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Blame it on the Elves: Perception of Illness in Anglo-Saxon England

Susan Závoti

From earliest times, people have sought to understand illness, so cultural attitudes to and treatment of illness tell us not only about the physical and material circumstances of a certain era, but also about people's attitudes towards life, the supernatural and religion. My aim in this essay is to probe the Anglo-Saxon mind's attitude to illness, in the transition period between heathenism and Christianity. In particular, I will explore the significance of the supernatural beings called *elves*, who are invested with an important role in the causes of disease and also bear a potential to be paralleled to devils, as witnessed by the Old English Leechbooks: even though the idea of connecting elves to illness is most plausibly much older in Anglo-Saxon England than that of connecting devils to illness brought by Christianity, ailments wrought by elves are still treated the same way as those wrought by devils. Furthermore, I shall discuss the power attributed to Christianity in the combat against elves regarding healing, as evidenced in *Bald's Leechbook*, and *Leechbook III*.

Since the earliest records of medicine in the Near East, it was the gods who were held responsible for afflicting people with illness. Demons and ghosts were also blamed, and in Mesopotamian texts, such demons were thought to be “gods gone bad” (Geller 5). The common cures for illness were the application of salves and exorcism, massaging or reeking the malevolent spirit out of the patients' limbs. Biblical texts are replete with stories where the Lord casts illness upon an individual or a whole nation for various reasons. Many centuries later, we find the same idea in the classical Mediterranean. In his treatise on the “Sacred Disease” (i.e.

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epilepsy) written around 400 BC, Hippocrates also lamented over the popular belief, prevailing in his time, that epilepsy or other illnesses were wrought by the gods. One and a half millennia later, in Anglo-Saxon medical texts, we find evidence that it is elves who are thought to cause certain illnesses.

Though both Greeks and Anglo-Saxons attribute illness to transcendental causes, there is one enormous difference between the ancient and the Anglo-Saxon perceptions of illness. In Anglo-Saxon leechdoms, God never appears as punishing mankind with illness; on the contrary, His power neutralizes the elves' fiendish work. Hence, the Leechbooks present the transition from paganism to Christianity, where a benign God helps people fight the demonic forces manifested by older pagan beings. The Anglo-Saxon Leechbooks provide an insight into the religious mind that attributes all events to a higher being, at the same time indicating a certain reconciliation between Christian and pagan beliefs.

The Sources

The Old English Leechbooks are collections of recipes preserved in MS London, British Library, Royal 12 D. They were written down in the tenth century by the same hand as the annals of 922-55 in the Parker Chronicle (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 173, ff 1-56) presumably in Winchester (Ker 333). They consist of three segments with a numbered table of contents, the second ending with a verse colophon in Latin referring to Bald; hence the first two of the Leechbooks are referred to as "*Bald's Leechbook*." The separate *Bald's Leechbook* segments and *Leechbook III* consist of 88, 67 and 76 chapters respectively on 128 folios. The MS was presumably read throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries as it appears from the marginalia also in Latin and "the frequent nota signs" (Ker 332). As Rubin pointed out, they rely heavily on Classical Latin and Greek medical texts (59), and also bear textual parallels with the Salernitan Gariopontus (see Talbot). Following classical tradition, they present diseases and their cures in a downward order, from head to toe. Even though Latin was the language of science, these texts were written in the vernacular, which is exceptional amongst contemporary medical texts and suggests they were regularly used in medical practice.

Another significant medical text needs mention here: the *Lacnunga* is "an inferior medical work of 122 chapters of miscellaneous leechdoms which provide many examples of pagan magic" (Rubin 62). It is extant in London, British Library, MS Harley 585 and "comprises 193 leaves of poor quality parchment" (Pettit 133). It is of utmost importance to us,

because in leechdom 127, it brings together elves and “ese” which can be paralleled to the “*aesir ok álfar* formula” (meaning “gods and elves”) often occurring in Scandinavian mythological texts (Hall 108), since the Anglo-Saxon word “ese” is interpreted as “gods”:

Gif hit wære esa gescot, oððe hit wære / ylfa gescot,
oððe hit wære hægtessan gescot, nu ic wille ðin helpan.

