

THE *LACNUNGA* AND ITS SOURCES:
THE NINE HERBS CHARM AND
WIÐ FÆRSTICE RECONSIDERED

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ABSTRACT

Gods play a very minor role in Old English literature. No mythological tales have survived, and even short accounts of or mere allusions to pagan (major and minor) divinities are extremely rare. All that is left from the Anglo-Saxon period are two references to Woden in *Maxims I* and the *Nine Herbs Charm*, one mysterious occurrence of Ing in *The Rune Poem*, and an equally obscure description of shooting *esa* (*Æsir*), elves and *hægtessan* in the charm *Wið Færstice*. Given the sparsity of such references, we are well advised not to interpret them too quickly as cryptic manifestations of heathen myths. On the contrary, an examination of the two short 'myths' in the *Nine Herbs Charm* and *Wið Færstice* shows that both myths were created in their present form in the Christian era for the express purpose of transforming their supernatural protagonists into demonic, disease-inflicting beings that needed to be fought and destroyed.

KEY WORDS: Elves, *hægtessan*, witches, *Æsir*, valkyries, *disir*, Woden, Furious Host, Baldr, elfshot Hexenschuss, smith(s).

RESUMEN

Los dioses juegan un papel menor en la literatura del inglés antiguo. Ningún cuento mitológico ha sobrevivido, e incluso relatos cortos o simples alusiones a divinidades paganas (mayores y menores) son extremadamente escasas. Todo lo que queda en la literatura anglosajona son dos referencias a Odín en *Maxims I* y el *Nine Herbs Charm*, una misteriosa mención de Ing en *The Rune Poem*, y una descripción igualmente oscura del disparo de *esa* (*Æsir*), elfos y *hægtessan* en el encantamiento *Wið Færstice*. Dada la falta de tales referencias, es preferible no interpretarlos apresuradamente como manifestaciones de mitos paganos. Por el contrario, un examen de los dos 'mitos' cortos *Nine Herbs Charm* y *Wið Færstice* muestran que ambos mitos fueron creados en su forma actual en la era cristiana con el propósito expreso de transformar a sus protagonistas sobrenaturales en seres demoniacos que provocaban la enfermedad y contra los cuales había que luchar y destruirlos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: elfos, *hægtessan*, brujas, *Æsir*, valkirias, *disir*, Odín, anfitrión furioso, Baldr, Hexenschuss, herrero(s).



Gods play a very minor role in Old English literature. No mythological tales have survived, and even sporadic accounts of pagan (major and minor) divinities are sparse. All that is left from the Anglo-Saxon period are two references to Woden in *Maxims I* and the *Nine Herbs Charm*, one mysterious occurrence of Ing in *The Rune Poem*, and an equally obscure account of shooting *esa* (*Æsir*), elves and *hægtessan* in the charm *Wið Færstice*. Various possible reasons can be given for the absence of Anglo-Saxon mythological literature, such as a clerical intolerance of pagan stories and the destruction of an already deplete corpus during the Viking invasions. For the few references that have been left, we are, furthermore, well advised to heed Audrey Meaney's warning not to read "heathen memories into passages of poetic description which a more prosaic explanation would illuminate as well, if not better." The warning is certainly appropriate for the two so-called short myths presented in the *Nine Herbs Charm* and *Wið Færstice*. I will illustrate that both myths were created in their present form in the Christian era for the express purpose of transforming supernatural protagonists into demonic, disease-inflicting beings that were being displaced by the true God.

THE NINE HERBS CHARM

As already mentioned, references to pagan gods, elves and witches are rare in the Anglo-Saxon written corpus. If they do occur, their referents have usually undergone a transformation into either humans or, worse, demons. Woden, for example, becomes a euhemerized royal ancestor in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, in the late-eighth century Anglian collection of genealogies and in a ninth-century West Saxon regnal list. But Woden also occurs in one charm, *The Nine Herbs Charm* in the tenth-century British Library, MS Harley 585:

Wyrm com snican, toslat he man;
 ða genam Woden VIII wuldortanas,
 sloh ða næddran, þæt heo on VIII tofleah.
 Þær geændade æppel and attor,
 Þæt heo næfre ne wolde on hus bugan. (ll. 31-35)¹

A serpent/worm came crawling, tore a man to pieces; then Woden took nine glorious twigs, slew the serpent/worm, so that it flew into nine pieces. There apple and poison brought it about that it would never enter the house.

