

Magical Verse from Early Medieval England: The Metrical Charms in Context

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I, Karel Felix Fraaije, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

This thesis contextualises the Old English Metrical Charms, a selection of twelve alliterative texts from early medieval England. These compositions approach poetic language in a different way from most other literary genres. When performed, they should produce changes in the physical world. Their desired results reflect early medieval concerns. Some are occupied with bodily wellbeing and hope to cure sick patients or prevent undesirable conditions. Others focus on restoring material wellbeing, redressing theft or requesting agricultural benefits.

Scholars conventionally find the Metrical Charms challenging. There are several reasons for this circumstance. The Old English texts sometimes presuppose an awareness to obscure stories and events, and they employ a poetic register characterised by rare words and neologisms. Similarly, the Metrical Charms blur modern distinctions between science, magic, and religion, maintaining a complicated relationship with Christianity. They also demonstrate intricate transmission patterns: some show influences of written and oral media; most preserve overt and covert connections to texts in other languages.

The thesis employs a comparative methodology and examines the Metrical Charms against a broader background of (often medieval but sometimes modern) European charm traditions. Old English charms are rare. Middle English, Latin, German, Dutch, and Scandinavian charms survive in greater numbers and sometimes resemble the Old English texts. The precise relationships between these compositions have remained underexplored. A comparative methodology affords the unique possibility of linking notoriously complex passages in the Metrical Charms to similar sections from analogous texts. The thesis finds this approach is effective in retrieving the meaning of obscure words and phrases. It offers new solutions for some of the field's most longstanding interpretative problems.

Impact Statement

This thesis contributes to our understanding of Old English poetry. Its discoveries will specifically benefit the following groups:

1. Scholars of medieval English literature
2. Historians of medicine, religion, and science
3. Comparative folklorists

It also impacts the work of some historical linguists, lexicographers, Indo-Europeanists, and scholars working in the medical humanities.

The popular perception of the Metrical Charms is that they originated in a pre-Christian oral tradition and that they contain references to lost cults and belief systems. Even though they survive in monastic manuscripts, they are commonly perceived as written testimonies to early medieval oral traditions. Both of these assumptions suggest the Metrical Charms provide a unique viewpoint of the past. The written record from the early Middle Ages contains mostly Latin, Christian texts.

Over the last two centuries, historians and literary critics have used the Metrical Charms to understand early English culture. Indo-Europeanists and scholars of comparative mythology have employed them to reconstruct lost narratives and beliefs. Similarly, these texts are regularly cited in arguments about pre-Christian Germanic religion, and they have contributed substantially to established views on the practicalities of religious conversion and the interplay between medieval poetry, medicine, magic, and Christianity. Some passages in the Metrical Charms have been cited so often that they are famous outside academia. 'New Age' books or websites sometimes refer to them, and they are popular among re-enactors.

This thesis focuses on contextualising the Metrical Charms against a broader background of European charm traditions, incorporating

medieval and (early) modern evidence. The argument it presents challenges many entrenched views, both popular and academic. It disputes the traditional conviction that these texts contain overt references to pre-Christian deities. Such ideas can often be traced back to misunderstandings about a select number of ambiguous passages. The thesis argues that the common assumption that the Metrical Charms are popular texts that derive from oral traditions needs qualifying. Some may have circulated orally. Nevertheless, most have clear ties to classical and monastic learning. They feature complicated bilingual puns, use technical terminology, and sometimes presuppose familiarity with prayers and Christian rituals.

The thesis presents new readings and translations of all Metrical Charms. It revises and supplements previous arguments in numerous small ways. However, its most substantial contribution to the field of Old English studies comes in the form of new translations for several well-known and contested words. If accepted, these propositions will change our understanding of the Metrical Charms and modify how we conceptualise the relationship between alliterative poetry, magic, medicine, and religion in early medieval England.

Acknowledgement

In the week before returning to London to embark on this dissertation, I wrote an unpublishable short story. The solitary groundkeeper of a small beachcombing museum starts discerning the murmuring memories of the objects in the collection. He strikes up a friendship with Perceval, a Norwegian lobster, who from a vat of formaldehyde sings about his lost life on the ocean bed and the susurrations of moving currents. The dust that hovers in the museum's barrel-vaulted corridors serenades a generation of Victorian factory workers, employed in a local brick factory. Later, the same dust ends up in the groundkeeper's soup.

After four years of poring over old books and manuscripts, I realise I am that groundkeeper. With one important exception. My attempts to listen to the subdued music of the past have not been solitary. Many people have helped me along the way. It is my privilege to acknowledge their contributions and to thank them for their support.

First and foremost, I wish to express my sincerest gratitude to my primary supervisor, Prof. Richard North. Thanks for giving me the freedom to undertake this project and for steering me through it at critical moments. Thanks for educating me about philology and academia. Thanks for teaching me how to write something down in (Old) English and, occasionally, in Latin, Italian, German, Icelandic, and Dutch. Thanks for reading everything I ever wrote, even if it was not directly related to my PhD, and for coaching me on how to 'hit the ground running, rather than just hit the ground'.

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Risotto *Milanese* from the microwave is phenomenal after reading the original 'Dream of the Rood' and visiting the final resting place of Augustine and Boethius two towns over.

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The research for this project would never have been possible without the financial support of the AHRC. I wish to express my gratitude for the funding I have received for my research expenses and experiences. I remember working on a conference paper during a transatlantic flight and unexpectedly seeing the majestic cliffs of Greenland, basking in the arctic sun, 10 kilometres below. Life as a PhD student is full of beautiful surprises.

One beautiful surprise for which I am immensely grateful is speaking at the annual conference of the Associazione Italiana di Filologia Germanica. Prof. Concetta Giliberto organised a wonderful conference in a Sicilian palazzo. Thanks for inviting me, for making me feel welcome, and for allowing me to audition some of my ideas about theft charms in front of such a receptive audience. My sincerest gratitude for going above and beyond (racing through Palermo at rush-hour) to find me an appropriately sized conference t-shirt. I still have it and it fits perfectly.

I am forever indebted to my friends. I would like to thank one person in particular: Calum Cockburn. I remember leaving the library at 4 AM on an ordinary Tuesday. Walking down the stairs, I heard energetic footsteps echoing up through the stairwell. Moments later, your face appeared: 'I have found another analogue — I need a nineteenth-century edition of the *Old English Orosius*, quick!' You must have been the first person to get back out of bed to say that. You helped me with everything, from brainstorming to proofreading. I will never forget it.

The greatest debt I owe to my family. I put some of my first thoughts about charms to paper by the bedside of my extraordinary grandmother. She is no longer here to read the last. Rereading those initial notes always puts a smile on my face — even if they are not very good — because they remind me of her. A PhD requires sacrifices. I have lived five years of my life away from my parents and my two sisters: Hans, Erica, Aafke, and Maria. Thanks for giving me the freedom to pursue my dreams. This PhD is for you.

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Introduction¹

This thesis contextualises the Metrical Charms. These are twelve magical poems from early medieval England which solve common, practical problems. For example, ‘Metrical Charm 1’ hopes to restore fertility to barren farmland, ‘Metrical Charm 2’ seeks to cure wounds, and ‘Metrical Charm 3’ means to treat issues related to nightmares.² Together, these texts offer unique insights into the interrelationship between magical thinking and literary composition during the early Middle Ages.

The key publication in the development of the Metrical Charm corpus is Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie’s *Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, published in 1942. This edition contains all twelve texts and arranges them as follows:³

- Metrical Charm 1: For Unfruitful Land
- Metrical Charm 2: The Nine Herbs Charm
- Metrical Charm 3: Against a Dwarf
- Metrical Charm 4: For a Sudden Stitch
- Metrical Charm 5: For Loss of Cattle
- Metrical Charm 6: For Delayed Birth
- Metrical Charm 7: For the Water-Elf Disease
- Metrical Charm 8: For a Swarm of Bees
- Metrical Charm 9: For Theft of Cattle
- Metrical Charm 10: For Loss of Cattle
- Metrical Charm 11: A Journey Charm
- Metrical Charm 12: Against a Wen

¹ The research for this thesis was supported by the AHRC.

² The identification of ‘Against a Dwarf’ as a nightmare charm is contested. See page 111.

³ Dobbie 1942: 116–128, 207–220. Unless otherwise stated, this thesis uses Dobbie’s publication for editions of the Metrical Charms. References to scripture are from *Biblia Sacra Vulgata* 2007. Biblical translations are from the 1899 Douay–Rheims translation. Other translations are my own unless a source has been provided.

This dissertation uses Dobbie's English titles, except when this impedes clarity. 'Metrical Charm 1' and '8' have more common alternatives ('Æcerbot' and 'Wið ymbe'). 'Metrical Charm 6' is a composite passage consisting of three distinct rituals. Not all of its sections are for 'delayed birth' and continuing to refer to this passage as one 'charm' is misleading. Chapter 6 renames its separate parts as 'Ritual One', 'Two', and 'Three'. 'For the Water-Elf Disease' is consistently spelt without a hyphen between 'Water Elf' and the two different versions of 'For Loss of Cattle' have been distinguished with a Roman numeral ('I' and 'II').

The Metrical Charms' numerical labels suggest these compositions were always supposed to be considered together. This is inaccurate. These twelve texts survive in five different manuscripts, in which they were recorded over a period of two hundred years. 'For the Water Elf Disease', which is the earliest Metrical Charm, was written down c. 950; 'Against a Wen', which is the latest, was recorded c. 1150.

Six Metrical Charms survive in vernacular remedy books. The 'Nine Herbs Charm' (fol. 160^r–163^v), 'Against a Dwarf' (fols. 167^r–167^v), 'For a Sudden Stitch' (fols. 175^r–176^v), 'For Loss of Cattle I' (fols. 180^v–181^r), and 'For Delayed Birth' (fols. 185^r–185^v) are part of *Lacnunga*. This is a late tenth- or early eleventh-century work which itself forms a section of the composite manuscript British Library, Harley 585 (fols. 130^r–193^r). 'For the Water Elf Disease' (fols. 125^r–125^v) appears in *Leechbook III*, which was copied sometime in the mid-tenth century. *Leechbook III* is part of British Library, Royal 12. D. xvii (fols. 109^r–127^r), in which it follows another medical text called *Bald's Leechbook*.

'Wið ymbe' (p. 182), 'For Theft of Cattle' (p. 206), 'For Loss of Cattle II' (p. 206), the 'Journey Charm' (pp. 350–353), and 'Against a Wen' (fol. 106^v) are all marginal inscriptions. The first four survive in Cambridge Corpus Christi College 41 (CCCC 41), a much-annotated codex from the eleventh century which contains a translation of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*. Some of the manuscript's blank margins are ruled in drypoint. Its charms are all in the same hand. A single scribe must have compiled and

organised these texts with care.⁴ ‘For Loss of Cattle I’ and ‘II’ confirm marginal inscriptions can be based on entries in remedy books and vice versa. The former, which survives in *Lacnunga*, closely resembles the latter, which appears in CCCC 41.

‘Against a Wen’ survives on fol. 106^v of British Library, Royal 4. A. xiv. This tenth-century manuscript contains a commentary on specific Psalms (nos. 109–149) and a sermon on a passage in Numbers (20:10–12).⁵ The charm appears on what was once the last page of the codex and utilises the leftover ruling. Underneath, another marginal hand has recorded a second marginal verse, a Latin aphorism that puns on various forms of costliness.⁶ ‘Against a Wen’ was written down after 1066, but its themes and style (it is written in a form of alliterative metre) are so similar to earlier compositions that it merits including in the Metrical Charm corpus. Scholars have commonly assumed it is a linguistic modernisation of an Old English text.⁷

The exact manuscript context of ‘Æcerbot’ is unclear. It appears on fol. 176^r–178^v of British Library, Cotton Caligula A. vii. The text seems to have started out as a separate booklet.⁸ It probably owes its survival to its attachment to a lengthier work, a copy of the Old Saxon *Heliand*. Some scholars have suggested Cotton Caligula A. vii was assembled in the seventeenth century.⁹ More recently, Ciaran Arthur has argued ‘Æcerbot’ and the *Heliand* were united during the Benedictine Reform (late tenth century).¹⁰

⁴ Bredehoft 2006: 729–731.

⁵ This passage relates how Moses hits a desert rock with his staff in order to procure water.

⁶ ‘Si per diuitias possemus morte carere | Tunc prodesset eas indeficienter habere’ (if by riches it would be possible to be free from death | it would be profitable to have it unflinching).

⁷ Julius Zupitza claimed as follows: ‘dass wir es nur mit der sprachlichen Erneuerung eines altenglischen Denkmals zu tun haben, scheint mir nicht zu bezweifeln’. Zupitza 1887: 52. Ferdinand Holthausen later repeated the same sentiment. See Holthausen 1908: 215.

⁸ See footnotes 1137–1141.

⁹ See footnote 1137.

¹⁰ See footnote 1140.

State of Research

Romantic Philology and the Rediscovery of the Medieval Sources (1705–1866)

The Old English Metrical Charms have been studied for several centuries. The earliest publications that mention these texts were authored by antiquarians. In 1705, Humfrey Wanley (1672–1726) transcribed the ‘Journey Charm’ for his manuscript catalogue, *Antiquæ literaturæ septentrionalis* (antique northern literatures).¹¹ Near the end of the same century, Rasmus Nyerup (1759–1829) published ‘Æcerbot’ under the header ‘exorcismi sacri ad reddendos agros fertiles’ (sacred exorcisms for restoring fields to fertility).¹²

The systematic study of medieval charms commenced in the nineteenth century, when philologists such as Jacob Grimm (1785–1863) became interested in reconstructing Germanic myths and belief systems. Charms — especially poetic and vernacular ones — played an essential role in this objective. ‘Diese abergläubische formeln’, Grimm wrote, ‘frommen [*sic*] der geschichte unsrer mythologie, und enthalten nachrichten von göttern und gebräuchen des heidenthums’ (These superstitious formulas form the history of our mythology, and contain information about gods and pagan customs).¹³ He thus advanced a theoretical paradigm that continues to impact charm studies: the *Aberglaube*, ‘superstition’, of a later period can shed light on the *Heidentum*, ‘paganism’, of an earlier one.¹⁴

¹¹ Wanley 1705: 115.

¹² Nyerup and Suhm 1787: 148–150. Nyerup based his publication on a transcription by Franciscus Junius (1591–1677). See footnote 1141. Junius was fascinated by Germanic philology and copied several other charms from early English manuscripts. For more on this subject, see Telting 1842.

¹³ Grimm 1876: 1029.

¹⁴ For a later study on the relationship between these concepts, see Brox 1992.

We will return to this problematic proposition in our discussion of popular religion.¹⁵ Medieval charms do sometimes demonstrate unusual transmission patterns, and many survive as marginalia in otherwise Latin manuscripts.¹⁶ Grimm popularised the view that such inscriptions, some of them among the earliest vernacular expressions in Germanic languages, preserved the voices of an otherwise almost voiceless class of individuals: ordinary people. Charms, he argued, had entered onto the margins of early medieval manuscripts ‘aus dem munde des Volks’ (from the mouth of the people).¹⁷

In 1864 (one year after Grimm’s death), Adalbert Kuhn provided compelling new evidence for the idea that some German incantations were embedded in an extensive oral tradition and older than their manuscripts. In a seminal article, he contended the ‘Second Merseburg Charm’, a ninth-century incantation from Fulda, resembled a section from the *Atharvaveda*, a sacred Hindu composition from perhaps as early as 1200–1000 BC.¹⁸ Kuhn adduced the Indo-European heritage of both texts to suggest the roots of some medieval formulas stretched back into an ancient past.¹⁹

Current research suggests the situation is more complicated: incantations often spread because of trade or travel.²⁰ Similar formulas in related languages do not have to stem from the same *Urtext*. Nevertheless, Kuhn was not mistaken about the widespread oral currency of the ‘Merseburg Charm’. The distinct phraseology of this incantation — ‘bone to bone, sinew to sinew’ — is still prevalent in European folk medicine. As recently as 1999, two new variants were recorded in County Armagh and County Tyrone in Northern Ireland.²¹

¹⁵ See footnotes 59–72.

¹⁶ On this subject, see Olsan 2013; Haeseli 2011b. Also see ‘Figure 10’, ‘Figure 11’, and ‘Figure 15’.

¹⁷ Grimm 1876: 1029.

¹⁸ Kuhn 1864.

¹⁹ See also Ködderitzsch 1974.

²⁰ Smallwood 2004: 16–17.

²¹ Hillers 2019: 93.

In response to the findings of Romantic philologists, nineteenth-century scholars (mainly from Germany) began to collect, edit, and analyse vernacular charms.²² The cultural value of these documents changed profoundly. Before, incantations had often been printed in a manner that connoted sensationalism and religious rebuke. In 1584, the Protestant Reginald Scot had said about a Latin charm for falling sickness: 'These effects are too good to be true in such a patched peece of poperie'.²³ In 1749, *Gentleman's Magazine* had reprinted a comparable text (in truth a pilgrim's slip from the Cathedral of Cologne) as 'A Charm or Protection, Found in a Linen Purse of, Jackson, the Murderer and Smuggler who died (a Roman Catholic) in Chichester Gaol'.²⁴

Romantic philologists were interested in unearthing the historical roots of modern nations and languages. The result of this was that incantations began to acquire a reputation as precious cultural artefacts. In 1837, John Mitchell Kemble became one of the first individuals to express an unequivocally positive opinion of an Old English Metrical Charm ('Wið ymbe') when he wrote a letter to his 'dear friend' Jacob Grimm: 'I have a delightful spell for you from the margin of a Beda [...]: it is next in value to the one from the Harleian Codex printed in the D[eutsche] M[ythologie]'.²⁵ The inclination of nineteenth-century philologists to treasure early medieval incantations is also substantiated by a genre label they commonly used to designate such documents: in several early German editions, vernacular charms are not only called *Segen* (benedictions), *Beschwörungen*

²² Examples of publications from c. 1850–1920 that publish or collect new charms are as follows: Wackernagel 1843; Crecelius 1853; Auen 1854; Müllenhoff 1859; Dietrich 1867; Keinz 1867; Haupt 1871; Schönbach 1875; Müller 1876; Schönbach 1876, 1878; Zupitza 1878; Schönbach 1883; Steinmeyer 1883; Losch 1890; Zingerlinge 1891; Ammann 1892; Nyrop and Weinhold 1892; Schönbach 1893; Holthausen 1897; Ebermann 1903; Bächtold 1911; Ebermann 1917.

²³ Scot 1989: 132.

²⁴ 'A Charm or Protection, Found in a Linen Purse of, Jackson, the Murderer and Smuggler who died (a Roman Catholic) in Chichester Gaol' 1749.

²⁵ Wiley 1971: 148–149.

(incantations) or *Zaubersprüche* (spells), but also *Denkmäler* (monuments).²⁶

Even if some of the ideas of nineteenth-century philologists are now outmoded, modern specialists regularly express their admiration for influential figures such as Grimm and Kemble. The same privilege is rarely extended to Oswald Cockayne, the earliest editor of the majority of the Old English medical texts. His multivolume *Leechdoms, Wortcunning and Starcraft* (1864–1866) includes the first translations of most Metrical Charms. Nevertheless, the work is now often quoted to exemplify the folly and academic imprudence that sometimes characterises nineteenth-century publications about the history of magic and medicine.²⁷

Cockayne was a profoundly talented palaeographer. However, his penchant for writing his translations in an abstruse pre-Raphaelite register caused him to misrepresent the Old English material.²⁸ He often used archaisms or neologisms to convey simple concepts. He turned phrases such as ‘you wonder’ into ‘thou wondrest’ and rejected ‘neck’, ‘much’, and ‘astrology’ in favour of ‘swere’, ‘mickle’, and ‘starcraft’. Cockayne translated the first lines of ‘Against a Dwarf’ into ‘modern’ English as follows:

Here came entering: a spider wight:
he had his hands upon his hams:
he quoth that thou his hackney wert.²⁹

The philologist’s prefatory discussions of specific manuscripts are equally eccentric: *Bald’s Leechbook* apparently descends into ‘mere drivelling’; *Lacnunga* (which includes ‘Against a Dwarf’) should be regarded ‘with copious contempt’.³⁰ When Charles Singer republished all three of

²⁶ For example, see Müllenhoff 1873; von Steinmeyer 1916: 365–397. Also see footnote 7.

²⁷ For more on this subject, see Van Arsdall 2005, 2008.

²⁸ Van Arsdall 2005: 12.

²⁹ Cockayne 1866: 43.

³⁰ Both examples quoted in Van Arsdall 2005: 12.

Cockayne's volumes in 1961 he decided not to reprint the introductions: '[t]hese we omit because they are misleading in the present state of knowledge'.³¹

Professional Journals, Collections, and Critical Editions (1875–1942)

The early twentieth century witnessed a change in the way scholars approached incantations. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, editions of new charms had appeared in anthologies (often of unpublished medieval texts), as well as in transcriptions of manuscripts. When Walter de Gray Birch printed 'Against a Wen' in 1875, the age of discovery was effectively over: all Metrical Charms were now available.³²

Even if many early medieval codices had surrendered their hidden treasures, numerous possibilities for academic advancement remained. Researchers began to direct their attention to collecting, editing, interpreting, and translating. From the 1870s to the 1930s (and especially after 1900), charm scholarship witnessed the rise of so-called *Fachliteratur* and the popularisation of the academic note. Scholars such as Schlutter, Klaeber, and Holthausen never authored wide-ranging monographs about the Metrical Charms. Instead, they published their findings in short, condensed articles.³³ These sometimes discuss a problematic word ('Belucan in dem altenglischen Reisesegen'),³⁴ sometimes concern a specific text ('Der altenglische Reisesegen'),³⁵ and sometimes even

³¹ Cockayne 1961: xx.

³² de Gray Birch 1875. 'Against a Wen' seems to have remained unknown for at least another 25 years. See Closs 1979: 68–70.

³³ Schlutter 1907b, a, 1908, 1912; Holthausen 1908, 1918, 1920a, b, 1925, 1929, 1930, 1934; Klaeber 1921, 1929.

