach is swollen, scrape those plants and lay [them] on the stomach’; ed. De Vriend 1984, 38) and ‘sy þæt sar þær hit sy, smite mon ða sealfe ærest on þæt heafod’ (‘Be the pain where it may, one should smear the salve first on the head’; ed. Grattan–Singer 1952, 112) from the medical texts, and from the laws *V Æthelstan* ‘& gif hit sy ðegen ðe hit do, sy þæt ilce’ (‘and if it be a thegn who does it, be that [punishment] likewise’; ed. Liebermann 1903–16, I 168).

The subject of the conditional clause must be *þæt*.⁸ Cockayne tried to explain *þæt ylfa* as a partitive genitive (a construction along the lines of ‘one of the *ælfe*’), but faced difficulties because *ælf* is masculine and *þæt* is neuter (we would have expected ***sie he ylfa*). He therefore sought a parallel for reading the neuter pronoun to refer to the masculine *ylfa* in the construction ‘ic hit eom’. This example seems of dubious relevance, but Cockayne’s interpretation might be viable insofar as neuter demonstratives are occasionally used of grammatically masculine nouns with asexual denotees (Mitchell 1985, I §68), in which case we must suppose that *ælfe* were viewed as asexual in this text. But it would be much more plausible to take *þæt* to refer to the illness with which the horse is afflicted, with *ylfa* as a straightforward possessive genitive: ‘If that [ailment] be *ælfe*’s, which is on it [the horse], this will do as a remedy for it [the horse]’. This is unambiguously the case in ‘sy þæt sar þær hit sy’, where the antecedent *sar* is restated. Hence the translation which I gave above: ‘Should it be *ælfe*’s, which is on it, this will do as a remedy for it’.

Thun did not offer a translation of the Old English remedy in his article, but had no doubt been influenced by those of earlier scholars, deducing that ‘The mention of *ylfa* makes it seem likely that the elves were thought to be those who were shooting’ (1969, 385). Implicitly, other commentators have followed the same reasoning. But I draw the opposite conclusion: the last sentence, the one mentioning *ælfe*, opens with a conditional clause, making it clear that *ælfe* are not necessarily involved in the illness at all. The remedy implies only that the ailment might in some way belong to *ælfe*, and advocates an extra measure to be employed if this is the case. This interpretation is further supported by the fact that the final part of the remedy, ‘& awrit on þæs seaxes horne þas word. Benedicite omnia opera domini dominum. Sy þæt ylfa þe him sie þis him mæg to bote’ is not integral to it. The remedy is completed with

⁸ *Ylfa* can, if declining regularly, only be a genitive plural. Even if it shows the same transference to the feminine *ō*-stem declension as the form *dunælfa* in the Third Cleopatra Glossary (ed. Rusche 1996, 521 [no. 1101]) and some of its textual relatives (such as the first Cleopatra Glossary, ed. Rusche 1996, 225 [C460]), a plural could not be the subject of the singular verb, which is, in any case, intransitive, leaving no function for *þæt ylfa* were to be taken as the subject.



the striking of the horse, after which we are told ‘þonne biþ þæt hors hal’ (‘Then the horse will be well’), a formula which usually signals the end of a remedy (cf. Cameron 1993, 40). The note that one should write a benediction on the ‘seaxes horn’, which will avail if the illness is *ælf*e’s, is an addition.