After the invocation of the nine (or less?) herbs (Meaney 115) to fight poison, flying venom (*onflyge*) and "the hostile one that travels through the land" (*þam laþan ðe geond lond færd*), Woden is introduced as *næddra*-slayer: the god cuts

¹ All translations of the Old English texts are my own.

the snake (or worm) into nine pieces with nine *wuldortanas*, which could be either twigs, perhaps with the names of the herbs carved in runes in them, or real weapons (with or without runes).² At first glance, this depiction could be an allusion to Woden's role as doctor. In the eddic *Hávamál* (st. 147) Óðinn knows a spell which physicians must know, and in the *Second Merseburg Charm*, Woden heals the dislocated leg of Baldr's horse. Furthermore, Karl Hauck has illustrated the god's role as magical healer on C-bracteates featuring Woden healing a horse. (Dobbie). Yet these parallels are inconclusive as far as the charm is concerned, since the god's destruction of the hostile snake turns out to be futile. True, apple and poison — most likely the serpent's own³ — accomplish that the serpent does not enter the house (again). At the same time, however, the nine pieces of the adder transform into the nine poisons that then have to be fought by the nine herbs and the *real* (i.e. Christian) healer uttering the charm.⁴ Instead of defeating evil, Woden spreads it in the end. If the poet, or compiler,⁵ knew of an older myth featuring Woden as serpent-killer, he adjusted it drastically in order to highlight the futility of pagan (magical) healing efforts. Nevertheless, it is even more likely that the poet invented the whole myth to discredit Woden's former role as healer. Woden's role is then used to explain the origins of disease: by killing the snake, Woden has released the personified, hostile poisons to be fought by the equally personified benevolent herbs. This second role certainly stands in stark contrast to Christ's crucifixion mentioned in the following lines of the charm: Christ's sacrifice created eternal life for man; Woden's act only spreads death.

WIÐ FÆRSTICE/ FOR A SUDDEN STITCH

Woden's role in the *Nine Herbs Charm* is thus not at all as positive as has often been assumed. Indeed, his marginalization corresponds very well to the demonization of lesser supernatural beings, such as the mysterious females with names ending in —*runa* and, of course, the elves. Elves were notorious casualties of

² The interpretation of *wuldortanas* as magical twigs was first given by Storms: "Crowning the achievements of the herbs Woden himself comes to their assistance against the hostile attack of the evil one. He takes nine glory-twigs, by which is meant nine runes, that is, nine twigs with the initial letters in runes of the plants representing the power inherent in them, and using them as weapons he smites the serpent with them" (195). For an alternative rendering of *wuldortanas* as rods or even swords, see Bremmer 412-15.

³ In *Solomon and Saturn II* (Dobbie 38-48), the wulf's slayer of twenty-five dragons has similar catastrophic consequences. Here the killing causes the rise of poisonous creatures that make the region of the conflict inhabitable (ll. 220-22).

⁴ See also Grattan and Singer. (53).

⁵ Given the different nature of the various parts of the charm, it is possible that the charm consists of various lays. In this case, a compiler juxtaposed the invocation of the herbs with Woden's feat and the reference to Christ's crucifixion.





the Christianization process. Scholars have argued that Anglo-Saxon elves, like their Scandinavian counterparts, had once been neutral beings who could either aid or turn against humans. This tradition of amoral elves is certainly very different from the Christian notion of them as malignant beings responsible for both physical disease and demonic possession. The three *Leechbooks* and the *Lacnunga* list a variety of remedies against elfshot, (water) elf disease ([*wæter*] *ælfadl*), elf-influence (*ælfside*), or simply the elfin race (*ælf*, *ælfcynn*),⁶ and in almost all cases, the remedies are herbal drinks and salves prepared in a more or less Christian ritual. For the Christian authors, elves belonged to the devil's domain. If a person was afflicted by elves, recovery could only be brought about with the destruction of their malignant spiritual influence.

The charm *Wið Færstice* confirms the negative attitude towards elves. Here elves, together with *Æsir* and *hægtessan*, are nothing more than antagonistic beings intent upon inflicting bodily pain:⁷

Wið færstice feferfuige and seo reade netele, ðe þurh ærn inwyxð, and wegbrade;
wyll in buteran.