³⁴ Klaeber 1929.

³⁵ Holthausen 1929.

respond to an earlier note about the same text ('Nochmals der altenglische Reisesegen').³⁶

Meanwhile, folklore studies experienced the emergence of Frazerian theories. Jacob Grimm and others had employed incantations alongside many other sources (historical and contemporary) to extrapolate old beliefs and to examine the intersections between medicine, magic, and religion. Several new publications applied comparative anthropology to similar ends. Thus, Albrecht Dieterich (1866–1908) explained that the address to 'Erce [...] eorþan modor' in 'Æcerbot' represented an Old English testimony to a much more widespread belief in Mother Earth.³⁷ The idea that charms and other folkloric practices were 'universal' and 'comparatively stable and permanent' also opened up a possibility for Freudian psychoanalysis: they were part of the 'deep' consciousness of the 'common mind'.³⁸ In 1922, Geza Róheim connected 'Ritual One' from 'Metrical Charm 6' to notions about 'penis symbolism', 'neurosis', and ritual 'coitus'.³⁹

The close ties between folkloristics and philology around the turn of the twentieth century help to explain why the first complete edition of Old English charms (all published separately before) was printed in a folklore journal. Felix Grendon's *Anglo-Saxon Charms* from 1909 is an important document for understanding the history of the discipline. It communicates the fashionable early-twentieth-century sentiments that 'heathen reminiscences [...] abound in the Old English charms'; that 'almost all the superstitious rites have their modern survivals or analogues'; and that '[a]s a rule, the ceremonies prescribed are of Heathen ancestry, while the formulas show church influence'.⁴⁰ However, the article is impractical as a source of scholarly information because it often mistranslates the medieval

³⁶ Holthausen 1930.

³⁷ See, for example, Dieterich 1913: 16. Also see this thesis' section 'The *Erce* Enigma'.

³⁸ Quotations taken from Frazer's discussion on ploughing rituals, which are thematically related to 'Æcerbot'. See Frazer 1912: 335.

³⁹ Róheim 1922: 321–322.

⁴⁰ Grendon 1909: 120, 123, 127.

texts. A contemporary reviewer noted Grendon's incompetence in Old English: 'the difficult problems presented by the metre of the charms are not even noticed, and the language is dismissed with the occasional recognition of an Anglian form'.⁴¹

Several decades later, a new generation of scholars commenced the work of re-editing the manuscript texts. In 1948, Godfrid Storms assembled and translated a significant number of Old English incantations in *Anglo-Saxon Magic*, synthesising the countless notes from preceding years. In 1952, John Grattan and Charles Singer superseded part of Cockayne's *Leechdoms* with a new version of *Lacnunga*.⁴² These works reprise established Frazerian ideas. In Storm's monograph, we read that 'Æcerbot' 'smells of magic, with a little superficial colouring'; that it 'reveals something of an older religion'; and that 'lines 30–42 constitute a [pagan] hymn to the sun'. The Christian scribe had not elided the reference to a solar cult because 'the connection between a good crop and the sun is so strong'.⁴³

As explained at the beginning of this thesis, one of the most significant twentieth-century contributions to charm scholarship is Dobbie's *Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems* from 1942. This work (titled in a nod to Richard Wülcker's *Die kleinere angelsächsische Dichtungen* from 1882) separated Old English verse from prose incantations. It popularised the use of the genre label 'Metrical Charm'. Dobbie's selection was purely based on metrical criteria, but it inadvertently satisfied a requirement in the curricula of twentieth-century universities.⁴⁴ The decision to label the Metrical Charms as 'minor poems' coincided with the gradual establishment of literary criticism as an academic discipline, reinforcing the increasingly accepted notion that medieval incantations were 'serious' works of

⁴¹ The same reviewer also disliked Grendon's modern English: 'insular prejudice must protest that "growsome" (p. 177) is a wanton disfigurement of "gruesome," and that even the liberal minded authors of *The King's English* would hardly defend the vicious split infinitive on p. 157'. See Skemp 1911a: 262, 266.

⁴² Singer and Grattan 1952.

⁴³ Storms 1948: 178–179.

⁴⁴ See footnote 46.

literature, deserving of academic scrutiny. If present-day undergraduate courses discuss charms from early medieval England, these are often metrical.

Corpus Formation and Digital Technologies (1942–2020)

Genre Labels: ‘Metrical Charm’ and ‘Galdor’

Scholars from a broad range of periods have contemplated how to classify medieval sources that appeal to a so-called *virtus verborum*. Nyerup published ‘Æcerbot’ as a series of ‘exorcismi’; Romantic scholars occasionally used the obsolete term ‘Denkmal’; and Kemble wrote letters using the word ‘spell’.⁴⁵ A current topic in this ongoing debate is the suitability of the label ‘Metrical Charm’.

Dobbie asserted in 1942 that ‘of the numerous charms and exorcisms preserved in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, there are only twelve which are in metrical form or which contain verse passages of sufficient regularity to warrant their inclusion in an edition of Anglo-Saxon poetry’.⁴⁶ This assessment has since been criticised. John Niles has argued that ‘Æcerbot’ has ‘little in common with the pieces with which modern editors have grouped it, the household remedies of Bald’s *Leechbook* or the *Lacnunga* manuscript’.⁴⁷ Marion Amies and Thomas Hill have sought to redefine the ‘Journey Charm’ as a lorica, an Irish apotropaic prayer.⁴⁸ Edward Pettit has described ‘Metrical Charm 6’ as not one but a series of texts, ‘grouped together as remedies for the same affliction’.⁴⁹

The categorisation of incantations from early medieval England is made more complicated by the fact that the word ‘charm’ has been used to designate a myriad of different sources. Two recent publications exemplify

⁴⁵ See footnotes 12, 25, 26.

⁴⁶ Dobbie 1942: cxxx.

⁴⁷ Niles 1980: 45.

⁴⁸ Amies 1983; Hill 1981.

⁴⁹ Pettit 2001a: 318.

how a tacit disagreement about nomenclature can encourage incongruent results. In 2006, Leslie Arnovick reported that ‘the Old English Charm Corpus, consisting of 228 charms’ (italics not in original) demonstrates a ‘thorough distribution of [incantations using the] Pater Noster’.⁵⁰ In 2013 Ciaran Arthur insisted on the significance of specific locations in Old English charms based on his interpretation of ‘Godfrid Storms’ corpus of *eighty-six* Anglo-Saxon charms’ (italics not in original).⁵¹

The flexibility of the word ‘charm’ is problematic because it can cause misunderstandings. At the same time, mandating the use of restrictive genre labels also produces inconsistencies. Selecting appropriate designations for magico-religious texts is not only a modern academic concern: medieval authors wrestled with the same problem. To illustrate this point, we may consider the versatility and semantic breadth of the word *galdor*, an Old English term which Dobbie’s *Metrical Charms* sometimes use to describe themselves.

‘For the Water Elf Disease’ states that ‘þas galdor mon mæg singan on wunde’ (these charms one may sing on a wound). The instructions of the ‘Nine Herbs Charm’ recommend singing the incantation ‘on ælcre þara wyrta’ (on all of the herbs).⁵² Meanwhile, Ælfric of Eynsham (955–1010) asserted that a Christian who ‘his hælðe secan wile [...] æt awyrigedum galdrum’ (wishes to seek his health from accursed charms) is ‘þam hæðenum mannum gelic’ (equal to heathen people).⁵³ He explained: ‘Ne sceal nan man mid galdre wyrte besingan ac mid godes wordum hi gebletsian’ (a person should not enchant a herb with a charm, but with God’s words bless it).⁵⁴ The implication that emerges from these statements seems well defined. To an extent, it echoes some of the nineteenth-century views discussed earlier: charms are unorthodox and constitute pre-Christian alternatives to Christian practices. Nevertheless, a

⁵⁰ Arnovick 2006: 69.

⁵¹ Arthur 2014a: 10.

⁵² Line 15; lines 69–70.

⁵³ Clemoes 1997: 449–450.

⁵⁴ Clemoes 1997: 450.

closer look at the written record reveals this dichotomy is misleading. In Old English, the word *galdor* can also be used to describe Christian poems.⁵⁵ More significantly, Lea Olsan has pointed out that ‘[i]n Anglo-Saxon vernacular charms one finds the directions “sing this gealdor” and “sing this gebede” accompanying the same kinds of formulas’.⁵⁶ If medieval authors used the word *galdor* to classify texts, they also used it to voice opinions *about* texts.⁵⁷

Brian Murdoch, a specialist in Old High German incantations, has made an appropriate suggestion to resolve some of the ambiguity regarding the genre distinctions of incantatory literature. In his book chapter ‘Charms, Recipes, and Prayers’, he outlines the following idea:

[T]hey interlock with other forms of writing that seem at first glance to be different. Categorization is a particularly difficult problem, even when it is accepted that all early German charms are, in the form we have them, Christian. Many of what are termed charms are designed to heal, or at least to make a situation better, and thus they overlap to some extent with the medical-pharmaceutical approach to healing, represented by the recipe, the prescription. The word *recipe* simply means “take (ingredients),” and medical recipes in their turn may be linked with the cookery recipe. In another, rather different direction, the Christianization of the German charms makes for an equally firm link with liturgical prayers, specifically with the collects, the petitionary prayers offered when faced with a given situation, such as prayers for the sick, or to ensure that a negative situation might not arise. The factor which brings together these apparently different types of writing — recipes,

⁵⁵ See *DOE* s.v. 1 ‘galdor’.

⁵⁶ Olsan 1992: 117.

⁵⁷ Compare footnotes 23–24. See further Arthur 2018: 21–64; Kesling 2020: 171–85.

charms, and prayers — is the concept of amelioration, of making something better.⁵⁸

Murdoch's argument supports Dobbie's idea that considering the Metrical Charms as a corpus is advantageous, even if they are 'different types of writing'. Nevertheless, the decision to present various poems from five different manuscripts under the same header remains a modern one. It should not be misunderstood as an attempt to define a specific medieval genre. Modern scholars profit from studying the Metrical Charms collectively because this allows concentrating on the role poetry played in early medieval magic, as well as on the role magical thinking played in early medieval poetry.

Here, it is important to mention the distinction between magic, religion, and science has been theorised often and that preferences for specific definitions differ across disciplines. A recent discussion which contextualises these terms in relation to early medieval charms prefers to see all three as overlapping concepts within the same 'Interferenzbereich' (interdependent area).⁵⁹ This thesis understands 'magic' with reference to this theoretical framework. It uses the word in the same sense as defined by the *OED*: 'The use of ritual activities or observances which are intended to influence the course of events or to manipulate the natural world, usually involving the use of an occult or secret body of knowledge'.⁶⁰

Pagan Resonances and Popular Piety

In 1986, Professor Karl Schneider concluded his career by giving several lectures for the Japan Science Society. In these, he rehearsed his views (ultimately based on those of nineteenth-century scholars such as Grimm) that the Metrical Charms preserved pre-Christian practices under a thin

⁵⁸ Murdoch 2004: 58.

⁵⁹ See Haeseli 2011a: 29.

⁶⁰ *OED* s.v. 1a 'magic'.

layer of Christian veneer.⁶¹ Previously, he had published that ‘Against a Wen’ alluded to a story about a pre-Christian ‘Totenberg’ (mountain of the dead) and that ‘For Theft of Cattle’ invoked Freyr.⁶²

Nevertheless, academic discussions were moving in a new direction. A decade before Schneider’s valedictory lectures, Eric Stanley had already published *The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism* (1975). This brought into clearer view how Romantic scholarship from the nineteenth century had contributed to misconceptions about ‘half-veiled remains of pagan poetry’.⁶³ In 1980, John Niles advanced the increasingly popular view that vernacular incantations were not sanitised artefacts from ancient times: ‘inventing a wholly fabulous mythology and social setting’ was unhelpful and ineffective.⁶⁴

The turn of the twenty-first century witnessed a proliferation of arguments that focused on the Christian nature of the Metrical Charms. Concepts that feature prominently in such discussions are ‘popular religion’ and ‘popular medicine’. In 1977, Thomas Hill rejected Storm’s earlier propositions about half-forgotten solar cults and associated ‘Æcerbot’ with ‘a Christian user’.⁶⁵ Two decades later, John Richardson argued that ‘For a Sudden Stitch’ (previously characterised as an interpolated document with a ‘pagan core’) was a ‘thoroughly Christian poem’, expressive of a ‘newer Christianity’.⁶⁶

Karen Jolly has written numerous publications on the interconnection between Old English charms and popular religion.⁶⁷ She has discussed the subject most extensively in her 1996 monograph *Elf Charms in Context*, which proposes charms originated from ‘the meeting between [...] folk customs and the rudimentary Christian expertise of a

⁶¹ See Schneider 1986.

⁶² Schneider 1969: 292; 1961: 42.

⁶³ See Stanley 2000: 14-23.

⁶⁴ Niles 1980: 55.

⁶⁵ Hill 1977.

⁶⁶ Richardson 2001: 22.

⁶⁷ Jolly 1985, 1993, 1996, 1998, 2005, 2006b, 2007.

local priest'.⁶⁸ John Blair favoured an alternative view in *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (2005). He argued some charms were created in 'large churches with books and well-formed liturgical routines' and that such texts substantiate a 'recasting of mainstream doctrine and observance in the idiom of traditional folklore' (this thesis supports a similar proposition in the conclusion of the chapter on 'Against a Wen').⁶⁹ Ciaran Arthur is one of the most recent scholars to review the interrelations between the Metrical Charms and religious texts. His book from 2018 focuses on the correspondences between incantations and liturgical rites.⁷⁰ This furthers the work of scholars such as Heather Barkley, who in 1997 considered the liturgical influences on early medieval theft charms.⁷¹ Arthur's arguments specifically engage with the interplay between the Old English sources and their manuscript context.⁷² His monograph follows in the wake of a much broader movement in the humanities that emerged just before the new millennium: 'New Philology'.

Manuscript Context and 'New Philology'

New Philology maintains that '[l]iterary works do not exist independently of their material embodiments'; that 'the physical form of the text is an integral part of its meaning'; and that 'physical objects come into being through a series of processes in which a (potentially large) number of people are involved'.⁷³ The 1990s witnessed a rise in the popularity of such principles, not least because of increased accessibility to medieval manuscripts. Rapid advances in digital technologies enabled charm scholars to read texts *in situ*.

⁶⁸ Jolly 1996: 70.

⁶⁹ Blair 2005: 484, n. 266.

⁷⁰ Arthur 2014a, b, 2015, 2018a.

⁷¹ Barkley 1997. Other studies which consider incantations or curses alongside liturgical rites are Little 1993; Banks 1993; Hascher-Burger 2011.

⁷² See especially Arthur 2018b.

⁷³ Driscoll 2010: 91.

Researchers such as Lea Olsan and Stephanie Hollis reconsidered the traditional understanding that charms were ‘oral’ texts whose marginal transmission patterns reflected a degree of unorthodoxy.⁷⁴ Commentators also began to focus on the *mise-en-page* of the primary sources. Charms commonly appear alongside other texts, but traditional editions do not ordinarily make this clear. The advent of online manuscript libraries simplified examining how a specific source had been recorded; how it had been treated by readers after its recording; as well as how it interacted with neighbouring materials.⁷⁵ Krista Haeseli recently reaffirmed the enduring popularity of reading charms as documents that express multivalent relations between performer, reader, manuscript, and scribe, when she published her poststructuralist review of Old and Middle High German incantations in 2011.⁷⁶

Perhaps the most significant contribution to charm scholarship since the beginning of the new millennium is Edward Pettit’s edition of *Lacnunga* (superseding Grattan and Singer’s publication from 1952).⁷⁷ Consisting of two volumes, it presents extensive discussions of the themes, analogues, language, and metre of the five Metrical Charms contained in the Old English manuscript. Alaric Hall’s *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England* (2007) is a lexicographical study and not an analysis of incantations.⁷⁸ It nevertheless features an intriguing examination of ‘For a Sudden Stitch’. A recent contribution from the field of folklore studies is Jonathan Roper’s *English Verbal Charms* (2005).⁷⁹ This monograph is one of the few to consider the post-medieval development of English incantations.⁸⁰

Lastly, recent years have witnessed the submission of several relevant PhD theses. These are Rebecca Fisher’s *The Transmission and*

⁷⁴ Olsan 1989a, b, 1992, 1999, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2013; Jones and Olsan 2015; Hollis 1997.

⁷⁵ For recent contextual studies of single charms, see Baker 2008; O’Connor 2018.

⁷⁶ Haeseli 2011b; also see Haeseli 2008, a.

⁷⁷ Pettit 2001a, b.

⁷⁸ Hall 2007b.

⁷⁹ Roper 2005. For shorter studies relating to Old English charms, see Roper 2006, 2011.

⁸⁰ Also see Forbes 1971; Davies 1998.

Performance of Charms in Anglo-Saxon England (2011); Emily Kesling's *The Old English Medical Collections in Their Literary Context* (2016); and Katherine Hindley's *Textual Magic in Medieval England* (2017). Caroline Batten is currently writing her doctoral dissertation at Oxford University. This is preliminarily titled '*A Cure for the Harm of Another Poison*': *The Comparative Poetics of the Metrical Charms, their Analogues, and Other Old English Verse*.⁸¹

Outline of the Problem, Hypothesis, and Methodology

A lack of context is the most significant impediment to interpreting the Metrical Charms effectively. We often do not know who created these compositions or who performed them. Sometimes, we do not know with certainty what issues they address. The problematic words and phrases and obscure grammatical constructions that feature in many Metrical Charms delimit our ability to determine what these texts are about and how we should translate them. The injurious 'micelan mannes tungan' which 'Wið ymbe' means to silence has been translated as 'the mighty tongue of man',⁸² 'the mighty tongues of men',⁸³ and 'the mighty spell of man',⁸⁴ but also as a taboo designation for a bear.⁸⁵ Similarly, the mysterious *gyrd* that appears in the opening line of the 'Journey Charm' has been interpreted as 'a holy rood',⁸⁶ a 'Wanderstab' (walking stick),⁸⁷ a 'rod',⁸⁸ 'eine grüne, vielleicht noch teilweise belaubte Gerte' (a green, perhaps still partly leafy

⁸¹ Batten and Hindley's theses have not been consulted.

⁸² Storms 1948: 133.

⁸³ Cook 1995: 50.

⁸⁴ Grendon 1909: 169.

⁸⁵ Line 6. See Meissner 1916: 379.

⁸⁶ Line 1. Cockayne 1864: 389.

⁸⁷ Holthausen 1929: 89; 1930: 255.

⁸⁸ Storms 1948: 217.

twig),⁸⁹ ‘a palm branch’,⁹⁰ ‘a *uirga* that a Christian might bear’,⁹¹ and even an ‘ancient rune-stick’.⁹² Most (but not all) of these translations make sense on a linguistic level. Nevertheless, the decision to prefer one instead of another profoundly changes the meaning of the documents in which they occur. Reading ‘rune stick’ instead of ‘holy rood’ impacts how we understand the literary background of the ‘Journey Charm’ and the religious mentality of the scribe who recorded it.

Interpretative ambiguities can sometimes be resolved through re-contextualisation. There are several ways to introduce context to Old English literature. This thesis, however, concentrates on reading obscure phraseology in the Metrical Charms against a more extensive background of medieval and post-medieval incantations. It is possible to distinguish a correlation between the methodology of this thesis and that of Patrick Murphy’s recent monograph on the Exeter Book Riddles. The latter work ‘unriddles’ the Old English poems by analysing them alongside texts from often much later oral traditions.⁹³ Reviewers have consistently noted the value of the methodology. The book’s greatest contribution, Sarah Higley wrote, ‘is its comparative strategy’.⁹⁴ Jennifer Neville stated that the monograph offers a ‘strong argument’ for the value of examining the relationship between the Exeter Riddles and texts from later oral traditions.⁹⁵

This thesis does not analyse riddles but charms. However, the two genres are in some ways similar. Besides the fact that both survive in prodigious numbers in later folklore collections, they are equally preoccupied with metaphors and (often very advanced) word games. Just like riddling wordplay, magical phraseology can be deliberately obscure. Put differently, riddles and charms lend themselves to a comparative

⁸⁹ Sandmann 1975: 24.

⁹⁰ Stuart 1981: 272.

⁹¹ Thomas D. Hill 2012: 158.

⁹² Brooke 1892: 474.

⁹³ Murphy: 2011.

⁹⁴ Higley 2013: 1136.

⁹⁵ Neville 2014: 325.

methodology particularly well because they have later analogues and because they can feature literary dimensions that are difficult to perceive or interpret without context. For this precise reason, the thesis occasionally casts a wide net, sometimes tracing back a specific phrase or motif back to antiquity, sometimes distinguishing a lexical or thematic link between the Old English texts and formulas from nineteenth-century Scandinavian oral traditions.

A specific advantage of situating the Metrical Charms within a broader literary framework is that this facilitates using reference works and analytical strategies that since World War II have been applied primarily to German sources. Like Old English charms, German *Segen* (blessings) and *Zaubersprüche* (spells) occasionally feature hapax legomena, corrupt phrases, and unconventional syntactic structures. The interpretative issues that these provoke, however, can often be reduced by consulting several corpora. In 1867, Friedrich Keinz conjectured that a specific passage in the thirteenth-century 'Münchener Nachtsegen' preserved a reference to a lost literary tradition. He argued the first two nouns in the phrase 'herbrote u_n h'rbrant | vart uz in eyn andir lant' (*herbrote* and *herbrant*, go away to a different land) were 'Namen der Heldensage' (names of heroic legend).⁹⁶

In 2000, Monika Schulz used the *Corpus der deutschen Segen und Beschwörungsformeln* to show that the translation of 'herbrote' and 'h'rbrant' 'in eine völlig andere Richtung weist und mit der Heldenepik im Sinne von Keinz nun gar nichts zu tun hat' (points in a completely different direction and has nothing to do with heroic literature in the way that Keinz suggests).⁹⁷ As Schulz made clear, a text in a twelfth-century manuscript from the Library of Peterhouse, Cambridge mentioned 'der herbrate' in a

⁹⁶ Lines 41–42, edited in Schulz 2000b: 153. Keinz 1867: 12. 'Die beiden Wörter sind whol nur als Namen aufzufassen. Schwierig dürfte aber dann die Erklärung sein, wie diese Namen der Heldensage (Herbrot für Herbort) in solche Gesellschaft gerathen sind'.