[If it were shot of gods (or spirits), or if it were shot of elves,
Or if it were shot of witch (or witches), now I will help you.]
(Pettit 94-95)

This manuscript thus proves the connection of Anglo-Saxon elves to Scandinavian ones by presenting them paired up with gods, just as we see in Scandinavian mythological texts.

Bald's Leechbook shows a stronger classical influence than *Leechbook III*. The contents are much more well-structured following the classical head-to-toe pattern. The first book describes external ailments, whereas the second discusses internal illnesses. By contrast, *Leechbook III* includes both external and internal diseases. While in the first third of its recipes the head-to-toe order is traceable, the rest lists diseases in a rather ad-hoc way. While *Bald's Leechbook* makes reference to the classical concept of four humours and the four elements, *Leechbook III* rather resorts to magico-medical treatments. *Bald's Leechbook* relies more on “rational” medicine, thereby showing a stronger bond to classical medical tradition. As Philip van der Eijk puts it:

The “rationality” of Greek medicine was perceived to lie in the fact that it abandons “superstitious” beliefs about gods and demons as causes and healers of disease, and that it adheres to what is sometimes referred to as “the principle of the uniformity of Nature,” i.e. the view that like causes always produce like results. (3)

In *Bald's Leechbook*, diseases are for the most part ascribed to the imbalance of the four humours or to “ill humours.” With a few exceptions, the most frequently recurring diseases such as leprosy or erysipelas are treated by salves made of herbs or sometimes of animal origin; even surgery is implemented in certain cases, in line with rational medicine. The first instance of a magico-Christian element in *Leechbook I*, the implementation of holy water and prayer, is suggested as the cure for poison, snake bite, as well as “that which comes from shot” (*Leechbook I* 45; Cockayne 116). The ensuing recipes using Christian elements are for “flying venom,” “restraint,” “lent disease,” “fiend sick man,” “lunatics,”

“rune magic,” “elves,” “elf-shot” and “nightmare.” In *Leechbook II*, the magico-Christian element first occurs as late as recipe 53 (Cockayne 274), which proposes holy water as an ingredient for a “light drink.” From then on, various types of ailments are treated with Christian elements, such as elf-shots, dysentery, and jaundice. Contrastingly, the magico-Christian element in *Leechbook III* is apparent from the very first recipe, which prescribes a treatment for head troubles and at the same time for “temptation of the devil.” *Leechbook III* also contains the highest number of Christian elements as means of healing and supernatural beings as sources of illness. Most of the diseases are explained by the principle of the four humours in the Leechbooks, but where this principle is missing and there is no obvious cause of the disease (in the case of worms, ulcers, swellings and wounds of unknown origin, for example), then it tends to be attributed to supernatural beings like elves and demons.

Elves

Our knowledge of elves is scanty as records of them are quite obscure. Nevertheless, they seem to be a Proto-Germanic heritage. Their tradition has survived in nearly all of the West-Germanic territories well into the High Middle Ages or beyond. Apart from the Anglo-Saxon medical texts or personal names, we can find references to them in glosses, as well as in the Old English heroic epic, *Beowulf*. The passage describing Grendel’s descent traces back the origin of the race of monsters to the time when Cain slew Abel. Lines 102-114 of the poem explain that this was the time when *eotens* and *elves* and *orcs* sprang forth:

Wæs se grimma gæst Grendel haten,
 mære mearcstapa, se þe moras heold,
 fen ond fæsten; fifelcynnes eard
 wonsæli wer weardode hwile,
 siþðan him scyppend forscifen hæfde
 in Caines cynne. Ðone cwealm gewræc
 ece drihten, þæs þe he Abel slog;
 ne gefeah he þære fæhðe, ac he hine feor forwræc,
 metod for þy mane, mancynne fram.
 þanon untydras ealle onwocon,
eotenas ond *ylfe* ond *orcneas*,
 swylce gigantas, þa wið gode wunnon
 lange þrage; he him ðæs lean forgeald.