This exorcism of ‘elves’ from the main part of the remedy *Gif hors ofscoten sie* is supported by the external evidence of three remedies, in Bald’s *Læceboc* I and *Lacnunga*, for ailments of similar name, again affecting horses. *Lacnunga* folio 171r and Bald’s *Læceboc* 58r–v share a remedy, no doubt through written transmission, respectively entitled ‘Gif hors gescoten sy oððe oþer neat’ (‘If a horse be *gescoten*, or another (livestock) animal’; ed. Grattan–Singer 1952, 168) and ‘Gif hors sie ofscoten oþþe oþer neat’. This variation shows clearly that *ofscoten* in Bald’s *Læceboc* corresponds directly to *gescoten* in *Lacnunga*. Meanwhile, on folios 182v–183r of *Lacnunga* is a charm, in Latin apart from its opening, ‘gif hors bið gescoten’ (ed. Grattan–Singer 1952, 184–86). However, *ælf* does not appear in any of the texts. This seems to me to support the conclusion that *ofscoten* in *Gif hors ofscoten sie* does not imply *ælf*e. Admittedly, the remedies adduce elements of Christian scripture or ritual, and the Latin one is effectively an exorcism, declaring ‘extinguatur [MS extingunt] diabolus’ (‘may the Devil be expelled’) and using biblical quotations (cf. Grattan–Singer 1952, 186 nn. 1, 2, 3), but this does not mean that a *gescoten* horse is an elf-shot horse. Previous commentators, however, have tended to draw the opposite conclusion from these texts, the thinking being expressed explicitly, as before, by Thun. Having concluded that the *ofscoten* horse had been shot by ‘elves’ in the text which mentions them, Thun deduced that ‘The term *gescoten* in *Lacnunga* is a synonym of *ofscoten* in *Læceboc*. If we accept elves as being the shooting spirits in the two passages in *Læceboc* ... it will seem highly probable that they were thought of as shooting also in *Lacnunga*’ (1969, 385). Likewise, Storms translated *gescoten* in *Gif hors gescoten sy oððe oþer neat* in *Lacnunga* as ‘elf-shot’ (1948, 250), while Grendon entitled it ‘For an elf-shot horse’ (1909, 164), and Jolly considered it to provide for ‘an animal shot by an elf’ (1996, 1). Grattan and Singer entitled the Latin remedy in *Lacnunga* ‘Christian Charm for Elfshot Horse’ (1952, 185); and, while entitling it literally with ‘If a horse be shot’, Jolly accepted it as an ‘elf remedy’ (1996, 143). With this precedent in place, various other texts which include neither *ælf* nor *sceotan* have, at times, been identified as remedies for ‘elves’, helping the idea of ‘elf-shot’ and other malicious actions by ‘elves’ to spread through the corpus (e.g. Storms 1948, 254–55; Bonser 1963, 160–61, 163). But this reasoning is inverted: the absence of *ælf* in all these texts militates against its general presence, not for it.

3. *Ælfe*, internal pains and *ælf*sogoða

What, then, does *Gif hors ofscoten sie* tell us about *ælf*e? All it suggests is that someone considered them a possible cause of a horse being *ofscoten*, in which case it was appropriate to increase the liturgical content in a remedy which was already substantially based on Christian ritual. The remaining variable, then, is how we



should understand *ofscoten*. *Sceotan* literally denoted thrusting or shooting. But later in English it had specific medical meanings along the lines of ‘to afflict, cause pain; have darting pains’ (*MED*, s.v. *shēten* §6b; *OED*, s.vv. *shoot*, v. §I.5, *shooting* §3), which is the sort of sense in which Cockayne, Bosworth and Toller, and Clark Hall took *ofscoten* in *Gif hors ofscoten sie*. Apart from in the texts mentioned above, which have themselves been taken as evidence for elf-shot, this meaning seems not to be attested in Old English, though *Læceboc III* and *Lacnunga* share a remedy ‘wið sceotendum wenne’ (‘against a *sceotend* growth’; ed. Grattan–Singer 1952, 148; cf. *Læceboc III*, ed. Wright 1955, f. 117r), which seems likely to attest to *sceotan* in a similar sense, unless it is an early attestation of the sense ‘to sprout, to spring forth’ (*MED*, s.v. *shēten* §2b; *DOST*, s.v. *schute* §I.6). But its West Germanic cognates, and the reflexes and cognates of the corresponding noun *gescot*, provide a fuller range of comparisons, in senses along the lines of ‘(to cause a) sharp pain’ (e.g. Höfler 1899, s.vv. *schliessen*, *Schoss*; *OED*, s.v. *shot*, n.¹ §I.1.b; *MED*, s.v. *shot* §4e, cf. §4d; *DOST*, s.v. *schot* §2; Söderwall 1884–1918, s.v. *skut* §3; Lexer 1869–76, s.vv. *geschôz*, *schuz*). This seems to be the meaning in the Older Scots noun *elf-schot* and, as I discuss briefly below, I suspect that this meaning is to be understood in the Old English charm *Wið Færstice*; compounds of *elf* with past participles denoting ailments later in English and Scots also denote internal pains (Hall 2005, 23–27). Likewise, the noun *elf-cake*, attested in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, apparently denotes some sort of pain in the torso (*MED*, s.v. *elf*; cf. s.v. *elven*; *OED*, s.v. *elf*, n.¹); manuscript variants in *elune* suggest that, as the compound would imply, *elves* were understood by at least some redactors to be the cause of the ailment (ed. Heinrich 1896, 155). Accordingly, I consider that *Gif hors ofscoten sie* and its Old English relatives are probably concerned with internal pains rather than with any sort of projectile wound, so translating *gescoten* as ‘badly pained’ above. The vector whereby *ælfe* might have inflicted the ailment on the horse is not evidenced at all. Possession, assumed by Storms, is a possibility, but by no means the only one.