⁹⁷ Schulz 2000b: 131. This corpus is not available in print. It is part of the *Nachlass Adolf Spamer*. The separate *Segen* are currently in the process of being digitised by Das Institut für Sächsische Geschichte und Volkskunde. The *Schlagwortkatalog* has not yet been published. See *Nachlass Adolf Spamer des Instituts für Sächsische Geschichte und Volkskunde* 2020.

remedy for an eye infection.⁹⁸ Several fifteenth- and sixteenth-century documents from Germany helped to confirm that *herbrote* signified an ocular ailment.⁹⁹ Meanwhile, an entry in Munich 17403 (13th cent.) translated a close parallel to the term ‘h’rbrant’ as ‘ordei granum’, an eyelid swelling which in English is called a sty or a ‘hordeolum’ (a diminutive form of *hordeum*, ‘barley’).¹⁰⁰ Both comparisons suggest the ‘Münchner Nachtsegen’ does not expatriate two characters from a now lost heroic legend. Instead, it exorcises two eye problems.¹⁰¹

Just as early German poems can be used to elucidate each other’s meaning, Old and Middle High German incantations can be used to shed light on the themes and phraseology of the English Metrical Charms. ‘Wið ymbe’, which means to recover an absconding swarm of bees, helps to illustrate this point. The charm tells performers to straw earth over their bees and under their right foot and to address the swarming insects as *sigewif*. This unconventional appellation can mean ‘victory women’ (a standard translation) but also ‘descent women’ (a new translation).¹⁰²

Some scholars have hypothesised that ‘Wið ymbe’ constitutes a pagan spell that evokes the power of earth or perhaps represents a later iteration of an incantation that once invoked Valkyries.¹⁰³ In 1903, Elard Hugo Meyer argued the poem was ‘ein angelsächsisches Schlachtgebet zu den Siegweibern, das merkwürdigerweise später auf die schwärmenden Bienen übertragen wurde’ (an Anglo-Saxon slaughter-prayer to the victory women, which, strangely enough, was later applied to swarming bees).¹⁰⁴

⁹⁸ Schulz 2000b: 131.

⁹⁹ Schulz 2000b: 131–142.

¹⁰⁰ Schulz 2000b: 131.

¹⁰¹ It should be noted that the ‘Münchner Nachtsegen’ approaches adversity in a comprehensive fashion: it enumerates a great number of inconveniences to ensure all aspects of daily life are safeguarded from harmful influences. The text’s preoccupation with eye problems is subservient to a broader apotropaic theme. For more on this text, see footnotes 564, 707–710.

¹⁰² See Bosworth and Toller, s.v. ‘sige’. Compare a very similar observation in Frank 1972: 209.

¹⁰³ For Valkyrie interpretations of ‘Wið ymbe’, see footnote 1259.

¹⁰⁴ Meyer 1903b: 270. Meyer explains beforehand that ‘Siegweibern’ should be understood as a synonym for ‘nordischen Walküren’ (nordic Valkyries).

Several decades later, Stanley Greenfield presented an alternative Valkyrian hypothesis to accommodate a literary perspective: the term ‘victory women’ was not a reference to an old religious belief, but an indication of the poet’s intention to emphasise that bees are vicious insects, armed with stingers in the same way Valkyries are armed with ‘victorious swords’.¹⁰⁵

‘Wið ymbe’ is difficult to interpret because no comparable English texts survive.¹⁰⁶ The complications diminish when we consider that records from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland preserve a substantial number of incantations to summon absconding bees, including several Latin and vernacular specimens from the early medieval period.¹⁰⁷ A number of these make use of analogous verbal formulas. The ‘Lorscher Bienensegen’ includes the phrase ‘sizi sizi bina’ (sit, sit, bees).¹⁰⁸ ‘Wið ymbe’ has ‘sitte ge, sigewif’ (sit down, you victory/descent women).¹⁰⁹ Likewise, the German poem tells the bees not to fly off to nearby woodland: ‘zi holce ni fluc du’.¹¹⁰ The English charm repeats this instruction: ‘næfre ge wilde to wuda fleogan’ (may you never fly, wild, to the woods).¹¹¹

The advice to scatter earth is also reiterated in a later swarm charm from northern Germany. In the Old English text, the user is told to perform the following procedure:

Nim eorþan, oferweorp mid þinre swiþran handa under þinum
swiþran fet [...] And wiððon forweorp ofer great, þonne hi
swirman.¹¹²

¹⁰⁵ Greenfield 1986: 256.

¹⁰⁶ Roper 2005: 202.

¹⁰⁷ See footnotes 1258–1265.

¹⁰⁸ Line 5. The German text has been transcribed from the manuscript. For the full *Segen*, see footnote 1253.

¹⁰⁹ Line 9.

¹¹⁰ Line 8.

¹¹¹ Line 7.

¹¹² Lines 1–2, 7–8.

Take earth, cast it with your right hand under your right foot [...]
And, when they swarm, cast grit over them.

In the latter, the advice is as follows:

Mache dese dreii Creutze mit dem rechten fuss auff die erden wirff
den Erden unter deinem fusse mangk oder pobber die Bienen so
mogen sie nit von deinem Hofe hinwegk fligen.¹¹³

Make these three crosses with the right foot on the earth, cast earth
under your foot and between or over the bees. In this way, they
cannot fly away from your yard.

The parallels between the English and German texts are evident. Thus, it is stimulating to see that all of the German charms appear in manuscripts from areas with strong historical ties to beekeeping while none alludes to Valkyries.¹¹⁴ Some, however, use creative epithets for the queen (or king) bee, and most ask the swarm to come back down to earth.¹¹⁵ The Old English hapax *sigewif* appears to make full use of the dual meaning of a single vernacular expression: it stresses the ‘triumphant’ (*sige*), regal nature of the addressed livestock and simultaneously inspires an inclination to ‘sink’ (*sigan*).¹¹⁶ ‘Wið ymbe’ undeniably rehearses one originally continental tradition. The advice to throw earth on bees already appears as a practical suggestion in a Roman agricultural treatise from 37 BCE.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ No. 15 in Fife 1964: 155.

¹¹⁴ See ‘Figure 16’.

¹¹⁵ For numerous examples, see ‘Bienensegen’ in *Nachlass Adolf Spamer des Instituts für Sächsische Geschichte und Volkskunde* 2020.

¹¹⁶ See footnote 1265.

¹¹⁷ For similar passages in Roman literature, see Kersten 2014. Also see footnotes 1280–1283.

cum iam evoluturae sunt aut etiam inceperunt, consonant vehementer, proinde ut milites faciunt, cum castra movent. quae primo cum exierunt, in conspectu volitant reliquas, quae nondum congregatae sunt, respectantes, dum conveniant. [cum] a mellario cum id fecisse sunt animadversae, iaciundo in eas pulvere et circumtinniendo aere perterritae.¹¹⁸

When they [the bees] are just about to fly away or have already begun to do so, they vigorously make noise, in the same manner as soldiers do when moving camp. Those that leave first fly about in sight, looking back repeatedly at the others who have not yet congregated, until they all come together. When the beekeeper sees what has happened, he terrifies them by throwing dust over them and by clashing around them with brass.

Rationale

In 1944, Howard Meroney concluded his review of Dobbie's edition of the *Metrical Charms* with the observation that recent research had made 'genuine progress'. Nevertheless, several significant difficulties had remained unresolved:

Dobbie's approach, literary rather than anthropological, hardly carries beyond the fringe of the main problem, the obscurity of the magic and ritual. Desirable would be fuller references to the prose corpus of the Old English pseudo-medical recipes and to an index of relevant motifs; concerning 'Wið Ymbe' (Charm VIII), for instance, we wish more outside material than the 'Lorscher Bienensegen'. But

¹¹⁸ Goetz 1912: 161.

these are precisely the fields where existing research satisfies least — there is no such index — and one can only hope that this textually sound, otherwise well-equipped re-edition of the *Charms* will help to stimulate the needed inquiry.¹¹⁹

Almost eighty years have passed since Meroney published his review. Nevertheless, the ‘needed inquiry’ to complement Dobbie’s corpus has not been undertaken. There is no index of motifs at present, and the manifold relationships between Old English, Middle English, Latin, Irish, German, and Scandinavian incantations remain under-researched.

This thesis situates the Metrical Charms ‘in context’: it explores each of Dobbie’s twelve texts separately and focuses specifically on explicating specific phraseology against a broader background of medieval and post-medieval charms (predominantly in English, Irish, German, Scandinavian, Latin, and Dutch). It provides ‘fuller references’ for all Metrical Charms to relevant motifs and analogues (thus tackling those issues where existing research still ‘satisfies least’), and it also makes a contribution towards understanding the religious contexts of these texts, specifically in the chapters on *Lacnunga*’s Childbirth rituals, the ‘Journey Charm’, and ‘Æcerbot’. Finally, this thesis describes the significant advancements and breakthroughs of the previous 200 years; synthesises English, German, French, Dutch, Italian, and Scandinavian scholarship; and presents updated translations of the medieval sources. As a result, it is able to offer new suggestions for resolving some of the field’s most well-known and most longstanding problems.

¹¹⁹ Meroney 1944a: 199.

1. Herbs and Verbs: The ‘Nine Herbs Charm’

Introduction

Around 1904, Joseph Payne asked Walter Skeat for a summary of the ‘Nine Herbs Charm’. The former was a distinguished historian of medicine; the latter was one of Britain’s most pre-eminent philologists. He received the following reply:

It is an old *heathen* charm preserved down to Christian times, when allusions to Christianity would be possible. The dialect is Wessex, or South Saxon, generally called Anglo-Saxon; not Midland and not Northern. The MS. seems to be late tenth century; but it is a reminiscence of something older.¹²⁰

The generation of Payne and Skeat is often associated with several persistent misconceptions about early medieval literature. Many Old English sources which were once assumed to contain vestiges of paganism or resonances of oral poetry from the migration period (c. 375–600) are now considered products of a later age.

In this case, the philologist’s assertions have remained mostly uncontested: the dialect of the charm is predominantly that of Wessex.¹²¹ It is also probable that *Lacnunga* (‘the MS.’) was assembled sometime

¹²⁰ Payne 1904: 138.

¹²¹ *don* in Lines 68 and 72 does seem to constitute a northern subjunctive form. See Storms 1948: 192.

during the late-tenth or early-eleventh century.¹²² More significantly, both recent and not-so-recent commentators have contended that the charm and the manuscript in which it is preserved echo ‘something older’.¹²³ What that ‘something’ was remains unclear. Most scholars have followed Skeat and typified the charm’s origins as pre-Christian.¹²⁴ Some have indulged in romantic imagery: ‘Eerie scenes from half-remembered myths glimmer past us as we read, like the lambent settings of unforgotten dreams’.¹²⁵

This chapter will qualify the hypothesis that the incantation stems from a pre-Christian tradition. The composer(s) of the ‘Nine Herbs Charm’ probably sourced some elements from oral tradition. One modern scholar has calculated that a full performance lasts around three hours and requires uttering the charm out loud thirty-one times.¹²⁶ This is enough to memorise the text and to endow its written words with some oral currency; few Old English poems advocate a recital that inadvertently serves as a memory drill. Nevertheless, the composition imitates the phraseology of Latin book learning. As this chapter will argue, most of its mysterious scenes draw their power from the creative implementation of wordplay and incantatory formulas, rather than the eeriness of ‘half-remembered myths’. Before we can explore these propositions further, we need to review the Old English text:

+ Gemyne ðu, Mucgwyrht, hwæt þu ameldodest,
 hwæt þu renadest æt Regenmelde.
 Una þu hattest, yldost wyrta;
 ðu miht wið III 7 wið XXX,

¹²² Pettit 2001a: xxiv.

¹²³ Walter Sedgefield presents his edition of the Old English text in a subsection titled ‘folklore and heathen survivals’; Richard Wülker commented on the charm in his *Grundriss* under the heading ‘Gedichte, die auf das Heidentum weisen’. See Sedgefield 1928a: 359; Wülker 1885: x.

¹²⁴ See ‘Is the ‘Nine Herbs Charm’ a ‘Germanic’ Poem?’.

¹²⁵ Glosecki 2000: 99.

¹²⁶ Beechy 2010: 87.

5 þu miht wip attre 7 wið onflyge,
 þu miht wip þa[m] laþan ðe geond lond færð.
 + Ond þu, Wegbrade, wyrta modor,
 eastan op[e]no, innan mihtigu;
 ofer ðy crætu curran, ofer ðy cwene reodan,
10 ofer ðy bryde bryodedon, ofer þy fearras fnærdon.
 Eallum þu þon wiðstode 7 wiðstunedest.
 Swa ðu wiðstonde attre 7 onflyge
 7 þæm laðan þe geond lond fereð.
 Stune hætte þeos wyrta, heo on stane geweox;
15 stond heo wið attre, stunað heo wærce.
 Stiðe heo hatte, wiðstunað heo attre,
 wreceð heo wraðan, weorpeð ut attor.
 + Þis is seo wyrta seo wip wirm gefeaht,
 þeos mæg wið attre, heo mæg wið onflyge,
20 heo mæg wið ða[m] laþan ðe geond lond fereþ.
 Fleoh þu nu, Attorlaðe, seo læsse ða maran,
 seo mare þa læssan, oððæt him beigra bot sy.
 Gemyne þu, Mægðe, hwæt þu ameldodest,
 hwæt ðu geændadest æt Alorforda;
25 þ(æt) næfre for gefloge feorh ne gesealde
 syþðan him mon Mægðan to mete gegyrede.
 þis is seo wyrta ðe Wergulu hatte;
 ðas onsænde seolh ofer sæs hrygc,
 ondan attres opres to bote.
30 Ðas VIII ongan wið nygon attrum.
 + Wirm com snican, toslat he nan;
 ða genam Woden VIII wuldortanas,
 sloh ða þa næddran, þæt heo on VIII tofleah.
 Þær geændade Æppel 7 attor,
35 þ(æt) heo næfre ne wolde on hus bugan.
 + Fille 7 Finule, felamihtigu twa,

- þa wyrte gesceop witig drihten,
 halig on heofonu(m), þa he hongode;
 sette 7 sænde on VII worulde
 40 earmum 7 eadigum eallu(m) to bote.
 Stond heo wið wærce, stunað heo wið attre,
 seo mæg wið III 7 wið XXX,
 wið feondes hond 7 [w]ið færb[r]egde,
 wið malscrunge minra wihta.
- 45 + Nu magon þas VIII wyrta wið nygon wuldorgeflogenum,
 wið VIII attrum 7 wið nygon onflygnum,
 wið ðy readan attre, wið ðy runlan attre,
 wið ðy hwitan attre, wið ðy wedenan attre,
 wið ðy geolwan attre, wið ðy grenan attre,
 50 wið ðy wonnan attre, wið ðy wedenan attre,
 wið ðy br[un]an attre, wið ðy basewan attre,
 wið wrymgeblæd, wið wætergeblæd,
 wið þorngeblæd, wið þys[tel]geblæd,
 wið ysgeblæd, wið attorgeblæd,
- 55 gif ænig attor cume eastan fleogan
 oððe ænig norðan cume
 oððe ænig westan ofer werðeode.
 + Crist stod ofer alde ængancundes.
 Ic ana wat ea rinnende
- 60 7 þa nygon nædran behealdað;
 motan ealle weoda nu wyrto[m] aspringan,
 sæs toslupan, eal sealt wæter,
 ðon(ne) ic þis attor of ðe geblawe.
- 65 Mugcwyr, wegbrade þe eastan open sy, lombes cyrse, attorlaðan,
 mageðan, netelan, wudusuræppel, fille 7 finul, ealde sapan; gewyrc
 ða wyrta to duste; mængc wip þa sapan and wip þæs æpples gor.
 Wyrc slypan of wætere 7 of axsan; genim finol, wyl on þære slyppan

7 beþe mid æggemongc¹²⁷ þon(ne) he þa sealfe on de, ge ær ge
 æfter. Sing þæt galdor on ælcra þara wyrta, III ær he hy wyrce 7 on
 þone æppel ealswa; 7 singe þon men in þone muð 7 in þa earan
 buta 7 on ða wunde þ(æt) ilce gealdor ær he þa sealfe on do.¹²⁸

Remember, Mugwort, what you declared,
 what you decreed at Regenmeld.¹²⁹
 You are called *Una*, oldest of herbs.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Pettit emends to '[ð]a[n] gemo[n]gc[e]'.
¹²⁸ The medieval text appears on 160^r–163^r of London, British Library, Harley 585

(*Lacnunga*). This thesis uses the following edition: Pettit 2001a: 60–69. See further the 'Hypothetical Textual Improvement' in Pettit 2001b: 114–116. Other editions are Dobbie 1942: 119–121; Storms 1948: 186–197; Sandmann 1975: 192–195. Superseded editions are Cockayne 1864: 31–39; Wülcker 1882: 34–36; Wülcker and Grein 1883: 320–323; Hoops 1889: 56–61; Grendon 1909: 190–195; Holthausen 1934; Singer and Grattan 1952: 150–157.

¹²⁹ The meaning of this word is contested. Bradley suggested it could be the name of a girl or a mythical place. See Bradley 1904: 144. Godfrid Storms suggested it was a forgotten event in the life of one of the 'major or minor personages of the Germanic Valhalla'. Storms 1948: 194. Holthausen, and Braekman preferred variants of 'great proclamation'. The former admitted he did not know what that meant; the latter proposed it might be a reference to the crucifixion. Holthausen 1934: 182; Braekman 1980: 463. Braekman cited later Dutch, German, and Latin parallels. He argued that the 'Nine Herbs Charm' draws on an apocryphal legend that concerned Christ's alleged declaration before his death that all herbs should serve as cures. A problem with Braekman's theory is that in the 'Nine Herbs Charm' not Christ but the plants themselves are supposed to have spoken. Cameron supported Braekman's theory in 1993; Pettit rejected it in 2001. See Cameron 1993: 148; Pettit 2001b: 105. For more on the apocryphal legend related to Christ's command to herbs, see Ohrt 1929: 10–20. For an alternative interpretation that attempts to connect *Regenmeld* to Odin ('Regenmelde quindi, sia che si voglia intendere come toponimo o avvenimento mitologico, e chiaramente connesso ad Odino'), see Giraudi 1980: 286. The 'Nine Herbs Charm' later adjures *Mægðe* to recall 'hwæt þu ameldodest | hwæt ðu geændadest æt Alorforda' (ll. 23–24), which suggests both Regenmeld and Alorford are indeed names for epic assemblies. At least one cosmic event in Germanic mythology seems to start with a cognate element: *ragnarøk* composes *ragna*, 'of the ruling powers' and *øk*, 'judgement' (sometimes also *røkkr*, 'twilight'). This thesis argues the word participates in a paronomasic word game. See footnotes 136 and 281.

¹³⁰ *Una*, like most other nicknames, appears to be a feminine adjective. It is perhaps based on Latin *unus*. Sandmann argued *Una* was a cultic Germanic name. See Sandmann 1975: 204. This discussion connects *Una* instead to the charm's preference for seeing plants as primordial, powerful women. Just like the sobriquets 'wyrta modor' and 'yldost wyrta', *Una* connotes 'prima donna'.

You have virtue against three and against thirty.¹³¹
 5 You have virtue against poison and against flying disease.¹³²
 You have virtue against the foe that roams through the land.¹³³
 And you, Waybread, mother of herbs,
 open eastward, virtuous within,
 over you carts creaked,¹³⁴ over you wives rode,
 10 over you brides cried out, over you bulls snorted.
 You withstood and battered against everything then.
 So may you withstand poison, and flying disease,
 and the foe that roams through the land.
 This plant is called *Stune*, it grew on stone.
 15 It withstands poison; it batters pain.
 It is called *Stiðe*; it batters against poison.
 It drives out evil, throws out poison.
 This is the plant that fought against the worm.¹³⁵
 This has power against poison; it has power against flying disease.
 20 It has power against the foe that roams through the land.
 Now you, Lesser Nightshade, put greater (poisons) to flight,

¹³¹ Note that ‘virtue’ is a technical term in medieval botanical treatises. Medical herbs are commonly listed as having a number of ‘virtues’. An alternative translation of the line is: ‘you have thirty-tree virtues’. For a discussion, see footnote 250. For a Latin charm from the ninth century which uses similar phraseology, see Braekman 1980: 462.

¹³² Flying disease is a common ailment in an early medieval medicine. Also note the ‘wlieghende canker’ in the Middle Dutch charm quoted later in this chapter. For a discussion of ‘onflyge’, ‘gefloge’, and ‘onflygnum’, see Pettit 2001b: 106–108. Other (often speculative and conflicting) discussions of ‘flying venoms’ can be found in Künzel 2017: 91–99; Barley 1972; Singer and Grattan 1952: 55; Meaney 1992: 16; Cameron 1993: 10, 149–150; Braekman 1997: 91; Jolly 1996: 128–130.

¹³³ This line recurs three times with small grammatical variations. The ‘evil one’ is twice female accusative (‘þa laðan’) and once masculine dative (‘þæm laðan’). The preposition *wið* can occur with both cases. Translating all lines as plural, ‘foes’, is incongruent because the verb forms or consistently singular. Travelling or wandering afflictions are common in medieval charms. It is perhaps possible to draw a parallel to the antagonists of so-called *Begegnungssegen*. See Holzmann 2001: 110–113; Schulz 2000a: 291–293; 2003a: 149; Ohrt 1936.

¹³⁴ *Curran* or *ceorran* appears only once in Old English. Perhaps it is related to *gyrran*, ‘to make a harsh sound’. See *DOE* s.v. ‘ceorran’ and ‘gyrran’.

