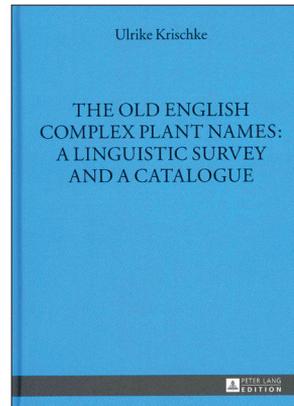


## FROM ELF-TENDRIL TO POISON-HARM

**Krischke, Ulrike.** *The Old English Complex Plant Names: A Linguistic Survey and a Catalogue.* Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2013. 486 pp.

Krischke belongs to a group of scholars in Munich and Graz who have worked on the *Dictionary of Old English Plant Names*, a resource which is now accessible online at: <http://oldenglish-plantnames.org/>. Seeing plant-names as ‘descriptions in disguise’, Krischke notes that they “encode botanical ‘facts’ such as the colour of the flowers or the efficacy of the plant against thunder and lightning, as well as real distinctions in nature, such as taxonomic superordination or sub-ordination” (p. 50), and the book under review can be seen as an attempt to remove the disguises from these descriptions. The work restricts itself to ‘complex plant names’, where *complex* is to be understood as the opposite of *simplex*, i.e. it deals with compound rather than uncompounded forms. Examples of such complex names include *āttor-lāþe* (poison-harm), and *æppel-treow* (apple-tree), just to give two of the examples listed under ‘A’.



The first half of the work is taken up with a ‘linguistic survey’ of the material. Besides the requisite introduction, statement of aims, literature review, discussion of sources, and summary, which also serve to reveal the work’s origins as a University of Munich PhD, we find meatier chapters on topics such as the names’ morphology and semantics, and the question of how language contact may have affected plant-names. Approximately half of the work (pp. 239–423) is then taken up with a ‘catalogue’ of Old English plant names. The entries typically have the following structure: the Old English name, a literal translation of that name into Modern English, and the modern terms for the plant in the Latin, English, and German languages, respectively. (Sometimes the Old English term denotes more than one Linnean species, e.g. *foxes glōfa* was used to refer not just to the plant known in Modern English as *foxglove*, but also to those we know as *thorn apple* and *deadly nightshade*. In such cases, Krischke lists the relevant forms for each referent in all three languages.)

But her entries do not consist solely of lemmata and glosses. Such information is followed by notes on the word’s occurrence in the *Dictionary of Old English* and the *Dictionary of Old English Plant Names*, notices of any illustrations of the plant to be found in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, together with the Latin equivalents for the name provided in contemporaneous texts. Needless to say, these Latin plant-names differ from their modern equivalents – for example, *wulfes-tæsel* (Modern English *wolf teasel* or *wild teasel*), which modern botanists refer to as *Dipsacus silvestris* Huds. was given the Latin equivalent *chamalaela alba* by an unknown English scribe a thousand years ago. Notes on the term’s etymology, morphology, motivation, and associative relations then follow, and the entries conclude, where appropriate, with a series of cross-references. We should also note that plant-names proper are not the only entries in this dictionary,

but also elements of plant-names appear as individual entries, thus *fugel* (bird) appears, due to its occurrence in the plant-names *fuglesbēan*, *fugleslēac* and *fugleswīse*.

Readers of this journal, given that it is the *Electronic Journal of Folklore*, rather than the *Electronic Journal of Linguistics*, will, I guess, be most interested in the information listed under the ‘motivation’, i.e. Krischke’s explanations of what aspect of the plant has been settled upon to provide its name. She discusses the matter at length in chapter 6, where she delineates ten different forms of ‘associative relation’ (e.g. metaphorical similarity, co-taxonomic similarity, co-taxonomic contrast, syntagmatic contiguity, etc.) and thirty different categories of motives behind naming, including the plant’s habitat, shape, size, texture, taste, smell, use in healing, use as food, etc. Names of natural taxa always highlight certain aspects and thus also always place other aspects into the background. For example, the bird known as *blackbird* (*Turdus merula*) in English has a name motivated by the colour of its plumage. We might imagine another English altogether in which the bird took its name from the colour of its beak, and where *Turdus merula* was known instead as *Goldbill*, or yet another English still, where the name came from the bird’s song, *Melody-bird*. But as it is the common English name, it focuses on the colour of the bird’s plumage, and ignores the colour of the beak and the quality of its song.

As luck would have it, the discussions of motivation are often the longest single part of her entries. We find such mythological beings represented as dragons, dwarves, and elves: *dracan-blōd* (the resin of *Dracaena L.*, literally dragon’s blood), *dweorge-dwostle* (*Mentha pulegium L.*, literally dwarf’s dost), and *ælf-pone* (*Solanum dulcamara*, literally elf’s tendril). But the motivation for the application of such mythological names is not always straightforward. *Dracan-blōd* may be a loan-translation (direct, or indirectly via Latin) of a Greek term, rather than a reflection of Germanic mythology (although the author does also note that reference to the resin as ‘dragon’s blood’ is not to be found in the German equivalent plant-name).

Krischke suggests the ‘dweorg’ in *dweorge-dwostle*, which could mean either ‘dwarf’ or ‘fever’, may have a connection with mythology, but is more likely to simply refer to the diminutive size of the plant. However, we seem to be on firmer mythological ground as far as *ælf-pone* is concerned, where Krischke feels confident in asserting that “the element *ælf*: ‘elf’ indicates that the plant is helpful for treating diseases caused by elves”.

But even entries that involve more mundane creatures, such as horses or lambs, are not always entirely straightforward. Krischke’s sources suggest that the ‘horse’ in *hors-elene* (*Inula helenium L.*) is either “a folk etymological rendition of *inula* in analogy to *hinulus* ‘mule’ ... as horse” (p. 336) or a metaphorical use of ‘horse’ to denote, metaphorically, the sense of ‘wild’. Even with such a transparent term as *lambes cærse* (lambs cress), Krischke is unwilling to plump for one of the two possible interpretations – a kind of cress found where sheep live, or a kind of cress eaten by sheep.

Following this ‘catalogue’ of names, the work concludes with a 21-page bibliography, and three indexes (of word-forms, botanical names, and subjects). All in all, it can certainly be said that Krischke’s weighty volume is a worthy contribution to the study of early English language and culture.

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