[Grendel this monster grim was called,
 march-riever mighty, in moorland living,
 in fen and fastness; fief of the giants
 the hapless wight a while had kept
 since the Creator his exile doomed.
 On kin of Cain was the killing avenged
 by sovran God for slaughtered Abel.
 Ill fared his feud, and far was he driven,
 for the slaughter's sake, from sight of men.
 Of Cain awoke all that woful breed,
 Etins and elves and evil-spirits,
 as well as the giants that warred with God
 weary while: but their wage was paid them!]
 (Ford 16-17)

The word *elf* also occurs in compounds. If not describing illness or magic, the expressions often denote an enchanting beauty, as in the poem *Judith*, or in *Caedmon's Metrical Paraphrase of Parts of the Holy Scriptures* regarding Sarah. In both of these poems, the captivating beauty of the women is a potential risk to the beholders: Holofernes is dazzled by Judith's beauty so she is able to decapitate him, while Abraham's life is endangered by envious men in an alien land who try to get his wife:

(. . .) siððan egýpte
 eagum moton
 on þínne wlite wlitan
 wlance monige
 þonne æðelinga
 eorlas wénað
 mæg ælf-scieno (. . .)

[“Since the Egyptians,
 with their eyes, may
 on thy beauty gaze,
 many proud ones;
 when of men
 the earls ween,
 woman of elfin beauty!”]
 (Thorpe 109)

(. . .) cwæð þa eft raðe
 oðre wórde
 to sarran
 sínces brýtta
 ne þearf ðe on edwit
 abraham (sic!) settan

ðín frea drihten
 þat þu flett-waðas
 mæg ælf-scieno
 mine træde
 ác him hýge-teonan
 hwítan seolfre
 deope béte.

["Need not to thee in reproach
 Abraham attach,
 thy lord,
 that thou my pavilion,
 woman elfin-fair!
 hast trodden;
 for to him the injury,
 with white silver,
 I will well repair."]
 (Thorpe 165)

In both of these instances, calling the women "elf-beautiful" does not simply indicate a high level of attractiveness, but naming elves conjures a shifty, threatening effect in the meaning of their beauty.

We also have records of elves, or rather *álfar*, in Scandinavian literature, as attested by the Eddas and Scandinavian folklore. In the Eddas, elves are strongly connected to gods: they are often mentioned after the *Aesir*, the chief group of the gods, as it has been touched upon in connection with the *aesir ok álfar* formula. Beside elves and witches, the *Aesir* also occur in another collection of Anglo-Saxon leechdoms called "*Lacnunga*" in connection with a "sudden stitch" beside elves and witches. But, according to the Eddas, elves are also ruled by *Freyr*, who belonged to the other group of gods called *Vanir*. The *Vanir* are associated with fertility, and *Freyr* is considered to be a significant fertility god. Moreover, "light elves" and "dark elves" are distinguished in Scandinavian sources, the dark ones being said to be mischievous beings who live underground. So both godly and chthonic features can be attributed to them. The chthonic character is also stressed in Scandinavian folktales, in which the elves are closely connected to nature. Their otherwise secret and miraculously invisible dwelling places are described as opening up like gates in rocks or mounds (Craigie 144). Invisible though they are, they are highly territorial, and the encroachment by humans on their land is avenged by cursing the humans with diseases; for example, the elves might cause an arm to wither away or a person to lose his wits (Craigie 158). Lost wits, mental and consequently physical deterioration are especially characteristic of encounters with elves, as a significant

number of folktales narrate the tragedy of peasants meeting elves in woods, and thereafter becoming incapable of ordinary life due to medical conditions. Punishment by elves is not necessarily regarded to be an act of vengeance, but rather a logical consequence, almost like a natural law: when a promise made for an elf is broken, tragedy ensues, which is, however, expected and considered legitimate by the human party – just like it is expected that, for instance, a kettle of water would boil when 99 degrees C is exceeded.

The Anglo-Saxon Perception of Illness

As mentioned above, in many cultures preceding Christianity, disease was considered to be a punishment of the gods. God in the Christian Old English medical texts, by contrast, always appears as a benevolent and helpful being. And those who inflict mankind with illness are God's adversaries, belonging to the "dark side." The following excerpts will illustrate this point.

Among the many ailments medieval people suffered, there was a good deal for which they could not find a direct and physical explanation. Since they found these diseases mysterious and menacing, they connected them with the supernatural. These conditions appear in the *Leechbooks* under names such as: "ælf-shot," "ælf-siden" or "ælf-sogopa" (*Leechbook II* 65; *Leechbook III* 41, 62).