¹³⁵ Like ‘flying disease’, ‘worm’ is a common early medieval ailment. Modern words which recall this aetiology are ‘toothworm’ and ‘ringworm’. Neither describe illnesses caused by worms. For extensive discussions of ‘worm’ as a medieval disease concept, see Künzel 2017: 91–100; Grabner 1962; Keil 2007; Schulz 1978-2008; Keil 1960; Pinto 1969.

Greater Nightshade, lesser (poisons), until both benefit him.
Remember, Mayweed, what you disclosed,
what you accomplished at Alorford:¹³⁶

25 That no life would ever be lost because of flying disease
after Mayweed was made as a meal against it.
This is the plant that is called *Wergulu*.
A seal sent it over the spine of the sea;¹³⁷
malice of other poison as a cure.

30 These nine goads against nine poisons.
A snake came sneaking, it tore apart no-one.
Woden took nine glory twigs;¹³⁸
then slew the snake so that it flew into nine.
There struggled apple against poison,

35 so it never wanted to dwell in a house.
Chervil and Fennel, a duo with many virtues:¹³⁹
the wise Lord wrought these plants,

¹³⁶ In 1892, Stopford Brooke commented: 'what Alorforda is, it is almost too distressing not to know'. Brooke 1892: 472. This remains mostly true today. For translation suggestions, see Sandmann 1975: 201; Magoun 1937b: 29. See further footnotes 129 and 281.

¹³⁷ The poem's reference to a seal is dubious. In nineteenth-century Scottish folklore, a 'selkie', or, 'mermaid' is saddened by a Glaswegian girl's funeral. She exclaims: 'If they wad drink nettles in March | and eat muggins in May | Sae mony braw maidens | Wadna gang to the clay'. See Black 1883: 194; Waugh 1960: 75. How this scrap of Scottish folklore would relate to the Old English incantation is unclear. There is, however, evidence to suggest *Wergulu* represents the nettle. See footnotes 293–295. For the relationship between seals and 'merfolk', see Puhvel 1963. The 'spine of the sea' is perhaps an Indo-European formula. See Ginevra 2018.

¹³⁸ The poem conceptualises illnesses as organisms that need to be slain. The hapax *wuldortanas* relates to this metaphorical understanding of disease. The conventional meanings of *tan* include 'twig' and 'sprout'. In a literary context, it can also denote a weapon; *wuldortanas* implies that 'glorious' twig-like herbs can resemble weaponry. See Bremmer 1989: 412–415. Note also that nine *wuldortanas* serve to repel nine *wuldorgeflogenum*. See Page 1999: 112; Pettit 2001b: 144–146. For additional views concerning the word *wuldortanas*, see Singer and Grattan 1952: 54; Symons 2015: 86–87; Chardonens 2009: 695. For commonly rejected translations of the term, see Sedgfield 1928b: 421; Grendon 1909: 193; Skemp 1911b: 301; Singer and Grattan 1952: 54. The respective suggestions of these scholars are 'nettle stalks', 'thunderbolts', 'apple twigs', and 'runic twigs of fate'. For more on the possible Old English meanings of the word *tan*, see Orton 2003.

¹³⁹ *Fille* may also be Breckland thyme. See footnote 246.

holy in the heavens, while he hung;¹⁴⁰
 He set and sent them into the seven worlds
 40 for the rich and poor — a medicine for all.¹⁴¹
 It withstands pain, batters poison.
 It has virtue against three and against thirty;
 against the enemy's hand and against sudden deceit,¹⁴²
 against the bewitching of evil beings.
 45 Now these nine plants have virtue against nine glory-fugitives,¹⁴³
 against nine poisons and against nine flying diseases:
 against the red poison, against the foul poison,¹⁴⁴
 against the white poison, against the blue poison,
 against the yellow poison, against the green poison,
 50 against the pale poison, against the blue poison,
 against the brown poison, against the purple poison,¹⁴⁵
 against worm-blister, against water-blister,¹⁴⁶
 against thorn-blister, against thistle-blister,¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁰ This is sometimes interpreted as a reference to an event in Norse mythology. *Hávamál* (strophes 138–141) explains Óðinn hung on Yggdrasil for nine nights to learn the secrets of runes. For the juxtaposition of Christ and Woden in an Anglo-Scandinavian context, see Kopár 2012: 119–123, 173–174. The English passage presumably refers to Christ's passion. Some medieval sources assert Christ created herbs while he suffered on the cross. See Braekman 1980: 462; Ohrt 1929.

¹⁴¹ 'earmum 7 eadigum' is a common Old English formula: 'sind eallum gemæne. earmum. 7 eadigum'. See Clemons 1997: 210.

¹⁴² *færb[r]jegde* is a hapax. The first element means 'sudden'; the second, by emendation, 'cunning' or 'deceit'. Hapaxes beginning with *fær-* are common. Compare: *færstice*, 'sudden stitch', *færærnige*, 'rapid riding', *færblæd*, 'sudden gust'.

¹⁴³ Sometimes these are interpreted as fallen angels. See, for example, Magoun 1947: 37. The expression 'Nygon wuldorgeflogenum' relates to the poem's preoccupation with flying diseases and parallels 'VIII wuldortanas'.

¹⁴⁴ *Runlan*, a hapax, is perhaps related to *runol*, 'foul'.

¹⁴⁵ Words for colours are difficult to translate. For a discussion of some of the colour names in the 'Nine Herbs Charm', see Biggam 1997: 185; Anderson 2003: 93. For additional literature on multi-coloured diseases (a common motif in medieval incantations), see Haver 1964: 473; Schulz 2000a: 86–90; Bonser 1925; Pinto 1969: 44–59. An early example of the motif appears in a charm for eye-troubles, scribbled in the margin of fol. 91^v of Bibliothèque Carnegie, Reims, MS 73 (s. ix).

¹⁴⁶ *Gēblæd* is probably related to *blæd*, 'gust'. Compare Dutch *blaasje*, 'blister', and *blazen*, 'to puff'.

¹⁴⁷ 'Thistle-blister' is a common translation. It requires the emendation of *pys* to *pystel*. For additional suggestions, see Abernethy 1983: 73. 'Thistles and thorns' is a common formula in medieval English texts and based on Gen. 3:18.

against ice-blister, against poison-blister.
 55 If any poison should come from the east;
 or any should come from the north;
 or any from the west over humankind:¹⁴⁸
 Christ stood upon diseases of any kind.¹⁴⁹
 I alone know a running river.
 60 And nine snakes behold it.
 All weeds must now burst into herbs;¹⁵⁰
 seas dissolve, all salt water;¹⁵¹
 as I blow this poison from you.

 65 Mugwort, waybread which is open towards the east, lamb's cress,
 nightshades, nettle, crab apple, chervil (or Breckland thyme), fennel,
 old soap — work these plants into a powder; mix with the old soap
 and with the apple's slush. Make a paste of water and ash; take
 fennel, boil in the paste. Bathe with an egg mixture when he puts on
 70 the salve — both before and after. Sing the charm over each herb,
 three times before he uses them, and also on the apple; and sing

¹⁴⁸ The missing wind direction has attracted various explanations. Storms suggested eyeskip or 'technical inability'. Wülcker proposed that beliefs about God's southern throne perhaps prevented southern poisons. Grendon discerned a relationship between the three wind directions and the charm's preference for multiples of three. See Wülcker and Grein 1883: 327; Storms 1948: 192; Grendon 1909: 229.

¹⁴⁹ The phrase 'alde ængancundes' has caused controversy. Banham prefers 'Christ stood above the old things in a unique way' (as opposed to the translation above). See Banham 2009: 190. Note that if Christ 'stands' on illnesses his healing technique mirrors that of *Wegbrade* and *Stune*. He also tramples on 'worms', that is, 'super aspidem et basiliscum' (upon the asp and the basilisk), in Psalm 90:13.

¹⁵⁰ Pettit translates *weoda* as 'woods' rather than 'weeds'. The line seems to distinguish between plants that are edible and inedible. The subsequent line relates seas should evaporate salt water. This conveys a similar process: the natural world is made hospitable by turning an impotable (poisonous) substance (salt water) into a potable one (fresh water).

¹⁵¹ The charm describes destructive processes with verbs that begin with 'to': 'Wyrn com snican, toslat he nan'; 'sloh ða þa næddran, þæt heo on VIII tofleah'; 'sæs toslupan, eal sealt wæter' (lines 31, 33, 62).

the same charm into the person's mouth and into both the ears and on the wounds before he applies the salve.¹⁵²

The text provided above was first published in 1866.¹⁵³ Ever since, commentators have debated how it should be edited, interpreted, and translated. Some scholars have separated the charm's prose and verse sections.¹⁵⁴ In their view, the text blends two genres from different cultural milieus: a monastic recipe and a much older incantation.¹⁵⁵ Medieval churchmen generally condemn herbal enchantments and plant worship as pagan.¹⁵⁶ Yet, the 'Nine Herbs Charm' instructs users to 'Sing the charm over each herb', and it addresses all of its ingredients as if they are powerful, divine-like figures. The charm also mentions *Woden*. These circumstances have all been cited as evidence that at least the text's poetic section originated in a pre-Christian milieu.¹⁵⁷

Others have pondered over the charm's problematic phraseology. Some of the text's words and phrases are corrupt; others seem to be

¹⁵² See further the following English translations: Cockayne 1866: 31–39; Robinson 1885: 155–156; Brooke 1892: 472; Grendon 1909: 191–195; Stevens 1935: 169–171; Storms 1948: 187–191; Singer and Grattan 1952: 152–157; Bradley 1982; Abernethy 1983: 21–23; Cameron 1993: 143–146; Jolly 1993: 231–233; Rodrigues 1993: 137–139; Griffiths 1996: 178; Jolly 1996: 125–128; Glosecki 2000: 117–119; Pollington 2000: 214–219; Pettit 2001a: 60–69; Banham 2009; Williamson 2017: 1071–1073. German translations can be found in Hoops 1889: 56–61; Sandmann 1975: 192–194; a reprint of Hoops' rendering can be found in Marzell 1963: 74–75; for a Dutch translation, see Chardonens 2010: 80–82; for a Swedish translation, see Af Klintberg 1998: 44–45; for a Portuguese translation, see Medeiros 2015: 356–359; for an Italian translation, see Furlani 1989: 258–263.

¹⁵³ Cockayne 1866: 30–39.

¹⁵⁴ See Wülcker 1882: 34–36; Holthausen 1934; Leonhardi 1905: 137.

¹⁵⁵ See, for instance, Hoops 1889: 62.

¹⁵⁶ Ælfric (c. 955–c. 1010) wrote, 'Ne sceal nan man mid galdre wyrte besingan, ac mid Godes wordum hi gebletsian', see Clemoes 1997: 450. Regino of Prüm (c. 840 – c. 915) asserted that, 'Non licet in collection herbarum medicinalium aliquas observations vel incantationes attendere [...], nisi tantum cum symbolo divino et oratione domenicā, ut deus et dominus noster honeretur'. This is quoted in Franz 1909: 396. Burchard of Worms included a similar injunction in the nineteenth book of his *Decretum* (his collection of canon law), which, on its own, is also referred to as the *Corrector*. See entry 65 in McNeill and Gamer 1990: 330. These early medieval fears about the orthodoxy of herb incantations conform with the fourth canon from the synod of Rouen (c. 650), where it was decided to denounce anyone who intoned 'diabolica carmina super panem, aut super herbas'. See footnote 22 in Gagnon 2010: 120.

¹⁵⁷ For references, see this chapter's section 'Is the "Nine Herbs Charm" a "Germanic" Poem?'

poetic neologisms or even deliberately obscure puns. Edward Pettit, the charm's most recent editor, has tackled this issue by offering two versions. The first (provided above) changes as little as possible; the second suggests hypothetical textual improvements.¹⁵⁸ However, not all editors have proceeded with such caution. In 1975, Gert Sandmann rearranged the incantation and altered some of its words.¹⁵⁹ Contrary to most modern scholars, Sandmann argued that perfecting the charm's alliterative metre and clarifying its sometimes vague descriptions could help to recover a so-called *Urtext*, an original or 'primordial' version.¹⁶⁰

One of the few matters on which commentators do agree is that attempting to explicate all of the text's idiosyncrasies is unrealistic. 'This curious Old English poem', Henry Bradley wrote in 1904, 'is probably, like most other compositions of its class, not capable of being completely explained'.¹⁶¹ Seventy years afterwards, Nigel Barley concurred: 'This is an exceedingly complex charm which has caused much learned ink to be spilt to little purpose'.¹⁶² In 1980, Willy Braekman was more appreciative of the outcomes of previous investigations. He conceded the text presented 'apparently insurmountable difficulties', but also reported that 'eminent scholars' had 'suggested a number of valuable emendations'.¹⁶³

The 'Nine Herbs Charm' is a challenging text for many reasons. The difficulties start with its arithmetic. The composition is preoccupied with the number nine, but it actually enchants ten ingredients: nine herbs (two varieties of *Attorlaðe*) and one piece of fruit.¹⁶⁴ Howard Meroney noted 'every botanist would insist [...] that apples are not herbs'.¹⁶⁵ Nevertheless,

¹⁵⁸ Pettit 2001a: 60–69; 2001b: 114–116.

¹⁵⁹ Sandmann 1975: 192–195.

¹⁶⁰ Sandmann's editorial principles have since been criticised. See Sandmann 1975: 196; Schulz 2003b: 8; Stuart 1981: 260.

¹⁶¹ Bradley 1904: 144.

¹⁶² Barley 1972: 67.

¹⁶³ Braekman 1980: 461.

¹⁶⁴ Braekman used Singer and Grattan's (now commonly rejected) division of the poem into different 'lays' to suggest the incantation's first section mentions fewer: 'In spite of the fact that it is usually referred to as the "Nine Herbs Charm", it actually mentions only seven plants'. See Braekman 1980: 461.

¹⁶⁵ Meroney 1944b: 158.

all the incantation's ingredients are *wyrta* in Old English.¹⁶⁶ The text also describes how *Woden* strikes a snake into nine pieces with nine 'glory twigs'.¹⁶⁷ Ordinarily, one slash with nine twigs produces ten slices of snake.¹⁶⁸

The charm probably contains mathematical inaccuracies because it envisions nine as a magical number of power.¹⁶⁹ The text's linguistic and thematic ambiguities are more challenging to explicate. The 'Nine Herbs Charm' incorporates corrupt words and phrases; mentions obsolete disease concepts; and incorporates unconventional healing techniques. Modern drugs do not treat 'flying disease', 'worm-blister', or 'white poison'. Nor do modern doctors cure illnesses by blowing them away or singing into patients' ears. The text also refers to unfamiliar places and makes unspecified statements about unknown proceedings and events. What is *Regenmeld*?¹⁷⁰ Why did a seal transport one of the charm's ingredients over the spine of the sea?¹⁷¹

It is not even certain which condition or conditions the charm means to cure. In 1975, Gert Sandmann wrote that 'Der Neunkräutersegen steht im keiner Beziehung zum umgebenden MS-Text (es handelt sich um zwei Rezepte gegen Hämorrhoiden)' (the 'Nine Herbs Charm' does not relate to the surrounding manuscript text [this concerns two recipes against haemorrhoids]).¹⁷² Yet, in 1992, Malcolm Cameron adduced precisely the same codicological evidence to support the opposite view: 'as it is found in the manuscript between two [salves] for *fic* (haemorrhoids), it is

¹⁶⁶ Pettit 1996: 436–437.

¹⁶⁷ Line 32.

¹⁶⁸ See Chardonnes 2010: 81; 2009: 696–97. The latter article offers two explanations. 1: 'the compiler did not perceive any arithmetical issue at all, because he was more interested in numerical parallelism'. 2: 'suppose that the snake is not linear but circular. [...] a circular snake struck nine times is divided into nine parts'. Comparative evidence favours the first explanation. See, for example, Spruch 1–2 in Holzmann 2001: 133; Sandmann 1975: 227.

¹⁶⁹ For more on this number in medieval charms, see Weinhold 1897; Storms 1948: 97–101.

¹⁷⁰ See footnotes 129.

¹⁷¹ Banham suggests this may be because the herb is a marine plant. See footnote 137.

¹⁷² Sandmann 1975: 194.

presumably for the same ailment'.¹⁷³ László Chardonnens hinted at the unlikelihood of the latter argument with a dry sense of humour: '[D]an mag de genezer van geluk spreken dat de spreuk niet nog langer is!' (If so, the healer should praise his luck that the incantation is not any longer!).¹⁷⁴

If the 'Nine Herbs Charm' presents an uncommonly high number of interpretative problems, one of its complexities stands out: the text's unconventional use of botanical nomenclature.¹⁷⁵ As Pettit has put it: this is '[t]he most vexed and fundamental issue in the history of scholarship on this charm', to which 'there is not [...] a demonstrably correct solution'.¹⁷⁶

The problem encompasses two interdependent challenges. First, the metrical section of the charm uses unusual names to refer to some of its ingredients. The prose section uses more conventional botanical terms, but not all of these have been correlated unequivocally with modern plants. The herbs *lombes cyrse* and *attorlaðe* have proven to be especially difficult.¹⁷⁷ Second, the incantation's ingredients do not correspond to those of the recipe. The verse mentions 'mucgwyr't', 'wegbrade [...] eastan openo', 'attorlaðe', 'mægðe', 'æppel', '[f]ille', and 'finule', but omits 'lombes cyrse' and 'netelan'.¹⁷⁸ Instead, it mentions 'Una', 'Stune', 'Stiðe', and 'Wergulu'.¹⁷⁹ None of these words occurs elsewhere. They are most likely nicknames for some of the recipe's ingredients. Which nickname refers to which ingredient, however, is unclear.

In the past, scholars have approached this linguistic puzzle by subordinating their interpretations to three tacit and mostly unchallenged premises. These are as follows:

¹⁷³ Cameron 1992: 32. It is worth noting that both Sandmann's and Cameron's interpretations are further problematised by the fact that *fic* 'could also refer to some more general form of ulceration'. See Pratt 2001: 58–59. Also see footnote 207 and Ball 2017: 66–67.

¹⁷⁴ Chardonnens 2010: 83.

¹⁷⁵ Pettit 2001b: 109.

¹⁷⁶ Pettit 2001b: 109.

¹⁷⁷ See footnotes 288, 299–300.

¹⁷⁸ Lines 1, 8, 21, 23, 34, 36.

¹⁷⁹ Lines 2, 14, 16, 27.

1. The prose recipe mentions all the herbs that appear in the verse section. The prose plant names can be used to clarify those of the verse.¹⁸⁰
2. The structure of the 'Nine Herbs Charm' is stanzaic. The poem introduces the herbs one by one. It first addresses one herb, provides some information that pertains to it, and afterwards moves on to describe another.¹⁸¹
3. The 'Nine Herbs Charm' is an old 'Germanic' poem. It is culturally distinctive and redolent of a pre-Christian mentality. It is not a translation of a Latin, Greek, or Irish text.¹⁸²

Several discussions of the charm also propose additional, more speculative hypotheses. These are not uncontested; some are mutually exclusive:

4. Some of the poem's idiosyncratic names are epithets for ingredients which the poem has already mentioned. Thus, *Una* (l. 3) could refer to *Mucgwyr̥t* (l. 1), and *Stiðe* (l. 16) could be an alternative for *Stune* (l. 14).¹⁸³
5. The verse section's unknown names are descriptive. They exemplify a physical attribute or some other property of the ingredient in question.¹⁸⁴
6. The verse and the prose sections present the plants in the same order. *Stune* and *Stiðe* must designate *lombes cyrse* because the former names appear in between *wegbrade* and *attorlaðe* in the verse section and the latter herb appears in between *wegbrade* and *attorlaðan* in the prose recipe.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁰ Meroney 1944b: 160.

¹⁸¹ See this chapter's section titled 'The 'Nine Herbs Charm': Stanzaic or Formulaic?'

¹⁸² See this chapter's section titled 'Is the 'Nine Herbs Charm' a 'Germanic' Poem?'

¹⁸³ Bradley 1904: 145; Pettit 2001b: 110; Banham 2009: 192.

¹⁸⁴ Cameron 1993: 147; Cockayne 1866: 33; Wood 1926: 220. Holthausen 1934: 182; Bradley 1904: 145.

¹⁸⁵ Storms 1948: 196.

7. The *Nine Herb Charm*'s incantation is an amalgam of earlier incantations. The first section concerns plants and correlates with the recipe. Later sections are about different topics.¹⁸⁶
8. The recipe is a medieval attempt to 'guess' the meanings of the verse's odd plant names. The person who wrote it was as confounded as modern commentators and misconstrued some of the incantation's ingredients.¹⁸⁷
9. All of the plants should be mentioned before line 30: 'Ðas VIII ongan wið nygon attrum' (these nine goads against nine poisons). *Æppel*, *fille* and *finule* are mentioned after line 30 because of textual corruptions. Their sections need to be moved to an earlier position. Alternatively, these plants should be equated with any of the verse's mysterious nicknames which do appear before line 30. If so, they must compete with *netelan* and *lombes cyrse*, which the charm's metrical section does not mention by name at all.¹⁸⁸

The 'Nine Herb's Charm' has attracted critical attention for over 150 years. Nevertheless, its botanical lexicon has defied cogent explication. Recent discussions view *Una* as an alias of *Mucgwyr*t and interpret *Stune* and *Stiðe* as representations of *lombes cyrse* and *netelan* or vice versa.¹⁸⁹ Debby Banham, the charm's most recent translator, has pointed out, however, that such decisions are not based on firm conclusions. They are provisional conventions.¹⁹⁰

Even if offering a new interpretation of the Old English document is a daunting task, acquiring an original perspective on the charm's interpretative issues is not impossible. Two of the three 'standard'

¹⁸⁶ Singer and Grattan 1952: 150–157; Watkins 1995: 425.

¹⁸⁷ Hoops 1889: 57; Banham 2009: 192.

¹⁸⁸ Meroney 1944b: 158.

¹⁸⁹ Banham 2009: 191. This thesis tentatively identifies *Una* with *Mucgwyr*t, *Stune* and *Stiðe* with *lombes cyrse* and *netelan* with *Wergulu*. See this chapter's section on *Namenzauber*.