Hlude wæran hy, la, hlude, ða hy ofer þone hlæw ridan,
wæran anmode, ða hy ofer land ridan.
Scyld ðu ðe nu, þu ðysne nið genesan mote.
Ut lytel spere, gif her inne sie!
Stod under linde, under leohtum scylde,
þær ða mihtigan wif hyra mægen beræddon
and hy gyllende garas sændan;
ic him oðerne eft wille sændan,
fleogende flane forane togeanes.
Ut, lytel spere, gif hit her inne sy!
Sæt smið, sloh seax,
lytel iserna, wund [MS]⁸ swiðe.
Ut, lytel spere, gif her inne sy!
Syx smiðas sætan, wælspera worhtan.
Ut spere, næs in, spere!
Gif her inne sy isernes dæl,
hægtessan geweorc, hit sceal gemyltan.
Gif ðu wære on fell scoten oððe wære on flæsc scoten
oððe wære on blod scoten
oððe wære on lið scoten, næfre ne sy ðin lif atæsed;
gif hit wære esa gescot oððe hit wære ylfa gescot
oððe hit wære hægtæssan gescot, nu ic wille ðin helpan.

⁶ For the *Lacnunga* texts, Grattan and Singer 108-111, no. xxix, *ælfside*, no. cxxxv, elfshot, no. clxiv, elfshot. I.lxiv *ælfside*, II. lxv.1, elfshot, II. lxv.5, *ælf*, III.xli, *ælfside*, III.lxi, *ælfcynn*; III.lxii, *ælfadl*; III.lxiii, *wæter ælfadl*. For a discussion of the remedies against elvish influence, Jolly 146-167.

⁷ "For a Sudden Stitch," Dobbie 122-23.

⁸ Dobbie and other scholars emend to *wundrum*, but such emendation is not necessary. See below.

Þis ðe to bote esa gescotes, ðis ðe to bote ylfa gescotes,
 ðis ðe to bote hægtessan gescotes; ic ðin wille helpan.
 Fleoh þær * * * on fyrgenheafde.
 Hal westu, helpe ðin drihten!
 Nim þonne þæt seax, ado on wætan.

Against a sudden stitch, feverfew and the red nettel, which grows into a house, and waybroad; boil in butter.

Loud they were, lo, loud, when they rode over the mound, they were resolute when they rode over the land. Shield yourself now, that you may escape this enmity/strife. Out, little spear, if you be in here. I/ he stood under the linden tree, under a light shield, where the mighty women deliberated about their power, and[,] screaming[,] spears sent; I will send another [one] back to them, a flying arrow from the opposite side, towards them. A smith sat, forged a knife, little iron, great wound. Six smiths sat, made slaughter-spears. Out, little spear, not in, spear! If a piece of iron be in here, the work of a hag, it must melt. If you were shot in the skin, or were shot in the flesh, or were shot in the blood, or were shot in the bone, or were shot in the limb, may your life never be injured; if it were Æsir's shot, or it were elves' shot, or it were hag's shot, now I will help you. This [be] your remedy for Æsir's shot, this your remedy for elves' shot, this your remedy for hag's shot; I will help you. Flee there * * * on the mountaintop. Be whole, God help you!
 Take then the knife, put into liquid.

The charm is interesting in several ways. Unlike the myth of Woden's fight with the worm in the *Nine Herbs Charm*, which had been appropriated or even created only to reject the deity, shooting witches and elves were most likely not the product of poetic creativity. Elfshot is a malady mentioned in another medical recipe (Cockayne 290-293), and the concept of shooting elves and witches can still be found in the Modern Scottish "elf-arrow" and Modern German *Hexenschuss*. No doubt, the Anglo-Saxons explained the occurrence of sudden sharp pain with an imagined missile attack by invisible supernatural beings, although it remains unclear whether this explanation is based on authentic mythological traditions, as Heather Stuart has assumed, or developed together with the demonization of the elves.⁹ Eric Stanley's claim that our modern distinction between literal and metaphorical concepts should not be applied to the Anglo-Saxon mind is certainly valid.¹⁰ No German today would think of a witch shooting at them with an arrow or spear when experiencing a *Hexenschuss*, yet for the Anglo-Saxons the sudden pain *was caused* by invisible malignant beings.

Even so, the myth given in the first part of the charm does not have to be authentic. The very fact that the identity of the attackers is so obscure should make us pause: who are those creatures riding over the land? Are they the *mihtigan wif*

⁹ Stuart (318-320).

¹⁰ E.G. Stanley (237-245).