What these illnesses denote is often obscure, but luckily we find them usually in the context of some other, defined leechdom as it can be seen, for instance, in the *Leechbook II*, entry 65: "Wiþ þære geolwan adle genim niopowearðe eolenan (. . .) to gehealdanne lichoman hælo mid drihtnes gebede þis is æpele læcedom (. . .) hit eac deah wiþ feondes costungum yflum" [For the yellow disease (jaundice), take the bottom part of helenium (. . .), to keep the body healthy with the Lord's prayer this is a noble leechdom (. . .), also effective against the evil probations/temptations of the devil.] Another example for this is entry 41 in *Leechbook III*:

Vyrc godne drenc wiþ eallum feondes costungum. Nim betonican biseop wyrt elehtran gyþrifan attorlapan wulfes eamb gearwan lege under weofod gesinge viiii mæssan ofer gescearfa þa wyrta on halig wæter (. . .) þeos sealf is god wiþ ælcra feondes costunga 7 ælfsidenne 7 lencten adle.

[Make a good drink for all the temptations/probations of the devil. Take [herbs], lay under altar, sing nine masses over, slice the worts in holy water (. . .) good for all the temptations/probations of the devil, for elf-magic and lent disease.] (Cockayne 334-335)

In both of these leechdoms, the occurrence of devils and elves coincides with infectious diseases. Jaundice, which might be the result of the inflammation of the liver often occurs with high fever. Lent disease, which is assumed to have been a typhus-like condition also produces high fever. Extremely high fever can cause brain damage which in turn can result in the so-called “abnormal posturing” known as opisthotonus, when the patient’s legs and spine arch stiffly into a bridge, and this affliction is accompanied by clenched jaws, spastic tetraplegia and convulsions (Stokes 50). This condition can easily appear as a seizure, or a demonic possession. Even though *costung* is translated as “temptation” both in the Cockayne and in the Pettit publications of leechdoms consulted here, the word also bears the meaning “trial” and “probation” (see Bosworth-Toller, *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*) as if the devil had tortured the patient (167). Thus these medical conditions (i.e. abnormal posturing and delirious state resulting from fever), are understood as a demonic fight over man’s soul. Indeed, seizures resulting from high fever of bacterial infection could hardly be distinguished from seizures of mental disorders, and both were taken as proof of the presence of a ravaging demon in the patient. This might have given rise to the practice of paralleling elves with devils. With the arrival of Christianity, seizures were titled “demonic,” on the one hand because of the continental medical tradition and learning, and on the other hand because of the long-established Christian tradition of attributing seizures to devils. Because elves were obviously regarded as demons, conditions otherwise authentically pagan and Anglo-Saxon *elfish*, could be taken under one umbrella with those of being Christian demonic.

Elf-related diseases treated as demonic possession also occur in *Leechbook III*, remedy number 62. This particular leechdom seeks to cure “elf disease” (ælf-adle) and the curious condition translated as “elf hiccup” (ælf-sogopa). For elf disease, *Leechbook III* offers three separate remedies, all of them containing Christian liturgical elements, and two of them using the many thousand year old method of dislodging harmful possessing spirits by the smoke produced by burning herbs. The same entry also contains the description of the symptoms of elf-hiccup, and interestingly, in addition to the salve made of herbs and the writing of crosses, the remedy prescribes the following Latin text to be sung:

Deus omnipotens, pater domini nostri Iesu Christi, per impositionem huius scripturae *expelle* a famulo tuo, [name], omnem impetum *castalidum* de capite, (. . .)

Almighty God, father of our lord Jesus Christ, with the imposition of your Scripture expel from your servant, [name], every attack of the *castalides* from the head (. . .)

Later it instructs that the following lines also have to be sung:

Dominus omnipotens, pater domini nostri Iesu Christi, per impositionem huius scripturae et per gustum huius expelle diabolum a famulo tuo.

Almighty Lord, father of our lord Jesus Christ, with the imposition of your Scripture and your Ghost expel the devil from your servant.