This association of *ælfe* with internal pains is also paralleled elsewhere in Old English, in the Old English compound *ælfsoġoða*. This occurs in a long set of remedies in *Læceboc III* against *ælfadl* (‘*ælf*-ailment’; ed. Wright 1955, ff. 123v–25r), which I take to be a superordinate term whose meaning encompasses that of *ælfsoġoða*. *Ælfsoġoða* has puzzled lexicographers; the *Dictionary of Old English* (s.v. *ælfsoġeða*) offers ‘disease thought to have been caused by supernatural agency, perhaps anaemia’, repeating a tradition going back to Geldner’s *Untersuchungen zu ae. Krankheitsnamen* of 1908 (cf. Thun 1969, 388 n. 1). But *sogoða* itself seems to have denoted internal pains. Bosworth and Toller defined *sogoða* as ‘hiccough, heartburn (?)’, but it is worth quoting a couple of the more revealing instances of the word (1898, s.v.; cf. *MED*, s.v. *soġoða*; Clark Hall 1960, s.v. *sogeða*, and the definition s.v. *ælfsoġoða*, ‘hiccough (thought to have been caused by elves)’). My favourite is

this sage instruction from the beginning of chapter 43 of the Old English Benedictine Rule (ed. Schröder 1964, 67–68):⁹

Sona swa þæt beacn þæs belhrincges gehyred bið, þærrihthe forlæte æghwylc swa hwæt swa he on handa hæfde, and mid ofste þone tidsang þære godcundan þenunge gesece, onette þeah mid gestæþignesse and no mid higeleaste, ne yrne he, þelæs he mid þæs rynes eðgunge hwylcne wleattan and sogeðan on his heortan ne astyrige.

As soon as the sign of the ringing of the bell is heard, each should abandon forthwith whatever he has in his hands, and with haste make for the lauds of that holy worship, hastening however with composure and not with carelessness; he should not run, lest, with the panting of running, he cause either [?]nausea or *sogoða* in his heart.

Additionally, the Old English *Herbarium* gives a remedy ‘wið þæra ðearma ece 7 wið ealles þæs innoðes’ (‘against pain of the intestines and of all the innards’; ed. De Vriend 1984, 130, who identified no corresponding Latin text), adding a remedy ‘Gyf ðonne æfter ðam men sy sogoþa getenge oððe hwylc innan gundbryne’ (‘If then thereafter the person has a *sogoða* afflicting [him/her] or any bile-burning within’). This remedy concludes, ‘ðonne wene ic þæt hyt him wel fremie ge wið sogoðan ge wið æghwylcum incundum earfoðnyssum’ (‘Then I anticipate that it will help him/her well either for *sogoða* or for any internal difficulties’; ed. De Vriend 1984, 132). Here again, then, *sogoða* must denote some pain within the torso.

That *ælfsoða* denoted some more specific kind of internal pain is hinted by the unusually detailed notes in the remedy, on symptoms distinguishing it from *ælfadl* (ed. Wright 1955, f. 124v):

Gif him biþ ælfsoða him beoþ þa eagan geolwe þær hi reade beon sceoldon . gif þu þone mon lacnian wille þænc his gebæra 7 wite hwilces hades he sie . gif hit biþ wæpnedman 7 locað up þonne þu hine ærest sceawast 7 se 7wlita [i.e. *andwlita*] biþ geolwe blac . þone mon þu meah gelacnian æltæwlice gif he ne biþ þær on to lange . gif hit biþ wif 7 locað niþer þonne þu hit ærest sceawast . 7 hira 7wlita biþ reade wan þæt þu miht eac gelacnian .