“mighty women” of line 8, or are they counterparts to, if not identical with, the members of Woden’s Furious Host, who reappear as *esa* in lines 23 and 25? (Hauer 252–53). For Stanley Hauer, the riders, the mighty women and the smiths can be identified as the gods, witches and elves mentioned in lines 23 to 26a. Yet while the riders could be Æsir-like creatures and the mighty women could be hags, the identification of the smiths with elves in this charm remains tentative, as it is mainly based on the interpretations of two specific references in Icelandic texts: the legendary smith Vǫlundr is called *visi alfa* “prince of elves” in *Vǫlundarkviða* (st. 32), and Snorri Sturluson equates metal-working dwarves with *swartálfar* “black elves” in his *Gylfaginning*.¹¹ Evidence taken from another literary tradition is not conclusive, particularly when it is as scant as in this case. No metal-working elves are mentioned in the Scandinavian texts of the Viking Age, and even the one reference to Vǫlundr is open to interpretation. Should we take *visi alfa* in a literal sense (as is usually done), or could it not be merely a kenning expressing Vǫlundr’s supernatural nature? Furthermore, the kenning is used by Vǫlundr’s opponent King Niðuðr when asking the smith about his sons’ fate and may merely be an expression of the king’s spite for the smith. However this may be, the existence of a tradition of elfish smiths in Anglo-Saxon England remains very questionable.

Once the forging smiths are not necessarily elves, Hauer’s hypothetical equation of the noisy entities riding across the land with the Æsir becomes less convincing. In fact, the causal relationship between the activities of Woden’s furious host and the ailment can only be explained if the riders are the *mihhtigan wif* who first advance on horseback and then attack the person standing under the linden tree—most probably the patient or the healer himself—with spears. Even then, however, does the identity of the *mihhtigan wif* remain elusive. They could be either Hauer’s shooting witches whose former existence has survived in the word *Hexenschuss*, or they could be elves as “followers of Woden” and “humble relations of the valkyries.”¹² Alternatively, their nature also reminds us of the Scandinavian *dísir*, who occasionally turned against people as well.¹³ The statement that they ride over a *hlæw*, most likely a funeral mound, associates them with the dead, yet this association is possible for all three groups of supernatural beings. Given the general

¹¹ In *Gylfaginning*, for example, Óðinn sends Freyr’s messenger Skinir down to *swartálfheimr* ‘world of the black elves’ to have dwarves make the fetter Gleipnir, with which the Fenriswolf is finally bound. Similarly, in *Skáldskaparmál*, Snorri relates how Loki, after having cut off Sif’s hair, has to obtain a new head of golden hair from the *swartálfum*: *eptir þat for Loki til þæra dverga, er heita Ivallda synir, ok gerþu þeir haddin ok Skiðblaðni ok geirinn, er Óþin atti, er Gungnir heitir*, ‘after that Loki went to the dwarves called Ivaldi’s sons, and they made the head of hair and Skiðblaðnir and Óðinn’s spear called Gungnir’. For Snorri’s two texts, Jónssonm (36), (*Gylfaginning*) (122) (*Skáldskaparmál*).

¹² Stuart (320).

¹³ A well-known narrative in which hostile *dísir* figure prominently is the story of Þiðrandi in *Þáttur Þiðrandi ok Þórhalls* in *Flateyjarbók* I and *Formanna Sögur* (221–24 and note 15). Nine supernatural women called both *dísir* and *fylgiur* in the story attack and kill Þiðrandi for his and his companions’ openness towards the Christian faith.

nature of the myth and its Christian manuscript context, it is very likely that it has been re-invented simply as part of the healing ritual (Chickering 99). In other words, the narrative part of the charm is nothing more than an extensive metaphor that explains the occurrence of sudden sharp pain and its remedy in terms of an armed conflict between assaulting supernatural women and an equally aggressive healer.

The role of the smiths is even less certain than that of the Æsir and supernatural women. Are they the evil women's accomplices, or are they helpful aids to the speaker? Again, the Christian context of the charm is essential. As Minna Doskow points out, the final benediction reveals that the healing ritual can only be successful with God's help (Doskow 324-326). This clear division between good (Christian patient and healer) and evil (hostile supernatural beings) would certainly be undermined if six smiths are evil and one is benevolent.¹⁴ It is more plausible that all members of the group are on the same side, and much speaks here in favour of that being the enemy side. First of all, the six smiths are the producers of *walsperas* "slaughter-spears," a kenning that expresses hostile intent. These spears then turn into the *gyllende garas* thrown by the noisy women. Furthermore, the single smith makes a *seax lytel* "little knife," which inflicts a *wund swiðe* "great wound." This murderous weapon makes it rather unlikely that the smith is benevolent. Even the assumption that this knife is identical with the one the healer dips into the concoction at the end of the charm fails to convince. After all, even if the knife were used for an incision, the resulting wound cannot be *swiðe*. Rather, the healer's knife is pitched against the evil power of this *seax lytel*, just as the healer fights the *gyllende garas* of the *mihtigan wif* with another *gar*.