¹⁹⁰ Banham 2009: 191.

premises outlined above are not as absolute as previous discussions have suggested. These are hypotheses 2 and 3 (that the charm is stanzaic and that the Old English text is a product of a ‘Germanic’ preliterate culture). Whether or not the charm’s incantation and its recipe mention the same ingredients (hypothesis 1) is impossible to verify. However, assuming this is the case enables us to propose readings that make sense in relation to the incantation’s inner structure and broader literary context. We shall consider hypotheses 2 and 3 in turn, pointing out the relevance of the remaining premises whenever this becomes necessary.

The ‘Nine Herbs Charm’: Stanzaic or Formulaic?

Commentators have often assumed that the ‘Nine Herbs Charm’ imperfectly preserves fragments from an older incantation (compare hypothesis 7). This older poem was reputedly composed of nine stanzas, each of which described one herb.¹⁹¹ Since it is not always possible to decide where one section should end and another should begin, interpreters have commonly postulated the incantation is either corrupt or incomplete. Some have proposed it should be re-ordered, but none of these re-orderings has been universally accepted.¹⁹²

Old English verse is not commonly stanzaic.¹⁹³ Establishing whether the ‘Nine Herbs Charm’ is, or whether some of its sections are merely

¹⁹¹ For example, ‘Each herb has its own stanza setting forth its virtues’. Storms 1948: 193. Also see Pettit 1996: 440.

¹⁹² See Sandmann’s ‘Neuordnung’ referenced in footnote 159. For superseded re-orderings: Wülker 1885: 353; Hoops 1889: 58. For a re-ordering which is still sometimes cited, see Storms 1948: 191.

¹⁹³ Some scholars have discerned ‘strophische Überreste’ in Old English charms; these discussions concern incantatory formulas, not stanzas. See Magoun 1937a; Schneider 1961; Rathe 1982. For the occurrence of stanzas in Middle English alliterative verse—note: ‘[t]here is almost nothing in the tradition of Old English verse that helps to account for these rhymeless but regular stanzas’—see Duggan 1977: 234.

reminiscent of stanzas, is essential because it determines how we understand the text's cultural context. It channels our thoughts on the charm's literary influences and how it acquired its current form. It also alters our view of whether or not the recipe's ordering of ingredients is the same as the incantation's (hypothesis 6), which in turn affects how we approach the translation of the incantation's botanical nicknames. Responding to an initial question about the text's formal features sets off a domino reaction that impacts all subsequent investigations.

Despite a common consensus that the 'Nine Herbs Charm' is stanzaic, the evidence for this assumption is unpersuasive. Medieval incantations commonly consist of short, formulaic segments. Such formulas travel independently and tend to crop up in various regions or places, often as smaller elements of more extensive compositions.¹⁹⁴ One German scholar has typified these using a masonry metaphor: *Textbausteine*, 'textual building blocks'.¹⁹⁵ If incantatory formulas are like bricks, however, they build unstable homes. A synonymous German genre label elegantly conveys this circumstance: *Wanderformeln*, 'formulas that wander around'.¹⁹⁶

The 'Nine Herbs Charm' incorporates a substantial number of incantatory formulas. Its passage on multi-coloured poisons, for instance, has numerous analogues. The Old English charm runs:

wið VIII attrum 7 wið nygon onflygnum,
 wið ðy readan attre, wið ðy runlan attre,
 wið ðy hwitan attre, wið ðy wedenan attre,
 wið ðy geolwan attre, wið ðy grenan attre,
 wið ðy wonnan attre, wið ðy wedenan attre,
 wið ðy br[un]an attre, wið ðy basewan attre.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁴ Krotz 2013.

¹⁹⁵ Krotz 2013: 253.

¹⁹⁶ Schwab 1994: 355.

¹⁹⁷ Lines 46–51.

against nine poisons and against nine flying diseases:
against the red poison, against the foul poison,
against the white poison, against the blue poison,
against the yellow poison, against the green poison,
against the pale poison, against the blue poison,
against the brown poison, against the purple poison.

One Middle Dutch analogue, recorded in Bruges c. 1490–1495, runs:

Hier boetic den svarte canker, de groene canker, den roode canker,
de blaue canker en de witte canker, de watercanker ende den
etende canker, scietende canker ende wlieghende canker en de
canker ende cankerinne ende .xc. arer kindren.¹⁹⁸

Hereby, I cure the black tumour, the green tumour, the red tumour,
the blue tumour, and the white tumour, and the water-tumour and
the eating tumour, shooting tumour, and the flying tumour, and the
tumour and the tumouress, and ninety of her children.

The ‘compass rose’ formula in the ‘Nine Herbs Charm’ is also not unique.
The Old English text avoids evil approaching from various wind directions
(‘gif ænig attor cume eastan fleogan oððe ænig norðan cume’).¹⁹⁹
Contemporary charms against theft pray to points of the compass so that
stolen objects will be returned.²⁰⁰

Most commentators in favour of the stanzaic view have attached
significance to the fact that the incantation includes recurring lines.
Nevertheless, these lines are often reminiscent of more widespread

¹⁹⁸ Braekman 1997: 109.

¹⁹⁹ It omits one wind direction. See footnote 148.

²⁰⁰ ‘Gebide þe þonne þriwa east and cweþ þonne þriwa: “Crux Christi ab oriente reducað”.
| Gebide þe þonne þriwa west and cweð þonne þriwa: “Crux Christi ab occidente
reducat”’. From ‘For Theft of Cattle I’, edited in Dobbie 1942: 123. Also see Schulz 1989.

formulas, too. ‘Gemyne þu, Mucgwyrt’ and ‘Gemyne þu, Mægðe’ — frequently interpreted as the incipits of separate strophes — parallel the opening words of a fourteenth-century German charm against hailstorms: ‘Gehugest du nv hagel’ (remember, now, hail).²⁰¹ In ‘Wið ymbe’, a beekeeper asks a swarm of bees to be ‘gemindige mines godes’ (mindful of my good fortune). Robert Pender argued the thrice-repeated line ‘þu miht wip þa[m] lapān ðe geond lond færð’ was a recursive ‘formal feature’ that ‘mark[ed] the end of the first three stanzas’;²⁰² Tiffany Beechy typified it as part of a ‘refrain’.²⁰³ The ‘Journey Charm’ — equally a poem that recycles formulas — includes a similar phrase. This text protects ‘wið eal þæt lað þe in to land fare’ (against all the evil that roams around the land).²⁰⁴

The charm’s much-discussed passage about *Woden* is formulaic, too. The relevant passage runs:

+ Wyrn com snican, toslat he nan;
 ða genam Woden VIII wuldortanas,
 sloh ða þa næddran, þæt heo on VIII tofleaþ.²⁰⁵

A snake came sneaking; it tore apart no one;
Woden took nine glory twigs;
 then slew the snake so that it flew into nine.

²⁰¹ A similar motif appears in some Scandinavian *marra* charms: a nineteenth-century specimen from the Faroes reads, ‘Marra, marra minni, ert tú her inni, minnist tú ikki slagið tãð, ið Sjurður Sigmundarson gáv tár?’ (Mare, mare, mind, are you in here? Do you not remember the strike that Sjurður Sigmundarson gave you?) See Holzmann 2001: 171; Hammershaimb 1849-1851: 203. Also see Ohrt 1929: 11–12; Müller 1901: 54. For more information on what a *marra* is, see this thesis’ discussion of ‘Against a Dwarf’.

²⁰² Pender 1969: 35–36.

²⁰³ Beechy 2010: 113. For a comparable assessment, see Vaughan-Sterling 1983: 197–198.

²⁰⁴ Line 6 in the ‘Nine Herbs Charm’; line 5 in the ‘Journey Charm’. The latter is edited in Dobbie 1942: 127. Also see Shook 1940: 140.

²⁰⁵ Lines 31–33.

Some medieval and post-medieval charms incorporate a similar motif. A Swedish incantation from 1876 for 'ormstyg'n' (serpent-sting) runs:

Jesus Christus jeck sig en vāj fram.
der mötte han en orm så ram.
Då tog han upp en knif
och stack I ormens lif,
att det ej skulle värka eller svida.²⁰⁶

Jesus Christ went on his way.
There he met a serpent so strong.
Then he picked up a knife
and stabbed into the serpent's body,
so that it would not ache or sting.

Likewise, part of a Middle Dutch charm against *vyc* (an ulcerous condition often associated with worms) runs:²⁰⁷

Dits om den vyc te slaen in den vinger of elder. Sech dese worde:
Die go[e]de sent Job, hi lach in de woude doot. Doe quamen die
wormen, si aten sijn vleesch van den beene, si soghen sijn bloet, si
ne daden hem gheen goet. 3. wasser wit, .3. wasser zwart, .3.
wasser roet. God ende die sente Job sla dese .9. vike alle ter doot.
In de name des svaders ende des soens ende des helich gheest.²⁰⁸

This is to slay the *vyc* in the finger[s] or elsewhere. Say these words:
the good saint Job, he lay dead in the woods. Then the worms

²⁰⁶ No. 1035 in Linderholm 1917-1940: 446.

²⁰⁷ For a discussion of *vyc* in Dutch incantations, see Braekman 1997: 90–92. The *Middelnederlandsch Woordenboek* defines *vige* as 'Naam van een ziekelijken uitwas of gezwel'. See footnote 173 for a discussion of the cognate Old English word *fic* and its relation to the 'Nine Herbs Charm'.

²⁰⁸ Braekman 1997: 91.

came. They ate his flesh off the bone; they sucked his blood; they did him no good. Three were white; three were black; three were red. God and St Job, strike these nine *vike* all to death. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The above examples corroborate that the 'Nine Herbs Charm' engages with a broader background of incantatory formulas. 'Wyr̥m com snican' parallels 'D]oe quamen die wormen'; 'ða genam Woden VIII wuldortanas, sloh ða þa næddran' is similar to 'Då tog han upp en knif och stack I ormens lif'. Likewise, the English charm praises *Woden* for a similar feat as the Dutch incantation assigns to St Job: 'sla dese .9. vike alle ter doot'.²⁰⁹

One more circumstance suggests the 'Nine Herbs Charm' is not a remnant of a stanzaic composition. Even if the incantation is poetic, it is not a poem in the modern sense of the word. It is more like the script for a dramatic performance. In a famous passage in *Hamlet*, Ophelia describes the virtues of several herbs she is holding in her hands:

There's rosemary, that's for remembrance; pray,
love, remember: and there is pansies. That's for thoughts.

[...]

There's fennel for you, and columbines: there's rue
for you; and here's some for me: we may call it
herb-grace o' Sundays: O you must wear your rue with
a difference. There's a daisy: I would give you
some violets, but they withered all when my father
died: they say he made a good end.²¹⁰

Shakespeare did not base his monologues on Old English incantations. Nevertheless, it is evident this section thematically resembles the 'Nine

²⁰⁹ Also see Ohrt 1927: 5–9.

²¹⁰ *Hamlet* 4.5 3056–60. The cited text is from the *Second Quarto of Hamlet*, edited in Greenblatt et al. 2016.

Herbs Charm'. Ophelia considers several medicinal plants. She clarifies their correct methods of application ('O you must wear your rue with a difference'); lists their therapeutic properties ('that's for remembrance'); and expands on their botanical labels ('we may call it herb-grace o' Sundays').

Scholars have commonly approached the 'Nine Herbs Charm' as a text whose stanza distinctions have become obscure through a complex combination of oral permutations, textual amalgamations, Christian revisions, and scribal guesswork (hypotheses 7 and 8).²¹¹ Supposedly, this tampering introduced inconsistencies: the charmer is made to exclaim 'These nine goads against nine poisons' before he or she has mentioned all ingredients (hypothesis 9). Ophelia's monologue shows such views are superfluous.²¹² '[T]here's fennel for you' and '[t]here's a daisy' are statements that refer to physical plants, used as stage props, not plants Ophelia has mentioned previously. The performer of the 'Nine Herbs Charm' is told to 'sing the charm over each herb' and the poem's invocation of '[t]hese nine' thus also addresses real plants, all of which are supposedly in reach at the time the words need to be spoken. Reading the text as an interactive script reveals the 'Nine Herbs Charm' is perhaps not as corrupt as previous commentators have suggested. The poem may be based on an earlier text or texts, but it is not necessarily an incomplete version of a once intact stanzaic composition.

²¹¹ Storms 1948: 192.

²¹² Also see Pettit 2001b: 111.

Is the 'Nine Herbs Charm' a 'Germanic' Poem?

Researchers have often typified the 'Nine Herbs Charm' as 'Germanic'. What this adjective means is not always clear. As the *OED* shows, it can have a linguistic meaning: 'The branch of the Indo-European language family that includes English, German, Dutch, Frisian, and the Scandinavian languages; spec. the ancient unrecorded language from which these developed'.²¹³ The same dictionary shows the word can have a cultural significance, too: 'Of or relating to the peoples of ancient northern and western Europe who spoke Germanic [...] or their descendants'.²¹⁴ In Old English studies, the second sense of the word connotes archaism and pre-Christian worship. It also implies orality and is unhelpfully bound up with longstanding misconceptions about literary and cultural purity. Modern scholars often attempt to restrict their usage to the first sense. Interpretations of the 'Nine Herbs Charm' take their root in nineteenth-century discussions and regularly use the word in the second. As one scholar claimed as recently as 2000: 'With overtly pagan elements, *Nine Herbs* has a native Germanic core'.²¹⁵

Charles Singer's essay *Early English Magic and Medicine* from 1928 illustrates how Germano-centric views have influenced historical interpretations of the 'Nine Herbs Charm'. A section on 'Native Teutonic magic and Herb-Lore' — clearly inspired by the Old English text — reads as follows:

²¹³ *OED* s.v. 3b 'Germanic'.

²¹⁴ *OED* s.v. 2a 'Germanic'.

²¹⁵ See Glosecki 2000: 94. Storms writes: 'The best and most conclusive criterion at our disposal to prove the Old English origin of a particular charm is the form of the charm itself. If we find a well-developed vernacular formula whose contents do not point to a foreign source, we can be certain that it is a true Germanic charm'. Storms 1948: 118.

Native Teutonic magical material may be distinguished from imported elements of Classical, Ecclesiastical, or Salernitan origin by the presence of four characteristic elements: the doctrine of *specific venoms*, the doctrine of *the nines*, the doctrine of *the worm* as the cause of disease, and lastly the doctrine of *the elf-shot*.

We call such material 'Native Teutonic,' but it might more fitly be termed Indo-Germanic, since these doctrines are to be found among all Indo-Germanic peoples and are encountered even in the Vedas. Yet when we meet these four doctrines in passages of English origin without classical or Celtic elements and especially when combined with references to Teutonic gods or customs, the material may with reasonable certainty be regarded as having been brought by the Anglo-Saxon tribes from their Continental home.²¹⁶

Researchers of medieval literature and medicine have presently abandoned nearly all of these propositions.²¹⁷ Commonly rejected ideas are as follows:

- 'Teutonic' and 'Germanic' are fitting ethnolinguistic labels that help to separate 'native' from 'non-native' incantations.²¹⁸
- Germanic tribes upheld rigid 'doctrines' regarding the causes of disease.²¹⁹
- 'Venoms' and 'shot' appear in Germanic and Vedic charms because they originated in Indo-European disease lore.²²⁰

²¹⁶ Singer 1928a: 149. This same section was later slightly revised and republished in Singer and Grattan 1952: 53.

²¹⁷ For a discussion of the difficulty of dating charms, see Abernethy 1983: 1–5.

²¹⁸ For misconceptions regarding the 'nationality' of medieval incantatory literature, see Eichner and Nedoma 2000; Schumann 1999.

²¹⁹ 'Doctrine' connotes the tenets of religious groups and political parties. Historical beliefs about the aetiologies of ailments are often multiform and malleable.

²²⁰ See, for instance, the international prevalence of 'shot' as discussed in Honko 1959.

One of Singer's views, however, has endured to the present day: a charm which mentions *Woden* — in other contexts a pagan god — should be interpreted as the product of a pre-Christian and 'Germanic' literary culture.²²¹ Without context, this argument may appear compelling: West Germanic speakers who venerated *Woden* crossed the Channel during the fifth century.²²² Speakers of Old Norse who worshipped *Óðinn* first raided and then settled in Britain during the ninth and tenth.²²³ A charm that reveres a supreme pre-Christian deity might have originated among either of these groups.

However, when we take the context of the 'Nine Herbs Charm' into account, the argument becomes more problematic. *Lacnunga* is a product of the tenth or eleventh century. By then, early medieval England had been Christian for generations. Book production was predominantly a monastic occupation, and copyists generally had an advanced understanding of religious scripture.²²⁴ The discrepancy between the date of the conversion and the transcription of the 'Nine Herbs Charm' requires an explanation. Singer's answer — now rejected²²⁵ — was 'monastic stupidity':

the tolerance of monastic scholarship doubtless accepted elements of classical Paganism, but can hardly have welcomed openly Pagan spells invoking the Northern gods and involving Northern mythology. Invocations of these must have been copied [...] with blank misunderstanding.²²⁶

²²¹ See Glosecki 2000: 94.

²²² See Shaw 2002; Meaney 1966; Ryan 1963.

²²³ For a succinct, recent overview of the connection between *Óðinn* and *Woden*, see Hultgård 2007.

²²⁴ *Woden* does appear in royal genealogies from early medieval England. Here, he appears as an ancestral figure (sometimes alongside biblical patriarchs). This material influences how a tenth or eleventh-century English audience may have interpreted the name *Woden*, even though, as this thesis will argue in the next section, the appearance of the name in the 'Nine Herbs Charm' probably reflects the vernacularisation of a Mercurial figure from late antiquity. The complexities of the genealogical material are discussed with references in Shaw 2002: 97-104. Also see footnote 237.

²²⁵ See, specifically, Talbot 1970: 73; Van Arsdall 2005, 2008.

²²⁶ Singer and Grattan 1952: 16.

Later scholars have argued the opposite: in 1980, John Niles objected to ‘Diehard neo-pagans’ reading ‘heathen mysteries’ where there were none. Concerning ‘Æcerbot’ (another Old English charm with reputed pre-Christian roots²²⁷), he said: ‘Scholars might do it less violence if they accept it at its face value, as an expression of the piety and anxiety of eleventh-century Christian Englishmen’.²²⁸

On rare occasions, however, unorthodox texts did slip through the cracks. A ninth-century manuscript from the monastery of Fulda (central Germany) preserves the now-famous Merseburg Incantations. One of these describes several Germanic figures in the process of curing a horse’s leg:

thu biguol en sinthgunt, sunna era suister;
thu biguol en friia, uolla era suister;
thu biguol en uuodan, so he uuola conda.

So, *Sinthgunt* enchanted it, *Sunna*’s sister;
So, *Friia* enchanted it, *Uolla*’s sister;
So, *UUodan* enchanted it, as he well could.²²⁹

A Latin incantation from a century later — based on a classical prototype — summons Asclepius, the Greek and Roman god of medicine, and Terra Mater. A marginal annotation explains: ‘Quod hic sequitur, non valet, sed pro hoc dicatur Pater noster et Credo’.²³⁰

Initially, it may seem as if the survival of some ‘unorthodox’ charms in medieval manuscripts helps to explain why the ‘Nine Herbs Charm’

²²⁷ This thesis disagrees with the view that ‘Æcerbot’ recalls pre-Christian beliefs. See ‘The *Erce* Enigma’ (page 313).

²²⁸ Niles 1980: 55. Also see Abernethy 1983: 11.

²²⁹ Braune, Helm, and Ebbinghaus 1994: 89.

²³⁰ Ohrt 1929: 7. Latin prayers to Terra Mater are more common in early medieval medicine. See Gesztelyi 1981: 453–454; McEnerney 1983.

reveres Christ and *Woden*. In truth, such sources undermine this proposition. The medieval record preserves only very few pre-Christian charms (this in contrast to a prodigious number of Christian ones). West Germanic formulas which mention pre-Christian *and* Christian figures are almost non-existent, aside from those that summon the latter to defeat the former.²³¹ We possess charms that invoke pagan figures;²³² charms that invoke Christian figures to exterminate pagan figures;²³³ charms that invoke Christian figures *instead* of pagan figures;²³⁴ but not charms that invoke Christian *and* pagan figures.

Furthermore, 'unorthodox' incantations are often suggestive of abnormal transmission processes: they appear on manuscript flyleaves or artefacts, and they are almost always products of a single individual, writing in private. Such exceptions do not apply to the 'Nine Herbs Charm'. A professional scribe revised the text after it was copied.²³⁵ It also appears in the middle of the main text of a much-annotated monastic medicine book. 'Stupidity', backsliding, or scribal oversight are all unpersuasive explanations for the charm's reputed syncretism. We need to consider an alternative solution.

Woden as an *Interpretatio Germanica*

In 1860, the *Spectator* reported a sensational literary discovery: 'the well-known plays and poems were not by William Shakespeare, but by another person of the same name!'²³⁶ This was intended as a joke. Nevertheless, a

²³¹ For instance, the fourteenth-century 'Münchner Nachtsegen' summons entities such as 'daz heylige sancte spiritus' to repel a character called *Wutan*. Schulz 2000b: 153.

²³² Hall 2009; Mees 2013.

²³³ See footnote 231.

²³⁴ The 'Second Merseburg Charm' has numerous later Christian analogues. See Ködderitzsch 1974.

²³⁵ Storms 1948: 191.