The implications of this leechdom are manifold. Firstly, it is striking that the illness is attributed to a possessing malevolent supernatural force that can only be removed by Christian exorcism as was the habitual treatment against demons. Secondly, in the first song the Latin expression “*castalidum*” is used, but in the second song “*diabolum*” is used, which clearly denotes the same force as “*castalidum*.” The *Castalides*, according to the *Encyclopedia of Greco-Roman Mythology*, were the muses associated with the sacred spring on Parnassus (Dixon-Kennedy 79), and were rendered “*dunylfa*,” i.e. mountain elves, in Byrhtferth’s Latin-Old English bilingual computus, the *Enchiridion* or *Manual* preserved in MS Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ashmole 328. Byrhtferth, following traditional pattern, starts his work by addressing a higher being and beseeching help to complete his mission. However, he rejects the classical tradition of resorting to muses and chooses the Christian Cherub as aid. Thus, he identifies classical sprites of a sacred spring with the Anglo-Saxon elves, who are also associated with springs. In addition, he rejects elves and muses as they belong to the erroneous pagan world. This introduction of the *Manual* beside the text of the Leechbook indicates the clear tradition that heathen supernatural beings closely associated with nature (and springs) were rendered “*castalides*” in Latin in Anglo-Saxon writings. This conclusion leaves no doubt that the *castalides* of the leechdom were elves who were described, in fact, a few sentences later as being synonymous with *diabolum*, only to be defeated by God’s help. Thus, we can conclude that certain illnesses were ascribed to the supernatural elves, which were paralleled to devils.

Leechdom 62 in *Leechbook I* shows a similar case. Lent disease and various forms of fevers are combated first with concoctions made of herbs and holy water, but then a rather sophisticated ritual follows in-

cluding writing on a paten and praying. After this, a text had to be recited in Latin, which opens with adjuring impersonated fevers: “Adiuro uos frigores et febres per deum patrem omnipotentem (. . .)” [I adjure you colds and fevers through the Almighty Father]. Addressing the fevers and calling out their names almost like personal names is familiar from Greek mythology, but is also frequently found in New Testament stories when Christ expelled disease inflicting spirits of people.

As these examples show, medical conditions emerging from infectious diseases, or we should say profane diseases, were attributed to elves and devils. But another group of diseases also appears in connection with elves. *Leechbook III*, 61 prescribes the same leechdom for the “race of elves,” “nihtgengan” and for “those the devil sleeps with.”

Wyrce sealfe wiþ ælfcynne 7 nihtgengan 7 þam mannum þe deofol mid hæmd genim eowohumelan (. . .) sete under weofod sing ofer viiii mæssan (. . .) Gif men hwilc yfel costung weorþe oþþe ælf oþþe niht gengan smire his andwlitan med þisse sealfe and on his eagan (. . .)

[Work a salve against the elf race and for “nightgengan” and for those the devil sleeps with. Take [herbs] put them under the altar, sing over them nine masses (. . .) If someone is subject to ill temptation or elf or “nihtgengan” smear his forehead and his eyes with this salve (. . .)]

(Cockayne 344-345)

Apparently, the popular Christian belief in *incubi* and *succubi* was present in Anglo-Saxon culture as well. As this leechdom suggests, when elves did not cause a visible physical impact, they could inflict psychic damage. Thus they were associated with the devilish *incubi* and *succubi*, and also with the mysterious *nihtgengan*, which we can only surmise were supernatural beings walking in the night.

So we can infer from the leechdoms that elves were not only alluded to as mysterious, absent, elusive causes of a host of physical and mental maladies, from stitches to fever and demonic possession. They were also thought to be actual, living creatures, who should be actively fought against like demons.

Conclusion

One of the great merits of the Leechbooks is that they give us an insight into the unique period after the Conversion in Britain. Despite the fact that Christianity had already been adopted on the Isles for four hundred years when the Leechbooks were written, elves were evidently still ac-

cepted as part of everyday Anglo-Saxon reality. Christianity could not entirely wipe out the belief in elves; instead it incorporated them into its system of beliefs and values. Thus, the disease-inflicting elves found themselves on the side of the devil, whereas God appeared as the benevolent healer, who was always at hand to help those who prayed to him. The Leechbooks provide insight into that particular period of history, when both Christianity and Anglo-Saxon paganism existed dynamically side-by-side, and in hybridized forms. Thus, in the Anglo-Saxon perception of illness, it was the demonic side that was responsible for ravaging humans with illnesses, and that side was also equivalent to the old German pagan religion. On the other hand, we also find evidence of belief in the benevolent God of the New Testament, who does not send illness to mankind, but rather heals and cures them of the demonic and pagan “pathogen.”

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