Given the Christian context of the charm's transmission, the association between evil forces and smiths is hardly surprising. Parallels can easily be drawn between the hot smithy and place of eternal fire, i.e. hell. In fact, Anglo-Saxon authors could be even more specific, as in the case of a twelfth-century Anglo-Saxon homily called by its editor "The Old English Honorius." In this homily, the devil becomes a smith, hell his hot smithy:

On swylcen wisen (þegneð) se deofol ure Drihtene. Hwu þegneð he him? For he nolde beon mid uren Drihtene on wuldre mid wele 7 mid blisse buten geswynce, þa geaf God him ane wica þæt he næfre ne byð (ge)swynceas, for he is smið, 7 his heorð is seo gedrefodnyse, 7 seo tyntrega. Þa hameres 7 þa beliges synden þa costninga, þa tangen synden ehteres, þa fielen 7 þa sagen synd þæra manna tungen, þe wyrceð hatunge betweenan heora emcristene, 7 bliðelice specað yfel. Þurh swylcene smið 7 þurh swylce tol, geclænsað ure Drihten þære halgena sawlen, ac of þan yfela mannen God sylf nymð þa wræce (R.D-N Warner 141).

The devil serves our Lord in such ways. How does he serve him? Because he did not wish to be with our Lord in glory with prosperity and grace, without toil. God

¹⁴ Such division has been done by Stanley R. Hauer, who, however, allows the possibility that all smiths are evil.

gave him then one dwelling that he is never without labour, for he is a smith, and his hearth is trouble and torment. The hammers and the bellows are the temptations, the thongs are the persecutors, the files and the saws are the men's tongues which create hatred among their fellow Christians and happily speak evil. Through such a smith and through such instruments does our Lord cleanse the souls of the holy, but on the evil ones God takes vengeance himself.

The infernal connotations of the smith certainly make him a perfect companion of the evil pagan divinities, whose association with the devil was a commonplace in the religious literature of Anglo-Saxon England.¹⁵ The re-invented myth of attacking demonic women and their infernal aids thus helped the healer to localize, marginalize and finally neutralize the source of the patient's pain.

In the end, anyone who tries to find sources for *The Nine Herbs Charm* and *Wið Færstice* will be disappointed. Although the writers of the charms could not have been ignorant of their ancestors' pagan religion, they did not transmit their knowledge in the way Snorri Sturluson later did in his *Prose Edda*. While Snorri reproduced many myths in a (suspiciously) systematic and objective fashion, the Anglo-Saxon writers used their knowledge for the invention of new myths. These myths, however, were only to discredit their divine protagonists in the new Christian era. Woden, elves, Æsir and witches were turned into disease-inflicting, malignant entities that needed to be destroyed in the everlasting battle between good and evil.

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¹⁵ OE *deofol* and most of its derivatives and compounds were used for the false gods (*deofol*), or idolators and their practices (*deofollic*, *deofolgyld*, *deofolgylda*, *deofolgyld-hus*, *deofolscipe*, *deofolwitega*); see *The Dictionary of Old English 'D'*, svv. In his famous, Ælfric dismisses both the Roman gods and their Scandinavian counterparts and then concludes: Se syrwienda deofol, þe swicað embe mancyn, / gebrohte þa hæþenan on þæt healice gedwyld, / þæt he swa fúle menn him fundon / to godum / þe þa leahtras lufodan, þe liciað þam deofle, / þæt eac heora biggengan heora bysmor lufodan, / and ælfremede wurdan fram þam ælmihtigan Gode, / se ðe leahtras onscunað, and lufað þa clænnysse (ll. 159-65) "The plotting devil, who deceives mankind, brought the heathens into that grievous heresy, so that they considered such foul men [their] gods, who loved vices that please the devil: that their worshippers also loved their disgrace and became estranged from the almighty God, who abhors vices and loves purity."

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