²³⁶ 'The "New Planet" and Its Discoverers' 1860: 38.

similar argument helps to clarify the identity of *Woden* in the ‘Nine Herbs Charm’. In early medieval England, the name *Woden* was not only used to signify a nebulous deity from an obsolete pantheon. It also functioned as a vernacular translation, a so-called *interpretatio Germanica*, for classical theonyms. *Woden* was often used as a synonym for ‘Mercury’ and ‘Hermes’.²³⁷

Scholars have generally not considered the idea that the charm’s *Woden* represents a classical figure.²³⁸ Most have agreed with Singer and endorsed the alluring but cyclical argument that the text must be ‘Germanic’ *because* it refers to *Woden*.²³⁹ In this regard, they have avoided or even suppressed the fact that the ‘Nine Herbs Charm’ contains a significant number of overt and covert references to classical themes and Latin phraseology. For instance, the text states the universe consists of ‘VII worulde’.²⁴⁰ This implies the influence of Mediterranean astronomy: classical astrologers assumed the universe comprised seven spheres.²⁴¹ Nevertheless, Holthausen asked ‘Warum 7 Welten? [...] Der Dichter der *Völuspá* kennt neun Welten’ (why seven worlds? The poet of *Völuspá* knows nine worlds).²⁴² Branston went further in his wish for the ‘Nine Herbs Charm’ to be Germanic. He submitted — without offering concrete evidence — that the incantation mentions only seven worlds because ‘our forefathers did not believe in Vanaheim (the world of the Vanir) and Muspellzheimr (the home of the Destroyers of the World)’.²⁴³

This mindset is impractical. The charm includes numerous expressions that are characteristic of classical scientific and botanical writings. For instance, it divides *Attorlaðe* into ‘greater’ and ‘lesser’

²³⁷ For more on the use of the name *Woden* as a vernacular translation for foreign deities, see Bremmer 1989: 415–416; Collitz 1924; Schjødt 2019; Battista 2003.

²³⁸ Exceptions are North 1997: 85–88; Shaw 2002: 156–160.

²³⁹ Hoops 1889: 63–64.

²⁴⁰ Line 39.

²⁴¹ See Singer and Grattan 1952: 155. They do go on to conclude that ‘this is an intrusive idea in a Northern Pagan setting’.

²⁴² Holthausen 1934: 183; Pettit 2001b: 124.

²⁴³ Branston 1957: 169.

varieties.²⁴⁴ Such phraseology mirrors the habit of Latin herbals to envision major and minor species. ‘Fille’ and ‘finule’ are borrowed plant names.²⁴⁵ The first is related to the modern English ‘chervil’ but can mean Breckland thyme.²⁴⁶ It ultimately derives from Ancient Greek *χαίρέφυλλον* (*chairephyllon*), which compounds ‘joy’ and ‘leaf’. *Finule* relates to *faeniculum*, ‘fennel’, a derivative of *faenum*, ‘hay’. Incidentally, the anonymous lyricist of *Lenten is come with love to toune* (c. 1350) also noticed that the sounds of these plants complement one another: ‘Þe lillie is lossom to seo, þe fenyl & þe fille’.²⁴⁷

More significantly, the ‘Nine Herbs Charm’ versifies the idiom of Latin plant and drug treatises. A line such as ‘Stune hætte þeos wyrt, heo on stane geweoƿ’ (*Stune* this herb is called, it grew on stone) echoes the language of medieval herbals. The *Old English Herbarium* says: ‘Ðeos wyrt þe man *artemesiam* 7 oðrum naman mucgwyrt nemneð bið cenned on stanigum stowum 7 on sandigum’ (This herb that people call *artemesiam* and with another name call mugwort is found in stony places and in sandy ones).²⁴⁸ The ‘Nine Herbs Charm’ endows plants with majestic titles; medieval writings about medicinal plants often do the same. The incantation declares that *Wegbrade* is ‘wyrta modor’ while *Mycgwyrt* is *Una* and ‘yldost wyrta’. ‘Una’ is the feminine Latin cardinal for ‘one’ (the relative ordinal is *prima*), which suggests *Mycgwyrt* is the primordial *prima donna* of plants. Meanwhile, Odo Magdunensis (fl. 1065) explained in the *Macer Floridus*, a long Latin poem about horticulture, that *artemisias* is the *mater herbarum*. A fifteenth-century treatise declares about madder: ‘hec herba est regina herbarum’.²⁴⁹

Likewise, the recursive line ‘Ðu miht wið III and wið XXX’ emulates the habit of classical drug treatises to enumerate the ‘virtues’ (Old English

²⁴⁴ Lines 21–22.

²⁴⁵ See Hoops 1889: 63. Their form suggests they are early loans.

²⁴⁶ See *Dictionary of Old English Plant Names* 2007–2009, s.v. ‘fille noun, f., n-decl., 8 occ.’.

²⁴⁷ Cited in *MED*, s.v. ‘fille n.(2)’.

²⁴⁸ 11.0 in De Vriend 1984: 54.

²⁴⁹ Lines 3, 7. Choulant 1832: 28; Sigerist 1936: 57. Also see Brévar 2008: 9.

miht, Latin *virtutes*) of specific ingredients. It resembles phrases such as ‘Herba vettonica virtutes habet XLVI’ (the herb betony has forty-six virtues) and ‘Herba mandragora masculina virtutes habet sex’ (the masculine mandrake herb has six virtues).²⁵⁰ The Old English charm enlivens the phraseology of this otherwise straight-to-the-point tradition with a few literary touches: it splits up the numeral thirty-three and reduplicates the pronoun *wið*. The repetition introduces echoic embellishment. The same stylistic choice highlights the poem’s thematic interest in multiples of three. Instead of using six digits (XXXIII), the composition uses two symmetrical groups of three (‘III’ and ‘XXX’). The line translates directly to ‘you have virtue against three and against thirty’; a freer rendering is ‘you have thirty-three virtues’.²⁵¹

We may now return to our initial query — the identity of *Woden* — and observe that encountering a Mercurial figure in an early English text about potent (magical) herbs is not unusual. The *Old English Herbarium* refers to Mercury several times. It credits him with the discovery of garlic: ‘Ðeos wyrft þe man temolum 7 oðrum naman singrene nemneð þæs þe Omerus sægð ys wyrta beorhtust 7 þæt Mercurius hy findan sceolde’ (This plant is called *temolus* or garlic: Homer said it was the most splendid and that Mercury found it).²⁵² The *Herbarium* also relates about *uerbascus* that ‘þæt Mercurius sceolde lulixe þam ealdormen syllan þa he com to Circean & he na syþþan ænige hyre yfelan weorc ondred’ (Mercury gave that to Lord Ulysses when he met Circe, and he afterwards did not fear any of her evil deeds).²⁵³

Nevertheless, medieval writers did not exclusively use the names ‘Mercury’ or ‘Hermes’ to describe gods from Roman and Greek pantheons. They also used it to denote Hermes Trismegistus, an elusive magical character from classical antiquity. Hermes the ‘Three-times-great’ began

²⁵⁰ Beccaria 1956: 325.

²⁵¹ Cf. Magoun 1947: 36–37.

²⁵² 49.0 in De Vriend 1984: 95.

²⁵³ 73.0 in De Vriend 1984: 114.

his life as one of the many avatars of the Egyptian divinity Thoth (god of wisdom, science, writing, and the moon). However, he soon acquired a reputation outside this context.²⁵⁴ During the Middle Ages, he developed into a gnostic figure, and he became known as an astrologer and medical magician.²⁵⁵ His popularity among renaissance alchemists inspired the still current English expression ‘hermetic seal’.²⁵⁶

The Hermetic Corpus — a varied collection of theosophical, astrological, philosophical, medicinal writings, mostly composed in Ptolemaic Egypt, and dating as far back as the second century — is notoriously incomplete. Enough survives, however, to propose Hermes Trismegistus’ persona inspired the name *Woden* in the ‘Nine Herbs Charm’. The surviving material underscores the figure’s prodigious medical, astrological, and botanical knowledge. *The Holy Book of Hermes to Asclepius*, for instance, offers herbal prescriptions based on relations between plants and zodiacal signs.²⁵⁷ *De virtutibus herbarum* of Thessalus of Tralles (fl. c. 70–95 CE) describes Hermetic revelations about twelve plants that are linked to the twelve signs of the zodiac. It also discusses the magical relationship between seven plants and seven planets. The ‘Nine Herb Charm’ shows a similar thematic interest in numerical lists related to botany and astronomy, because it features ‘VIII wyrta’ and ‘VII worulde’.²⁵⁸ The Old English text establishes a connection between plants and

²⁵⁴ Faivre 1988; Tester 1987: 21.

²⁵⁵ The literature on this subject is extensive. See Heiduk 2007, 2015.

²⁵⁶ Currently, the term is used mostly to describe closed doors and hatches; it originally denoted a secret seal used for airproofing glass tubes. See *OED*, s.v. ‘hermetic, adj. and n.’.

²⁵⁷ Copenhaver 1992: xxxiv; Festugière 1981: 139.

²⁵⁸ Thessalus of Tralles’ text is not traditionally considered a part of the Hermetic Corpus, but it draws on closely related ideas and mentions similar characters. See Scarborough 1991: 155. For studies that discuss the (ultimately Hermetic) relationship between plants and planets in Middle English literature, see Brown 1994; Heather 1943; O’Callaghan 2010; Voigts 2008. In one ninth or tenth-century Arabic text (translated from a lost Greek source), Hermes introduces himself thus: ‘I am the Master of Wonders, who built the seven spheres on top of one another, who seized the beaming sun and the shining moon and planted the tree of light-filled wisdom. He who eats of its fruit will not go hungry but can do without food and drink, he will be spiritual and divine; his knowledge will never be exhausted, and his good deeds will never cease.’ See Ebeling 2007: 49. Also see Vereno 1992: 339.

(heavenly) planetary realms in its description of Chervil and Fennel, when it explains ‘the wise Lord wrought these plants, | holy in the heavens, while he hung | He set and sent them into the seven worlds’.²⁵⁹

Many Hermetic texts envision Hermes as the teacher of Asclepius. In the previous section, we saw the latter sometimes appears in medieval herbal incantations.²⁶⁰ Charms and spells from an earlier period also summon the divine physician’s magical teacher. As Florian Ebeling summarises:

Hermes plays an important role in the Greek magical papyri of Graeco-Roman Egypt. These texts stem largely from the second to the fourth century, though some go back to the first century B.C.E. In them, Hermes is one of the gods called upon for the purpose of carrying out magical practices. The spells and accompanying ritual instructions are intended to assist prophecy, make love charms, harm enemies, protect against injury, and help catch thieves.²⁶¹

We have now surveyed much Latin material from the late classical period. It merits highlighting that not just the phraseology of the ‘Nine Herb Charm’ but also its manuscript has connections to such literature.²⁶² British Library, Harley 585 is a composite codex. Alongside the Old English remedy collection *Lacnunga* (130^r–193^r), it incorporates a collection of late classical herbal and medical writings. These are primarily from the fourth to the sixth centuries and include Pseudo-Apuleius’ *Herbarium* (fols. 1^r–66^v, orig. 5th cent. CE) and Pseudo-Dioscorides’ *De herbis femininis* and *Curae herbarum* (fols. 66^v–101^v, orig. 6th cent.).²⁶³ The same intellectual climate that produced such writings produced texts about Hermes Trismegistus.

²⁵⁹ Lines 36–38.

²⁶⁰ See footnote 230.

²⁶¹ The distinction between the various characters that can be addressed as Hermes is not always clear in these texts. See Ebeling 2007: 24.

²⁶² Bolotina 2016: 93–118.

²⁶³ See Riddle 1981.

Literary evidence from early medieval England presents another essential piece of the puzzle. The ‘Nine Herbs Charm’ is probably not the only early English work in which the Mediterranean magician makes an incognito appearance. Rolf Bremmer has argued the *Prose Solomon and Saturn* in passing refers to Hermes Trismegistus. Here, the figure is credited with the invention of the alphabet (a common attribute) and is called ‘Mercurius se gygand’ (Mercury the giant).²⁶⁴

The suggestion that *Woden* in the ‘Nine Herbs Charm’ is a vernacular avatar of Hermes the ‘Three-times-great’ is persuasive because this fits with the text’s literary context (incantatory magic interested in multiples of three), as well as that of its manuscript (late classical medicine and botany). It also helps resolve the one question that has perplexed most scholars: how can a charm from a monastic manuscript summon both Christ *and* Woden favourably? Compellingly, medieval authors were much more accepting of Hermes Trismegistus (as with Asclepius, some controversy remained) than of the Germanic God *Woden*. Following the end of the early medieval period, Albertus Magnus (1206–1280), Thomas of Yorke (fl. c. 1250), and William of Auvergne (c. 1180–1249) — all influential Christian writers — considered the Mediterranean *magus* an ‘authority’.²⁶⁵

Consequently, it is improbable that the ‘Nine Herbs Charm’ was composed to invoke both the Germanic All-father and the Christian Son of God.²⁶⁶ Just like the *Spectator*’s mysterious namesake of William Shakespeare, the Old English charm’s *Woden* is probably ‘another person of the same name’. This ‘other’ *Woden* was perhaps inspired by Hermes Trismegistus. The latter possessed a reputation as a skilled magical doctor; he was associated with multiples of three and numbered lists of magical plants and planets; he was also frequently portrayed as the teacher of Asclepius, a celebrated mythical physician. Both were

²⁶⁴ Bremmer 1989: 415–419.

²⁶⁵ Porecca 2005; Porreca 2011; Heiduk 2007; Porreca 2000; Heiduk 2006, 2015.

²⁶⁶ Cf. Glosecki 2000: 95.

commonly summoned in various types of incantations during the late classical and early medieval period.²⁶⁷

Literary Background: *Namenzauber* and Verbal Homeopathy

Most people would agree that if a cake recipe requires cinnamon, flour, and butter, it would be counterproductive to send someone to the store with a shopping list that itemises ‘spice’, ‘powder’, and ‘the melting one’. Nevertheless, we encounter this kind of semantic complexity throughout the ‘Nine Herbs Charm’. The verse section uses names such as *Una*, ‘one’, *Stiðe*, ‘resilient’ or ‘potent’, *Wergulu*, ‘liable to do evil’, and *Stune*, ‘batterer’, to refer to herbs which also have more common designations. As Meroney put it, ‘the commonplace ha[s] been deliberately substituted for the rare’.²⁶⁸ This circumstance raises an intriguing question: if the ‘Nine Herbs Charm’ means to heal its patients, why does it obfuscate its remedy?

One explanation is that the Old English document uses *Namenzauber* (name magic), a common technique in classical and medieval magic in which objects, animals, people, or supernatural entities are invoked and controlled through names.²⁶⁹ Early medieval charms use *Namenzauber* in several ways. The short Old High German text known as the *Zürcher Hausbesegnung*, for example, employs what is called a ‘Rumpelstiltskin motif’ to protect a residence against demons.²⁷⁰ It

²⁶⁷ Note this argument specifically pertains to the process which inspired the incorporation of the name *Woden* into the ‘Nine Herbs Charm’, not to the name’s subsequent reception in medical contexts by tenth and eleventh-century audiences.

²⁶⁸ Meroney 1944b: 159.

²⁶⁹ Riess 1897: 194. The classic study on this subject is Nyrop 1887. More recent studies that discuss *Namenzauber* are Daxelmüller 1996; Röhrich 1951.

²⁷⁰ For more on this motif, see Abernethy 1983: 331–333.

unmasks malevolent entities at the door and calls them out for the minor nuisances that they are. The text proceeds in two steps. First, it gives demons an uninspiring, common name. Then, it disempowers them by reminding them they cannot articulate a more difficult, uncommon one:

Uuola uuiht taz tu uueist taz tu uuiht heizist
taz tu ne uueist noch ne chanst cheden ‘chnospinci’.

Wight, you know well that you are called wight,
[and] that you do not know nor are able to pronounce
‘Chnospinci’.²⁷¹

The ‘Nine Herbs Charm’ draws on similar literary techniques. Like the Old High German incantation, it defines its subjects by assigning them tailored names: ‘Una þu hattest’, ‘Stune hætte þeos wyr’t’, ‘Stiðe heo hatte’.²⁷² However, the Old English charm goes further than its German analogue in demonstrating its power over its subjects. The latter uses the indicative and says, ‘Uuola [...] tu uueist taz’ (you know well that). The former uses the imperative and commands: ‘Gemyne ðu’ (you, remember!).²⁷³

Another reason the Old English incantation uses unconventional rather than conventional names relates to the fact that it envisions convalescence as a militaristic conflict. In modern English, health-related issues are still often described using combative rhetoric. We can ‘battle’ cancer, ‘arm ourselves against’ the flu, and ‘fight off’ a cold.²⁷⁴ The ‘Nine Herbs Charm’ takes this ‘animistic’ understanding of disease much further. It consistently characterises pathogens as living organisms: they can fly (‘ðu wiðstonde attre and onflyge’), creep (‘Wyrm com snican’), and roam

²⁷¹ Braune, Helm, and Ebbinghaus 1994: 90.

²⁷² Lines 3, 14, 16.

²⁷³ Line 1.

²⁷⁴ These are strictly anecdotal examples. For linguistic studies on the relationship between diseases and martial rhetoric, see Hauser, Nesse, and Schwarz 2017; Ross 1989; Camus 2009; Ibrahim 2007; Domínguez and Sapiña 2016.

around ('þam laþan ðe geond lond færð').²⁷⁵ Illnesses can also be avenged and thrown out ('wreceð heo wraðan, weorpeð ut attor'), or hewn into nine pieces ('sloh ða þa næddran, þæt heo on VIII tofleaþ').²⁷⁶

In medieval Germanic charms, the names of animate diseases are sometimes based on symptomatic complaints. Thus, a half-German, half-Latin charm from a twelfth-century manuscript claims to work against seven demonic entities called 'Nessia', 'Nagedo', 'Stechedo', 'Troppho', 'Crampho', 'Gigihte', and 'Paralisis' (*Nessia*, gnaw, sting, drip, cramp, gout, paralysis).²⁷⁷ This litany of diseases employs suffixes to convert verbs into nouns: *Nagedo* and *Stechedo* are nominal derivations of *nagan*, 'to gnaw' and *stechan*, 'to sting'.²⁷⁸ As we will see in a moment, the 'Nine Herbs Charm' uses comparable lexical techniques to foreground the positive combative qualities of its ingredients. Working from the premise that disease is a battleground, it relies on the 'identitätsstiftende und -erhaltende Funktion' (identity-forming and identity-maintaining function) of proper names to furnish its curative substances with victorious personalities.²⁷⁹ Perhaps somewhat analogous to the stage names of American wrestlers — for example: 'the Undertaker', 'Bruiser Brody', or 'Jim "The Anvil" Neidhart' — the charm's botanical nomenclature communicates vigour, hardiness, and talent for handling ill-willed adversaries.

The previous sections contextualise the rationale behind the 'Nine Herbs Charm' uses odd names. It does not explain *how* the text arrives at its odd appellations. The first clue regarding the poem's literary approach to selecting and constructing names occurs in the poem's first two lines:

²⁷⁵ Lines 12, 6, 31.

²⁷⁶ Lines 17, 33.

²⁷⁷ Holzmann 2001: 217. In the Old Saxon incantation 'Contra vermes', a disease demon called *Nesso* has 'nigun nessiklinon' (nine *Nesso*-babies). The latter are thematically similar to the English charm's 'nygon wuldorgeflogenum' or 'VIII attrum'. See Weinhold 1897: 25.

²⁷⁸ On the lexicography of these terms, see Riecke 2004: 419; Riecke 2019: 89; Riecke 2016: 118.

²⁷⁹ Wimmer 1995-1996: 373.

Gemyne ðu, mucgwyr̥t, hwæt þu ameldodest
hwæt þu renadest æt Regenmelde.²⁸⁰

Remember, Mugwort, what you reported
What you decreed at Regenmeld.

In the past, researchers have, without definite results, debated what or where, precisely, ‘Regenmeld’ is.²⁸¹ The propositions of previous researchers (a girl’s name, a forgotten mythological event, or an oblique reference to the crucifixion) have been summarised in footnote 129. For our present purpose — the explication of the poem’s mysterious plant names — we will put aside the potential semantic relationships Regenmeld has to concepts outside of the charm and focus on the relationships it maintains with adjacent words. Even if the proper noun’s meaning remains unresolved, its morphology clearly interacts with adjoining phrases. ‘Regenmeld’ composes two elements, *regen-* and *-meld*, and functions as the lexicographical ‘sum’ of the two verbs that precede it. If we reverse engineer the conjugated forms ‘renadest’ and ‘ameldodest’ we retrieve *regnian*, ‘to decree’, and *meldan*, ‘to report’.²⁸²

The charm’s preoccupation with puns and word games seems to have inspired most of its obscure plant names. Lines 14–15 run as follows:

Stune hætte þeos wyr̥t, heo on stane geweox
stond heo wið attre, stunað heo wærce’

Stune this herb is called, it grew on a stone
it stands against poison, it batters evil.²⁸³

²⁸⁰ Lines 1–2.

²⁸¹ See footnote 129; also see footnote 136.

²⁸² For more on this phenomenon in the ‘Nine Herbs Charm’, see Weston 1985: 185; Glosecki 2000: 102; Frank 1972: 209.

²⁸³ Also see Nelson and Dennis 2006: 7.

Tiffany Beechy has described *Stune* as ‘a nonsense word’.²⁸⁴ More likely, it is an adjective related to *stunian*. This is a rare verb, based on an Indo-European word for ‘to thunder’ or ‘to groan’. In Old English, it describes the sounds and movements of violent (natural) phenomena such as waves, storms, and clashing weapons.²⁸⁵ *Stune* may mean ‘batterer’ or ‘crasher’. Given the charm’s fondness for the neologism *wiðstunian*, we may also think of ‘counterstriker’. So-called deverbal adjectives without suffix occur in Old English more often: *gescead*, ‘discreet’ comes from *gesceadan*, ‘to separate’ and *gemun*, ‘mindful’, from *gemunan*, ‘to remember’.²⁸⁶

Stune forms the core of an ingenious rhetorical scheme that combines vowel and consonant substitutions with *anthimeria* (a rhetorical figure whereby words from one part of speech are used as if they belong to another). What starts as a simple sentence about the name of a specific plant — ‘*Stune hætte þeos wyrt*’ — gradually becomes a complicated interrelation of *Stune*’s physical and linguistic properties. As the proper name travels through various lexicographical reconfigurations, it becomes clear *Stune* is a hardy shrub on account of its stony origins (‘*stane*’); that it is good at (with)standing (‘*stond*’) poison; and that it batters (‘*stunað*’) evil.