If the person has (an) *ælfsoða*, his/her eyes will be yellow where they should be red. If you wish to treat that person, consider his/her behaviour and observe what sex he/she is. If it is a man and he looks up when you first inspect and the face is yellow-dusky,¹⁰ you can heal it entirely if he has not

⁹ Hanslik’s corresponding critical Latin text reads: ‘Ad horam diuini officii mox auditus fuerit signus, relictis omnibus, quaelibet fuerint in manibus, summa cum festinatione curratur, cum grauitate tamen, ut non scurilitas inueniat fomitem’ (1960, 106), which does not much illuminate *sogoða*.

¹⁰ *Wann* is a tricky word, and other meanings like ‘lurid’ or even ‘shining’ have been proposed (for a recent survey and reconsideration, see Breeze 1997; note also Bremmer 1988, 11). *Dusky* strikes me as a conservative and appropriate translation, but by no means the only possibility. For this note and the following, I am indebted to Carole Biggam for her advice.



had it too long. If it is a woman and she looks down when you first inspect it, and her face is red-dusky,¹¹ you can heal that also.

I do not claim to understand all of these symptoms, and they may have been presented here as signs of unnatural as opposed to natural illness, rather than as signs of what we would define as a syndrome, but either way the eyes being yellow where they should be red—presumably in the white, where the blood vessels are visible—surely suggests jaundice (cf. Meaney 1992, 20). Jaundice is a symptom of other disorders, mainly of the liver or the bile duct, in which bilirubin builds up in the blood, making the skin and particularly the whites of the eyes appear yellow (Schiff 1946, 15–28). Since the causal association of jaundice with liver, pancreas and bile duct problems tends to associate it with internal pain and digestive distress (Schiff 1946, 219–21, cf. 124–27, 177), it is plausible that these symptoms could be understood as a subset of *sogoðan*—one distinct from other *sogoðan* in being caused by *ælfe*. Presumably it shared at least some of its symptoms with *geolu adl* (literally ‘yellow ailment’, assumed to be jaundice), perhaps being distinguished from *geolu adl* particularly in also being a *sogoða*.

In theory, *ælsogoða* might be a bahuvrihi compound, its meaning differing from that suggested by its components; if so, we could not be certain that it connoted the involvement of *ælfe* in synchronic usage. However, a Latin charm included in the long set of procedures for *ælsogoða* begins ‘Deus omnipotens pater domini nostri jesu cristi. per Inpositjonem huius scriptura expelle a famulo tuo . N . Omnem Impetuum castalidum’ (‘God almighty, father of our lord Jesus Christ, through the application of this writing expel from your servant, N[AME], every attack of *castalides*’). *Castalides* here seems certainly to denote *ælfe*, through the adaptation and inversion of a gloss, originally from an interlinear gloss to the invocation at the beginning of Aldhelm’s *Carmen de virginitate*. Aldhelm wrote ‘Nec peto Castalidas metrorum cantica nimphas, / Quas dicunt Elicona iugum servare supernum’ (‘Nor do I seek metrical songs from Castalian nymphs, who are said to watch over Helicon’s lofty summit’; lines 24–25, ed. Ehwald 1919, II 353); the gloss appears in its earliest manuscript as ‘Castalidas nymphas : dunælfæ; Elicona : swa hatte sio dun’ (‘Nymphs of [the sacred spring] Castalia: mountain *ælfa* [female *ælfe*]; Helicon: so that