Whether or not the herb *Stiðe* (‘resilient’ or ‘stiff’ in Old English), which the charm invokes afterwards, is the same as *Stune* is controversial. It seems likely for three reasons. First, *Stiðe* reprises *Stune*’s preoccupation with ‘st’ consonant clusters. Second, it matches the latter’s abilities: *Stiðe* also ‘*wiðstunað [...] attre*’.²⁸⁷ Third, the prose recipe’s order suggests both *Stune* and *Stiðe* describe *lombes cyrse*. This vernacular plant name does not represent one species in the modern sense. Instead, it is a vernacular rendering of three medieval Latin designations with

²⁸⁴ Beechy 2010: 113.

²⁸⁵ See ‘(s)ten-1’ in Pokorny 1959-1969. Also see the verb *stunian* and the noun *gestun* in Bosworth and Toller 2019. *Stune* is not related to modern English *stun*, ‘To deprive of consciousness or of power of motion by a blow’, which entered the language around 1400 and ultimately relates to French *étonner*. See *OED*, s.v. ‘stun, v.’. It is, however, related to dutch *steunen*, which often occurs in the irreversible binomial ‘*kreunen en steunen*’. English approximations are ‘to huff and puff’ or ‘to groan and moan’.

²⁸⁶ Arista 2019: 166.

²⁸⁷ Line 16.

overlapping meanings: *nasturtium*, *thlaspi*, and *bursa pastoris*.²⁸⁸ These terms collectively describe a large group of plants that all taste somewhat like mustard. *Bursa pastoris* or ‘shepherd’s purse’ is an alluring explication for *lombes cyrse* because it has ‘resilient’ slender stems (a quality of *Stiðe*) and a preference for stony soils (a quality of *Stune*). The same plant, which one Middle English book translates as ‘lombeshert’, also repeats the vernacular name’s reference to shepherding.²⁸⁹ Even if *lombes cyrse* is not shepherd’s purse and *Stiðe* is not *Stune*, the adjective remains an appropriate nickname for a medicinal plant with a ‘stiff’ stem, a resilience to inhospitable soils, and a penchant for resisting poison. In Modern English, a ‘stiff’ drink contains much alcohol. In Old and Middle English, a ‘stiff’ concoction is either poisonous or efficacious as a remedy: ‘Ȝenim þisse wurte sæd, ȝemencg to stiþun drenche’.²⁹⁰

If the charm sometimes adds up common verbs to produce uncommon nouns (Regenmeld), it also divides common nouns to create uncommon verbs. We see this in its address to *Wegbrade*:

+ Ond þu, Wegbrade, wyrta modor,
eastan op[e]no, innan mihtigu;
ofer ðy crætu curran, ofer ðy cwene reodan,
ofer ðy bryde bryodedon, ofer þy fearras fnærdon.
Eallum þu þon wiðstode 7 wiðstunedest.
Swa ðu wiðstonde attre 7 onflyge

²⁸⁸ *Dictionary of Old English Plant Names* 2007-2009, s.v. ‘lambes-cærese, noun, f., n-decl., 4 occ.’. Also see Daems 1993: 282. Pliny had written earlier that *thlaspi* could denote two different plants (‘*Thlaspi duorum generum est*’). The first had white flowers (flos albi) a crescent-shaped seed capsule, similar to the shape of a lentil (‘*peltarum specie semine incluso, lenticulae effigie*’). These properties suggest the Roman scholar meant shepherd’s purse. The second was a different plant (‘*Persicon napi vocant*’) with similar remedial properties. See book XXVII, 113 in Mayhoff 1875-1906. The identification of *lombes cyrse* as *nasturtium* derives from the fact that one Old English remedy contains ‘*cersan sædes. sume men hatað lambes cersan*’. Its Latin source refers to ‘*nasturcii semen*’. The Latin and English recipes are edited in the appendix of Doyle 2011: 27.

²⁸⁹ Hunt 1989: 252.

²⁹⁰ Quoted in *MED*, s.v. 2.d ‘stiþ(e adj.)’.

7 þæm laðan þe geond lond fereð.²⁹¹

And you, Waybroad, mother of herbs,
open eastward, virtuous within,
over you carts creaked, over you wives rode,
over you brides cried out, over you bulls snorted.
You withstood and battered against everything then.
So may you withstand poison, and flying disease,
and the foe that roams through the land.

Readers with botanical knowledge will appreciate the appropriateness of this description. As Barbara Pleasant explains in *The Gardener's Weed Book*: 'Broadleaf plantain is well known to most gardeners, especially if there is a damp, compacted place where you often walk. This weed loves to grow in such places and tolerates being stepped on over and over again'.²⁹²

Nevertheless, the cited passage is not just concerned with horticultural accuracy. It also explores the verbal qualities of this 'mother of herbs'. *Wegbrade* has spent most of her existence in the middle of a busy *weg*, or 'road'. The vegetal matriarch has overseen the adventures of many female wayfarers. She has witnessed wives riding along and brides ('bryde') 'crying out' (from Old English *breodian*; compare *weg-brade*). Turned towards the rising sun, she has seen carts creaking in and out of view (*cræt* sometimes means 'sun's chariot' in Old English) and heard the 'snorting' (from *fnæran*) of 'bulls' (*fearras*) travelling (*faran*) up and down the thoroughfare. Plantain (from Latin *plantago*, after *planta*, 'footsole') has resisted the abuse of all this footfall; she has 'withstood' being stepped on. Now, she has built up an impressive reputation for defying rowdy travellers and is well-equipped to handle 'the foe that roams through the land'.

²⁹¹ Lines 7–13.

²⁹² Pleasant 1996: 111.

Wergulu is another intriguing name. Like *Stune*, it is not attested elsewhere. Most scholars interpret it as a weak form of the adjective **wergol*.²⁹³ The potential prevalence of this word is evidenced by an attested derivative: *weargolness*, ‘malediction’. The spelling of *Wergulu*’s ending is unusual but not impossible: words which end in *-ol* often have variants which end in *-ul*. Such suffixes furnish a verbal stem with the meaning ‘liable to’.²⁹⁴ *Cwidol* means ‘talkative’ (from *cwidian*, ‘to say’); *slapol* means ‘addicted to sleep’ (from *slapan*, ‘to sleep’). Since *wergan* can mean ‘to curse’, ‘to do evil’, or ‘to punish’, **wergol* most likely approximates ‘malevolent’, ‘vengeful’, or ‘liable to do harm’. The poem’s direct context corroborates that *Wergulu* is an anti-venom: a seal reputedly brought its ‘ondan attres opres’ (malice of other poison) over the ridge of the sea ‘to bote’ (as a cure). The recipe’s order of ingredients suggests *Wergulu* is the nickname of the nettle. This seems appropriate:²⁹⁵ whoever has had the misfortune of falling into a nettle patch will appreciate the characterisation of these plants’ serrated leaves as ‘vengeful’ and ‘malevolent’.

The poem further indulges in its predilection for etymological *jeux de mots* with the names *Mægðe* and *Attorlaðe*. The first can be explicated straightforwardly: *Mægðe*, ‘mayweed’, is a potent herb because it relates to *magan*, ‘to be strong, to prevail’.²⁹⁶ The twelfth-century herbal treatise *Liber iste sive Platearii* provides a parallel to this pun. It clarifies *vicetoxicum* carries this name because it conquers (*vincit*) poison (*toxicum*).²⁹⁷

²⁹³ Bradley 1904: 145; Pettit 2001a: 268.

²⁹⁴ Aschenbrenner 2014: 14.

²⁹⁵ If we abandon the order of the recipe, two other etymologies are possible. The first understands *wergulu* as a pun on *malum*, ‘evil’ but also ‘apple’. Another possibility is that *wergulu* is shepherd’s purse (one possible translation for *lombes cyrse*). *Wearg* means ‘vile’ or ‘evil’; *hulu* means ‘pod’ or ‘husk’. In this sense, the seeds of shepherd’s purse would be astringent or ‘vile’ pods. These etymologies do not explain why *Wergulu* is poisonous, as suggested by the context. Other etymologies are proposed in Morris 1968: 118–121; Wood 1926: 220.

²⁹⁶ Also see Glosecki 2000: 102; Nelson 1989: 61.

²⁹⁷ Stannard 1999: 193.

Attorlaðe, another antagonist to venom, requires more explanation. Unlike *Una*, *Wergulu*, and *Stune*, it commonly occurs in Old English sources. Yet, the name denotes several very different plant species. In the ‘Nine Herbs Charm’, *Attorlaðe* comes in two varieties, a greater and lesser one: ‘Attorlaðe, seo læsse ða maran, seo mare þa læssan, oððæt him beigra bot sy’.²⁹⁸ Previous studies do not account for this circumstance and, therefore, misidentify the herb as betony, fumitory, corydalis, blind nettle, or cockspur’s grass.²⁹⁹ This chapter argues the most plausible candidates for ‘greater’ and ‘lesser’ *Attorlaðe* are deadly nightshade and black nightshade (*Atropa belladonna* and *Solanum nigrum*). Both are in Middle English manuscripts translated as *morella*: ‘[A]ttorloth’ is ordinary ‘morella’; ‘attorlothe berry’ is ‘morella minor’.³⁰⁰ One Middle English remedy book advises combining both plants in similar manner to the Old English charm: ‘Take morell, bothe þe more and þe lesse [...] for it ys good for all maner off hoot sorys’.³⁰¹

One contemporary word list glosses *attorlaðe* as *venenifuga*.³⁰² The relevance of this observation becomes apparent as soon as we take a closer look at how the plant is introduced in the charm:

þeos mæg wið attre, heo mæg wið onflyge,
 heo mæg wið ða[m] laþan ðe geond lond fereþ.
 Fleoh þu nu, Attorlaðe, seo læsse ða maran.³⁰³

This has power against poison; it has power against flying disease.
 It has power against the foe that roams through the land.
 Now you, Lesser Nightshade, put greater (poisons) to flight.

²⁹⁸ Lines 21–22.

²⁹⁹ Betony: Grendon 1909: 193; Banham 2009: 189. Fumitory, corydalis: Cameron 1992. Blind nettle: Cockayne 1866: 35. Cockspur’s grass: Storms 1948: 320.

³⁰⁰ Hunt 1989: 181.

³⁰¹ Quoted in *MED*, s.v. ‘morel n.(1)’.

³⁰² *Dictionary of Old English Plant Names* 2007–2009, s.v. ‘ätor-läþe, noun, f., n-decl., 44 occ.’. Also see Sauer and Krischke 2004: 183; Sauer 2017.

³⁰³ Lines 19–21a.

This passage again contains several puns. Most straightforward is that the plant *attorlaðe* 'loaths' venom, and, therefore, works well 'wið attre'. More intricate is the idea that the plant can 'put to flight' (*fleohan*) noxious 'flying disease' (*onflyge*).

The Latin gloss *venenifuga*, however, presents another level of complexity. *Fuga* and *fleoh* are perfect translations. So are *attor* and *veneni*. The entire phrase 'Fleoh þu nu, attorlaðe' reiterates the plant's Latin and Old English names. What is more, the passage recalls a pre-existing incantatory tradition. A charm in the *Physica Plinii Sangallensis* (a Pseudo-Plinian compilation from the late-antique/ early medieval period) runs as follows:

Coli doloris praecantatio. Corydali cor circa ventrem alligato lino aut licio et sanguine eius ventrem hominis perungue et dic: 'Fuge, coli dolor. Corydalus te fugat!'³⁰⁴

Incantation against colon pain. Bind the heart of a crested lark with a cord or a leash around the belly of the patient, rub his belly with its blood and say: 'Flee, colon pain, the crested lark puts you to flight!'

Like the *Attorlaðe* passage in the 'Nine Herbs Charm', this Latin incantation uses an imperative form of the verb *fugare*, 'to put to flight, to chase away' and supplements it with a linguistic interrelation of the names for cures and ailments. In this instance, however, it is not *Attorlaðe* that loaths *attor*. Instead, the *cor* of a *corydalis* vanquishes *coli dolor(is)*. Literary scholars call such wordplay paronomasia;³⁰⁵ in magical or medical contexts, as is the case here, folklorists sometimes prefer 'verbal homeopathy'.³⁰⁶

³⁰⁴ No 23. in Önnersfors 1985: 239.

³⁰⁵ See Weston 1985: 185; Glosecki 2000: 102; Frank 1972: 209.

³⁰⁶ McCartney 1927.

Consequently, obscure appellations such as *Una*, *Stiðe*, *Wergulu*, *Stune*, or *Attorlaðe* do not obfuscate the remedy.³⁰⁷ Instead, they *are* the remedy. In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the female protagonist, frustrated with the fact that her lover is from the wrong family, asks 'What's in a name? That which we call a rose | By any other name would smell as sweet?'³⁰⁸ Juliet implies names are arbitrary and that they do not influence a person's character: 'Tis but thy name that is my enemy; Thou art thyself, though not a Montague'.³⁰⁹ In the 'Nine Herbs Charm', however, we encounter almost precisely the opposite idea. According to the view of the person(s) who composed the document, a rose with another name would *not* smell as sweet.

Conclusion

Researchers have often interpreted the 'Nine Herbs Charm' as a pagan relic that features obscure cultic words, fragmented stanzas, and a 'Germanic' core. Because it invokes Christ and *Woden*, commentators have contended the charm is an example of religious syncretism. This chapter shows these assumptions are either improbable or incorrect. The charm's reputedly cultic expressions (*Una*, *Regenmeld*, *Wergulu*) often stem from etymological word games. These are learned in nature and combine several ideas from late antique and early medieval medicine. The 'Nine Herbs Charm' combines *Namenzauber*, hermetic astrology, and verbal homeopathy. It also versifies the jargon of late antique herbal treatises and celebrates the polysemy of learned botanical nomenclature.

The term Germanic is vague and has meant different things to different scholars over time. Even in its most narrow, linguistic sense, this

³⁰⁷ For an explanation of *Una*, see the discussion associated with footnotes 248–249.

³⁰⁸ 2.2 47–8, edited in Greenblatt, et al. 2016.

³⁰⁹ 2.2 43–4.

label does not capture the essence of ‘Nine Herbs Charm’. The text relies on bilingual puns, incorporates universal incantatory formulas, adheres to cosmological ideas that originated in the Mediterranean, and bases much of its supposedly pre-Christian Germanic language on classical horticultural learning. The charm’s *Woden*, who most scholars have identified as the head of the Germanic pantheon, was probably inspired by Hermes Trismegistus, a classical magician known for his botanical and medical prowess. This proposition offers another layer of complexity to the potential reception of this name in early medieval England.³¹⁰

The medieval text poses two unconventional challenges. First, it demands that we combine two research methodologies that appear somewhat conflicting. Some of the charm’s expressions require the rigorous application of linguistic principles. They necessitate we comprehend and follow the grammatical rules of specific suffixes and word-formation processes. Nevertheless, the charm itself explores and celebrates folk etymologies that modern linguistic methods would encourage us to reject. To understand the text, we need to assign significance to current *and* medieval approaches to historical linguistics.

The second challenge is that we acknowledge the charm in some ways denies explication. Most scholars have assumed its odd expressions and obscure language preserve oblique references to long-forgotten legends and beliefs. Counterintuitively, many of the charm’s words and phrases are purposefully and intentionally confounding. They are attempts at ‘verbal homeopathy’ — efforts to interweave the conceptual and the physical world, so that linguistic representations of cures can become empowered to conquer real manifestations of illness. If the ‘Nine Herbs Charm’ works magic with word puzzles, accurate translations preserve rather than resolve its ambiguities.

³¹⁰ See notes 224, 237, 267.

2. Febrile Dreams and Chilling Nightmares: ‘Against a Dwarf’

Introduction

In 1903, Christopher Wordsworth (grandnephew of the famous poet laureate) published a poetic but confusing translation of the charm now often called ‘Against a Dwarf’.³¹¹ He assumed it narrated the intrusion of a ‘spider man’.³¹² The interloper enters with his hands on his hamstrings and later floats away with the patient ‘like a boat’. Fortunately, the ‘wild thing’s sister’ — that is, the sibling of the spider man — can intervene and say her piece: ‘never more this thing shall harm | Him who gets this charm’.³¹³ Wordsworth assumed ‘Against a Dwarf’ cured warts, but he inconsistently inferred in a footnote that ‘the cause of the headache was considered to be the presence of a spider creeping through the ear’.³¹⁴

This chapter clarifies why Wordsworth related warts to a ‘spider man’ that is holding the back of his thighs and causing ear-infestations. Even if these images are diverting and evocative, they reflect lexicographical misunderstandings. The discussion presented below argues ‘Against a Dwarf’ describes a nightmarish manifestation that subdues its victim with horse tack. The complete text of the Old English charm is as follows:

³¹¹ Other titles are ‘Metrical Charm 3’ (Dobbie), ‘Wið Dweorh’ (opening phrase in Old English), ‘Gegen Geschwülst’ (Wülker), ‘Against a Warty Eruption’ (Robinson).

³¹² Wordsworth 1903: 412.

³¹³ Wordsworth 1903: 412.

³¹⁴ He used Cockayne’s edition, which misreads *dweorh*, ‘dwarf’ as *weorh*, an otherwise unattested word which this publication decoded as ‘warty eruption’. Wordsworth 1903: 412. See footnote 323.

+ Wið dweorh man sceal niman VII lytle oflætan, swylce man mid ofrað, 7 wri[t]jan þas naman on ælcra oflætan: Maximian(us), Malchus, Iohannes, Martimianus, Dionisius, Constantinus, Serafion. Þænne eft þ(æt) galdor, þ(æt) her æfter cweð, man sceal singan, ærest on þ(æt) wynstre eare, þænne on þæt swiðre eare, þænne [b]ufan þæs mannes moldan; 7 ga þænne an mædenman to 7 ho hit on his sweoran, 7 do man swa þry dagas; hi(m) bið sona sel.

Her com in gangan, in spidenwiht.

Hæfde hi(m) his haman on handa, cwæð þ(æt) þu his hæncgest wære.

Leg[d]e þe his teage an sweoran. Ongunnan hi(m) of þæm lande liþan.

Sona swa hy of þæm lande coman, þa ongunnan hi(m) ða liþu colian.

Þa co(m) in gangan dweores sweostar.

þa g(e)ændade heo 7 aðas swor

ðæt næfre þis ðæ(m) adlegan derian ne moste,

ne þæm þe þis galdor begytan mihte,

oððe þe þis galdor ongalan cuþe. Am(en). Fiað.³¹⁵

Against [a] dwarf: one must take seven small wafers such as those with which one offers mass, and write these names on each wafer: Maximianus, Malchus, Johannes, Martinianus, Dionysius,

³¹⁵ Entry 'LXXXVI' in Pettit 2001a: 72–75. Other editions are Grendon 1909: 166–167; Dobbie 1942: 121–122; Storms 1948: 166–167; Stuart 1973: 637–652; Sandmann 1975: 52–53; Abernethy 1983: 27–29 Bjork 2014: 202–203. Superseded editions are as follows: Schlutter 1907b: 257; Cockayne 1866: 42; Wülcker and Grein 1883: 326; Robinson 1885: 158; Brooke 1892: 473. The medieval text appears on fols. 167^r–167^v of London, British Library, Harley 585.

Constantinus, Seraphion. Next, the charm provided hereafter should be sung, first in the left ear, then in the right ear, then above the man's head. And then a virgin should approach and hang it [the wafers made into a necklace] on his neck, and one must do so for three days. He will soon be better.

Here entered an *inspiden* being [the dwarf].³¹⁶

He had his horse collar in his hand; said that you [the patient] were his steed.

He laid his harness on your neck; they [the dwarf and the steed] then began to travel from the land.

As soon as they had come from the land his limbs [of the patient] began to cool.

Then, the sister of the beast [the steed] entered.

She then interceded and swore oaths,³¹⁷

that this never should afflict the patient
or the one who might obtain this charm
or who knows how to chant this charm.

Amen, let it be so.

The charm contains several difficult words and phrases. The fact that *inspiden* is possibly an untranslatable expression, as well as that the relationships between the patient (the *adlega*), the *sweostar*, the *wiht*, and the *deor* are not immediately apparent, has sent scholars down interesting, but ultimately tenuous interpretative routes. Wordsworth's headache-inspiring spiderman theorem is just one of many explanations that have

³¹⁶ See footnotes 375–383 for the argument that *inspiden* means 'scorched within', or, figuratively, 'wretched'. This argument follows Hutcheson 2012.

³¹⁷ Another common translation for 'þa g(e)ændade heo' is 'then she put an end to it'. This option is less plausible because *ge-endian* in the sense 'to cease, to finish' ordinarily needs an object. See Klaeber 1921.

been put forward over the years.³¹⁸ Others have involved reconstructing lost Germanic gods (emending *deores* to *Eares*);³¹⁹ suggesting that ‘the sister of the beast’ is the sister of the dwarf (changing *deores* to *dweores*);³²⁰ postulating that early English individuals associated spiders with dwarfs and carried around amulets made from the former to ward off the latter (reading *inspiden* as *in spider*);³²¹ as well as hypothesising that early medieval individuals envisioned night terrors as corpses ‘swathed in [...] grave-clothes’ (reading *inspiden* as *inwiðen*).³²²

Because ‘Against a Dwarf’ has been emended so often to support specific interpretations, it is challenging to synthesise the findings of previous enquiries. Commentators have not always discussed the same text. An additional circumstance that makes it hard to formulate a clear summary of earlier research is that the charm has not always been edited competently. In 1866, Cockayne mistranscribed *dweorh*, ‘dwarf’, as *weorh*, which he translated as ‘warty eruption’. As far as we know, **weorh* means nothing in Old English. Nevertheless, Cockayne misled several later commentators and editors, including Wordsworth, into supposing the text treated a skin problem.³²³ Moreover, the fourth line of the incantation — given as ‘*þa ongunnan hi(m) ða liþu colian*’ above — has in some previous editions been misrendered as ‘*þa ongunnan him ðah þa colian*’ (italics not in original).³²⁴

³¹⁸ William Clarke Robinson seems to have assumed the text might genuinely work. He prefaced his edition and translation of the poem with the observation that ‘Charms and magic cures for warts are still employed, and I believe effectually’. He alleged: ‘I have known the pains of burns put away by the strange incantations of an old woman; and I have seen the blood from a great hook-thrust in the leg of a shearer stopped by some equally incomprehensible means’. See Robinson 1885: 158.