¹¹ It is worth noting that range of hues which *read* could denote was wider than the range denoted by Modern English *red* (cf. Anderson 2000, who argues that ‘Old English *read* and its early Germanic cognates preserved the semantic range of Indo-European **rudhró-~reudh-*: viz., the colours obtainable through the artistic preparation of ocher and hematite: red, reddish brown, orange, and reddish yellow’, at 10). I wonder if we are to understand *reade* primarily in contradistinction to *geolwe*, rather than necessarily in terms of its focal denotation (whatever that may have been), a suggestion which probably receives some support from the collocation *read gold*, problematic though that is (see Anderson 2000). These distinctions might correspond to different causes of the jaundice, and so be clinically pertinent: ‘Generally speaking, the shade of the icterus may be a guide in diagnosis. A lemon-yellow tint suggests hemolytic jaundice, and orange-yellow shade hepatitis and a greenish- or blackish-yellow tint neoplastic disease’ (Schiff 1946, 223).



mountain is named'; ed. Rusche 1996, 51 [nos 1101–2]).¹² It is striking that the composer of the exorcism in *Læceboc III* went to such lengths to specify *ælfe* in Latin as to invert and adapt this gloss rather than simply demonising them and using *diaboli* or *demonēs*, so it seems beyond doubt that *ælfsgoða* was understood at least potentially to imply an attack by *ælfe*.¹³

4. Conclusions

The prospect that an *ofscoten* horse might owe its affliction to *ælfe*, then, is well-parallelled by the compounding of *ælf* with words for ailments in Old, Middle and early Modern English and in Older Scots. Those words adduced here all seem to be associated with internal pains, suggesting a specific, and long-lasting, connection between *ælfe* and this kind of illness. Both *Gif hors ofscoten sie* and *Wið ælfsgoða* emphasise, however, that *ælfe* were not seen as the only possible source of such ailments. Rather, it was recognised that they were one possibility, requiring distinct cures. The texts analysed here, however, offer no hint as to how *ælfe* inflicted illness—certainly neither projectiles nor possession, both assumed in the past, seems necessarily to be implied. Establishing what evidence there is for how *ælfe* caused illnesses requires a full examination of the other Old English remedies concerning *ælfe*, not to

¹² The earliest manuscript to contain the *dunælfa* gloss is BL. Cotton Cleopatra A.iii, probably compiled and written at St Augustine's, Canterbury; it has generally been dated to the mid-tenth century—the same date as the manuscript containing *Læceboc III*—but Rusche has recently argued specifically for a provenance in the 930s (1996, 2–6, 33–38; cf. Ker 1957, 180–82 [no. 143]; Dumville 1994, 137–39). Although it is not certain that this particular gloss is as old as those with which it was transmitted, it seems clearly to belong to a batch of glosses originating in the eighth century (Kittlick 1998, §§2.2, 14.3.2). The *-a* plural of *dunælfa* seems to represent a deliberate change of grammatical gender to accommodate the glossing of *nymphas* with a word normally denoting males, so I understand *dunælfa* to mean 'female *ælfe*'. However, divorced from its interlinear context (or misunderstood in it: cf. 'Castalidas : þa dúnlican', ed. Rusche 1996, 229 [C558], elsewhere in Cleopatra and from a different source; 'Castalidas musas . x . filias iouis . in castalo monte habitans' in the Harley Glossary, ed. Oliphant 1966, 59 [C477]), the gloss has been re-analysed by the composer of the exorcism in *Læceboc III*, such that it is *Castalidas* which forms the basis for the Latin translation of *ælf*. Later English composers of Latin *elf*-charms were to coin Latinised forms of *elves*, such as *elfæe*, *elfes*, *elues* and *elphi* (British Library, MSS. Sloane 962 f. 9v; 963 ff. 15r–16v; 2584 f. 73v).

¹³ Specifically, this charm has been taken as evidence that *ælfe* might possess the afflicted person, the charm being seen as an exorcism (e.g. Bosworth–Toller 1898, s.v. *ælfsgoða*; Jolly 1996, 163–64). This reading is possible but not required: 'Impetuum castalidum' could here mean any sort of attack. Etymologically, *impetus* implies physical motion, but it might equally, for example, be used to denote attack from a distance through the vector of magic. Judging on this problem depends largely on how the charm mentioning *castalides* is seen to relate to a second charm, following shortly after: 'Deus omnipotens pater domini nostri iesu cristi per Inpositjonem huius scriptura et per gustum huius expelle diabolium a famulo tuo .N.' ('God almighty, father of our lord Jesus Christ, through the application of this writing and through its tasting, expel the Devil from your servant, N[AME]'). This clearly supposes diabolical possession. Bosworth and Toller took this passage to mean the same thing as that mentioning *castalides*, in which case the possession evident in the second charm would be imputed to the

mention appropriate consideration of comparative material. But I should advert, at least, to the famous Old English remedy *Wið færstice* ('against a violent pain'; ed. Grattan–Singer 1952, 173–76).¹⁴ The charm in this remedy appears to envisage the *færstice* vividly as a *spere* ('javelin, spear') thrown by *mihtigan wif* ('powerful women'), and includes the celebrated lines 'gif hit wære esa gescot oððe hit wære ylfa gescot oððe hit wære hægtessan gescot, nu ic wille ðin helpan' ('whether it was *ese*'s *gescot* (*ese* is cognate with Old Icelandic *æsir*, 'pagan gods', but its meaning in Old English remains obscure), or it was *ælfe*'s *gescot*, or it was *hægtessan*'s *gescot* (a *hægtesse* being a witch or female supernatural being, or perhaps rather both; on *-an* as a genitive plural, which I assume here, see Hoad 1994; Lapidge–Baker 1995, xcvi), now I wish to help you'; ed. Grattan–Singer 1952, 174). However, as I have said above, and as my translation implies, many details in the text remain uncertain. All I wish to extract from it here are two points. The first is that its use of *gescot* is surely polysemic: it does not only denote a projectile, or an injury from a projectile, as has hitherto been assumed. The reflexes and cognates of *gescot* mentioned above strongly suggest that *gescot* could also denote internal pains with no necessary suggestion of supernatural causation. It can be taken in my quotation, then, as a potential synonym not only of *spere* but also of *færstice*. I suggest that in the context of the remedy, the synonymy of *gescot* with *færstice* is primary, but that its polysemy is manipulated to create a metaphorical narrative of heroic struggle from a *prima facie* narrative of illness, with obvious potential for ameliorating both the patient's self-perception, and his community's perception of his suffering. My second point, of course, is that one of the supernatural causes of the *færstice* envisaged by the charm is *ælfe*, consolidating the evidence of *Gif hors ofscoten sie* and *Wið ælfsogoða* for an association of *ælfe* with causing this sort of pain. *Wið færstice* has more to tell us

castalides in the first. But the distinction between, on the one hand, a petition to expel *omnem impetuum castalidum* and, on the other, *diabolus* equally suggests that in the first instance, direct possession is not implied, but rather some more indirect *impetus*. The *impetus castalidum* and the *diabolus* may be accorded separate charms and remedies precisely because they are distinct. Judging between these readings would be to draw a fine distinction on little evidence, with which we cannot be sure the composer(s) and redactor(s) of this remedy were particularly concerned.

¹⁴ *Færstice* is usually translated 'sudden stitch', taking what is usually given as the basic meaning of *fær* and the Modern English reflex of *stice* (e.g. Grattan–Singer 1952, 173). However, *stitch* in Modern English, when denoting a pain, denotes 'sharp spasmodic pain in the side resulting from running or exercising' (*Collins Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v.). This seems unlikely to be a sufficiently serious or chronic condition to warrant the elaborate remedy prescribed in *Wið færstice*. Moreover, the connotations of *fær-* are quite different from those of Modern English *sudden*, as is suggested by the translations suggested by Bosworth and Toller: 'Sudden, intense, terrible, horrid' (1898, s.v.). As for *stice*, they suggest 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 do not much narrow the potential meanings of *færstice*, but they emphasise that it could have denoted serious, thrusting pains as well as what Modern English-speakers would call a *stitch*.

on this matter, as have other comparanda such as the Scottish witchcraft trials and their attestations of the past participle *elf-schot*. What I have shown here, however, is that the detailed re-examination of our Old English medical material, with an eye to the semantic complexities of its vocabulary, is a necessary stage in underpinning the successful interpretation of our more striking texts—and for any meaningful assessment of *ælf*e in Anglo-Saxon culture.¹⁵

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Abbreviations

DOST: *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue*

MED: *Middle English Dictionary*

OED: *Oxford English Dictionary*

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