³¹⁹ Grattan 1927: 5; Hutcheson 2012: 189.

³²⁰ First suggested in Binz 1916: 163; accepted and popularised in Dobbie 1942: 212.

³²¹ Brie 1906: 23; Meaney 1981: 16–17. For a discussion and rejection of this emendation, see Cavell 2018: 22–24.

³²² Grattan 1927: 5; Singer and Grattan 1952: 162.

³²³ Cockayne 1866: 42; Wülcker and Grein 1883: 326; Robinson 1885: 158; Brooke 1892: 473; Wordsworth 1903: 411. Also see Hines 2019: 38.

³²⁴ See Jost 1950: 102; Storms 1948: 166.

Despite the obstacles, it is possible to outline two conventional interpretations that are not based on misreadings of the manuscript text or on emendations. These are as follows:

1. The charm cures fever or some sort of convulsive condition.³²⁵
2. The charm cures nightmares.³²⁶

In addition to these general interpretations, most recent scholars have also advocated one or more specific minor premises. These are frequently mutually exclusive:

3. The poetic part of the charm mentions three characters: the dwarf (who is the *wiht*), the patient, and the sister.³²⁷
4. The poetic part of the charm mentions four characters: the dwarf, the *wiht*, the patient, and the sister.³²⁸
5. The dwarf (who in this interpretation is the *wiht*) rides the patient.³²⁹
6. The dwarf rides the *wiht* (thought to be a spider through the emendation of *in spiden* to *in spider*).³³⁰
7. The *wiht*, who is benevolent, rides the malevolent dwarf on behalf of the patient.³³¹
8. The *wiht*, who is benevolent, rides the patient away from the dwarf.³³²

³²⁵ Grendon 1909: 215; Magoun 1937b: 20; Storms 1948: 169; Sandmann 1975: 55; Cameron 1993: 152; Pettit 1996: 532–535; Shaw 2006: 107–108, 110; Doyle 2008: 110; Hutcheson 2012; Závoti 2019: 126–127.

³²⁶ Grattan 1927: 4–6; Singer and Grattan 1952: 160–163; Bonser 1926: 361; 1945: 254; 1963: 165–6; Nelson 1982; Gay 1988; Niles 2013: 130; Milne 2019: 150–151; 2017: 102–103; Glosecki 2007; Mock 2020: 158–161.

³²⁷ Sandmann 1975: 58; Glosecki 2007: 65–66; Battles 2005: 35.

³²⁸ Storms 1948: 169.

³²⁹ Skemp 1911b: 294.

³³⁰ Grendon 1909: 215; Jost 1950: 102.

³³¹ Storms 1948: 169; Pettit 1996: 543.

³³² Lynch 2011: 65.

9. The use of first, second, and third person pronouns throughout, as well as a lack of alliteration in certain lines, is an indication of textual corruption. As Dobbie put it, 'something is wrong here'.³³³
10. The fact that the charm describes cooling limbs supports the interpretation that the charm cures fever.³³⁴
11. The *deores sweostar*, who enters the poem halfway, is the sister of the *wiht* or of the dwarf.³³⁵

The incompatibility of all these alternative hypotheses is confusing. The fact that 'Against a Dwarf' includes words and phrases that have not yet been explicated successfully means that any interpretation of the text will remain open to criticism until these lexical issues are resolved.

Nevertheless, some of the just-listed premises are more convincing than others. Drawing on a broad range of analogues from various geographical regions and historical periods (mostly medieval but also [early] modern), this chapter will argue that 'Against a Dwarf' treats nightmares (premise 2), that it mentions just three characters (premise 3), and that the disease demon rides the patient (premise 5). The discussion presented below considers medical perspectives and pays close attention to the literary resonances of a specific psycho-somatic condition called sleep paralysis.

The argument presented below differs from previous discussions in that it proposes that the *deores sweostar* is not the sister of the *wiht* or the dwarf (premise 11), but that of the victim. During the charm, the latter character is transformed into a specific type of *deor*, a supernatural *hæncgest*, 'stallion'. Sources from early medieval England never use the word *deor* to describe *incubi*-like figures and readings that support the idea

³³³ Skemp 1911b: 295; Dobbie 1942: 212. On the alliterative features of 'Against a Dwarf', see Batten 2021: 6. See further Batten's PhD thesis: 'Vulnerable Bodies: The Poetics of Protection in the Old English Metrical Charms' (Oxford University, 2020).

³³⁴ Storms 1948: 169; Pettit 1996: 533; Cameron 1993: 152; Shaw 2006: 127.

³³⁵ Grendon 1909: 215; Skemp 1911b: 295; Bonser 1926: 361; Sandmann 1975: 57; Nelson 1982: 17; Gay 1988: 176; Pettit 1996: 533; Lynch 2011: 64.

that the dwarf is the *deor* always advocate revising the manuscript text.³³⁶ Some codices, however, use the word *deor* to describe magical horses: *anhyrne deor* occasionally translates *unicornis*.³³⁷ The proposition that the *deores sweostar* is the sibling of the metamorphosed patient is advantageous because it helps to clarify why the charm changes its pronouns halfway through (compare premise 9). The victim starts out as one lifeform, but his metamorphosis endows him with an equine alter ego. After the transformation, the poem conceptualises the patient as embodying two distinct lifeforms: in the physical world, he is the *adliga*, the nightmare-ridden dreamer; in the dream world, he is the *hæncgest*, the harnessed, metamorphosed horse.

Sleep Paralysis and Folklore

Sleep paralysis afflicts a significant number of the population and manifests during the process of waking up or falling asleep.³³⁸ As the name suggests, people who suffer an episode of this condition are not able to move, even though they possess some form of consciousness. Many undergo frightening sensations and hallucinations while in this immobile state. Some frequently reported experiences resemble the events from ‘Against a Dwarf’. These are as follows:

- A pressure on the chest, often accompanied by the conviction that an entity is straddling or pushing down on one’s torso
- The feeling of being restrained or fettered.

³³⁶ I know only one example of charms which use a cognate of *deor* to refer to a nightmarish entity. These are nineteenth- and twentieth-century Dutch compositions, which use the word in rhyming position: ‘O maar, gij lelijk dier | kom toch deze nacht niet hier’. See nos. 950–6 in Haver 1964: 331.

³³⁷ See *DOE*, s.v. ‘ān-hyrne, *adj.*’.

³³⁸ Sharpless and Doghramji 2015b: [no page numbers given; see the subheading ‘What is Sleep Paralysis’].

- An inability to speak.
- The sensation that one is outside of one's own body.
- Breathing difficulties and a fear of choking.
- The idea that one is floating, falling, or flying.
- The feeling of being controlled by a threatening presence.³³⁹

The etymological and semantic relationship between sleep paralysis and folkloric characters is evident: many European languages describe bad dreams with now-fossilised expressions that mention demonic entities. The English word 'nightmare' is a good example, which, like its relatives in some other modern languages (French: *cauchemar*, 'nightmare'; Dutch: *nachtmerrie*, 'nightmare'; Russian: *kikimora*, 'nocturnal apparition, female house-spirit'; Polish: *zmora*, 'nightmare'; Czech: *můra*, 'nightmare, moth'; Bulgarian: *mora*, 'nightmare') incorporates an etymon of the Indo-European root **morā*.³⁴⁰ Modern German uses *Alptraum*, along with the more archaic *Nachtmahr*. The element 'Alp' in the former is etymologically related to the English word 'elf'.³⁴¹

Most people no longer recognise 'Alp' and 'mare' as terms for folkloric entities. Germans occasionally relate the former to the similarly named mountain range; English speakers sometimes wonder why bad dreams are named after nocturnal horses. The situation was different during the Middle Ages. Words such as 'mare' and 'elf' were still part of the everyday lexicon, informing an expansive, constantly shifting complex of lore concerning the behaviour of folkloric entities, hallucinogenic phantasms, and nocturnal intruders.

³³⁹ For a study on the 'Proportions for Intensity/Vividness Ratings of Hallucinations Accompanying Sleep Paralysis', see Cheyne 2003: 169. For a study which contextualises the same experiences using a mixture of literature and accounts taken from online discussion groups, see Shelley 2011: 11–13. For a study which explores the same symptoms in relation to modern folklore, see Davies 1996: 39.

³⁴⁰ See *OED*, s.v. 'Mare, n.2'. Also see the entry 'mer-5, merə-' in Pokorny 1959-1969.

³⁴¹ Also see Hall: 'I wish to note comparative evidence which shows the collocation of *ælf* and *mære* to have been well established and widespread in the West Germanic-speaking world – associations no doubt underlying the equivalence of Modern English nightmare with German *Alptraum* ("night-mare", lit. "alp-dream")'. 2007b: 125.

Throughout the scholastic period, scholars argued about the identity and exact origin of the *incubus*, an oppressive and libidinous disease demon which English and German manuscripts often translate with words such as *mare*, *elf*, and *alp*.³⁴² The aim was often to distinguish divine from demonic forms of conception.³⁴³ In more recent times, researchers have written extensive monographs about the relationship between various demonic and folkloric characters and their associations with bad dreams.³⁴⁴ Because it is only possible to explore this topic in a cursory manner here, we will focus on explaining why the Old English text mentions a dwarf, even though most of the just-cited, fossilised expressions from modern languages mention mares and elves instead.

Folkloric diseases connote anthropomorphic agency. Mares, elves, and dwarfs have different backstories, but they have similar physiques. They can perform the same actions. Consequently, they can be blamed for similar misdeeds and assaults. Another factor that clarifies the fluidity of these terms is that they describe ‘social realities’ rather than ‘objective realities’. As Alaric Hall has explained: objects such as ‘houses and trees [...] can be readily perceived in the physical world and, insofar as anything can be, objectively proven to exist’.³⁴⁵ Dwarfs, elves, and other folkloric characters cannot be ‘objectively proven to exist’, even though numerous people have tried over the centuries.³⁴⁶ They are products of the human imagination. Ultimately, they are what we want them to be.³⁴⁷

Bernard of Gordon (fl. 1270–1330) argued around 1305 that envisioning a demon as the cause for a disease on account of a suggestive name was a nonsensical practice of *vulgares*, ‘commoners’. Doctors, he believed, had better opinions (*‘hoc nihil est. Medici autem*

³⁴² See the lemmas ‘Ephialtes’ and ‘Incubus’ in Norri 2016; Also see Van Der Lugt 2004; Van Der Lugt 2001.

³⁴³ Van Der Lugt 2004.

³⁴⁴ Recent examples are Metzger 2011; Shelley 2011; Zochios 2006.

³⁴⁵ Hall 2007b: 9.

³⁴⁶ See, for example, Sinistrari 1879.

³⁴⁷ See further Ármann 2013, 2015.

melius opinantur’).³⁴⁸ Nevertheless, a common tendency to extract stories about causes (demonic intervention) from words for unpleasant and ill-understood situations (illnesses) and vice versa probably encouraged the cross-contamination between folkloric narratives and disease names in the historical record. Cyril Edwards explains the ability of entities to appear in different narrative contexts with different names as an aptitude to engage in feats of ‘[l]exical and conceptual shape-shifting’.³⁴⁹

We witness the semiotic fluidity of some folkloric characters in medieval works of literature. The Middle High German *Nibelungenlied* (c. 1200) features ‘Albrîch der vil küene, ein wildez getwerc’ (*alb*-rich [*alp*-king or mighty *alp*] the brave, a wild dwarf).³⁵⁰ In *Gylfaginning*, the first part of the Prose Edda (c. 1220), Snorri Sturluson relates that a character called Skírnir is sent ‘í Svartálfaheim til dverga nokkurra’ (to some dwarfs in *Svartálfaheim* [the world of the dark elves]).³⁵¹

The linguistic connections between mares, alps, elves, and dwarfs also appear in medical sources.³⁵² One Anglo-Norman incantation for improved sleep claims to be ‘Pur faies’. It begins: ‘Conjuro vos, elves’. Like ‘Against a Dwarf’, it charms the patient ‘per omnia corpora sanctorum qui dormierunt et surrexerunt’.³⁵³ An entry preceding it is also ‘ad dormier’ (for sleeping) and invokes the ‘.vii. dormientes’.³⁵⁴ Meanwhile, an Old High German manuscript contains a recipe *contra alpes* that advises writing down the following sequence: ‘Thebal Gut Gutani’.³⁵⁵ The phrase appears

³⁴⁸ Van Der Lugt 2001: 176.

³⁴⁹ Edwards 2004. Also see Motz 1975: 106, 119. For studies which approach the same issue from a different angle, and which stress the semantic breadth of the concept elf and how many different entities this term has embraced over the course of time, see Simpson 2011; Green 2016: 4–6; 2017: 381–386.

³⁵⁰ Aventüre 8, strophe 491 in Reichert 2017: 101.

³⁵¹ The interpretation of the Snorri’s passage has generated controversy. See footnote 109 in Schäfke 2010: 232; 2015: 368–369.

³⁵² This sidesteps the debate of whether ‘the dwarves in literature are more or less identical with the dwarves of ancient or medieval Germanic or Nordic folk belief’. Citation from Schäfke 2015: 349. For a study which argues against the possibility of making comparisons, see Battles 2005.

³⁵³ No. 55 in Hunt 1997: 223.

³⁵⁴ No. 44 in Hunt 1997: 222–223.

³⁵⁵ The text has not been published. See Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, München, Clm 536, fol. 89^v.

more often in medieval sources, but our understanding of it has not improved since Gerald Brosseau Gardner, founding father of modern Wicca, wrote in 1942 that ‘I have never discovered what it means and would welcome information’.³⁵⁶ Perhaps it is not dissimilar to other magical phrases with contested origins such as ‘hocus pocus’, ‘abracadabra’, and ‘open sesame’.³⁵⁷ Regardless, we find nearly the same letter sequence in an Old English recipe from a century earlier. Here, the formula is not against *alpes*, but ‘wið þone dwoh’ (against the dwarf).³⁵⁸ In the early medieval period, elves, mares, and dwarves shared close semantic relationships and references to these entities could occur in very similar textual contexts.

The multilinguistic labyrinth of medieval names and characters can be confusing. It is helpful to recall that a consistent trope in the mythology of the nightmare involves the riding of the victim’s chest. Johann Heinrich Füssli most famously portrayed this scene in his painting ‘The Nightmare’ from 1781.³⁵⁹ Etymology presents evidence for the motif’s ancient origins and widespread prevalence. As Owen Davies explains:

The sense of pressure or weight is integral to the nightmare both as a concept and as an experience [...]. The first element of French *cauchemar* derives from *caucher* (‘to tread on’) [...] In German, we find *alpdrücken* (‘elf-pressing’) and *hexendrücken* (‘witch-pressing’). The term for the nightmare in medieval French, *appesart*, Italian *pesuarole*, Spanish *pesadilla*, and Portuguese *pesadela* all derive

³⁵⁶ See further Tille 1895; Deecke 1892.

³⁵⁷ For the significance of gibberish formulas, see Arthur 2018c. For the etymologies of the quoted spells, *OED*, s.v. ‘hocus-pocus, n., adj., and adv.’; ‘open sesame, int. and n.’; ‘abracadabra, n. and int.’.

³⁵⁸ No. 77 in Storms 1948: 305. A few centuries later, a Dutch magician hedged his bets and allowed that either a ‘dwer’ or an ‘alf’ could show up following a conjuration that should help to obtain a so-called ‘Alfcappe’, a magical hat that renders its wearer invisible. See Braekman 1997: 466.

³⁵⁹ See ‘Figure 1’.

from the verb *peser*, meaning ‘to press down upon’[...] Latin *incubus* derives from *incubare* (‘to lie down upon’).³⁶⁰

Nightmare terms in Germanic languages are alluring because they often connote not only encumbrance but also movement. The second element of Icelandic *martröð* comes from *troða*, meaning ‘to tread on, to step on’. The Norwegian expression *mareritt* translates to ‘mare-ride’. The Modern English use of the participle ‘ridden’ to mean ‘afflicted’ or ‘beset with’ also stems from a phrase that initially described night terrors. Currently, city streets can be ‘gang-ridden’ (2007). In the past, people could be ‘divell ridden’ (1640), ‘hag-ridden’ (1684), and ‘ridden with the night mare’ (1587).³⁶¹ In early English sources, we encounter the same collocation. A remedy in *Bald’s Leechbook* is for ‘Gif mon mare ride’ (if a mare rides a person).³⁶²

³⁶⁰ Davies 2003: 184.

³⁶¹ See *OED*, s.v. ‘ridden, adj.’.

³⁶² See entry I.64.5 in Doyle 2011.



Figure 1 Two post-medieval depictions of sleep paralysis. Above: J.P. Simon's engraving from 1810. Below: Johann Heinrich Füssli's 'The Nightmare' from 1781. Both depict the condition as a chest riding monster. The lower painting also portrays a monstrous horse and highlights the widespread connection between nightmares and riding animals.

Riding Demons and Nocturnal Intruders

In the seventeenth century, Ludovico Sinistrari (1622–1701), an Italian Franciscan priest, remarked that ‘Incubi nonnulli rem habent cum equis’ (There are incubi that have something to do with horses). He contended this was peculiar since animals do not have souls: demonic figures should have little incentive to pursue them. Sinistrari surmised that incubi had a truly insatiable sexual appetite: ‘in ipsis sunt veræ passionēs sensus’.³⁶³ Our discussion shows there is another way of linking nocturnal demons to horses. The former ride their victims in the same way people ride the latter.³⁶⁴

Some striking parallels from later folktales elaborate this thematic link. For instance, William Henderson’s version of ‘The Blacksmith’s Wife of Yarrowfoot’ — based on an 1820s recording of a protégé of Sir Walter Scott, a certain Mr Wilkie — begins as follows:³⁶⁵

Some years back, the blacksmith of Yarrowfoot had for apprentices two brothers, both steady lads, and, when bound to him, fine healthy fellows. After a few months, however, the younger of the two began to grow pale and lean, lose his appetite, and show other marks of declining health. His brother, much concerned, often questioned him as to what ailed him, but to no purpose. At last, however, the poor lad burst into an agony of tears, and confessed that he was quite worn-out, and should soon be brought to the grave through the ill-usage of his mistress, who was in truth a witch, though none suspected it. ‘Every night,’ he sobbed out, ‘she comes to my bedside, puts a magic bridle on me, and changes me into a horse. Then, seated on my back, she urges me on for many a mile to the

³⁶³ Sinistrari 1879: 126–128.

³⁶⁴ Also see Grimm 1876: 1041.

³⁶⁵ Henderson 1879b: ix, 190–192.

wild moors, where she and I know not what other vile creatures hold their hideous feasts. There she keeps me all night, and at early morning I carry her home. She takes off my bridle, and there I am, but so weary I can ill stand. And thus I pass my nights while you are soundly sleeping.'

The elder brother at once declared he would take his chance of a night among the witches, so he put the younger one in his own place next the wall, and lay awake himself till the usual time of the witch-woman's arrival. She came, bridle in hand, and flinging it over the elder brother's head, up sprang a fine hunting horse. The lady leaped on his back, and started for the trysting-place, which on this occasion, as it chanced, was the cellar of a neighbouring laird.

While she and the rest of the vile crew were regaling themselves with claret and sack, the hunter, who was left in a spare stall of the stable, rubbed and rubbed his head against the wall till he loosened the bridle, and finally got it off, on which he recovered his human form. Holding the bridle firmly in his hand, he concealed himself at the back of the stall till his mistress came within reach, when in an instant he flung the magic bridle over her head, and, behold, a fine grey mare! He mounted her and dashed off, riding through hedge and ditch, till, looking down, he perceived she had lost a shoe from one of her forefeet. He took her to the first smithy that was open, had the shoe replaced, and a new one put on the other forefoot, and then rode her up and down a ploughed field till she was nearly worn out. At last he took her home, and pulled the bridle off just in time for her to creep into bed before her husband awoke, and got up for his day's work.³⁶⁶

³⁶⁶ Henderson 1879b. The standard reference text for the same story can be found in Briggs 1971: 623–625. Also see Briggs 1971: 715.

‘The Blacksmith’s Wife of Yarrowfoot’ and ‘Against a Dwarf’ were recorded several centuries apart. This circumstance presents limitations to how much we can rely on the former to contextualise the latter. Yet, the story structures of these two sources are similar: both give an account of an individual that is pestered by a supernatural being. The entity transforms its victim into a horse with a magical bridle and impairs his health by forcing him to traverse great distances at night. Equally, both narratives relate that the situation is eventually resolved by a caring sibling, who makes sure the malignant intruder is incapacitated.

Henderson’s nineteenth-century text constitutes a single account of a much more broadly attested story. It is a so-called migratory legend: alternative versions can be found both in written and oral form ‘from the Baltic to North America and from Austria to Iceland’.³⁶⁷ The story also has several medieval and classical analogues.³⁶⁸ In the fifth century, Augustine presented a convoluted argument about whether the Devil could transform humans ‘in membra et lineamenta bestialia’.³⁶⁹ To substantiate that evil entities can only superficially ‘commute’ God’s creations (‘ut videantur esse quod non sunt’), he related an anecdote about the father of a certain Praestantius.³⁷⁰ The man had dreamt he had been turned into a horse and had been made to carry army provisions. Something surprising occurred after he woke up: the events from the dreamworld had also happened in the real one.³⁷¹

Refocusing on the Old English charm, we observe that the poem commences *in medias res* with a stock formula: ‘Her com ingangan *in spiden* wiht’.³⁷² The syntax of the phrase, which emphasises its verbal element through an inversion of subject and action (the act of coming in

³⁶⁷ Blécourt 2003: 235. The Migratory Legend reference number for the story is ML 3057.

³⁶⁸ See, for instance, Fass Leavy 1994: 160; Oates 2003: 210–213; Murray 1921: 94–98.

³⁶⁹ Chapter XVIII in Migne 1845: 575.

³⁷⁰ Migne 1845: 574.

³⁷¹ Migne 1845: 575.

³⁷² Compare the citation from the *South-English Legendary*’s version of St Brendan in the next paragraph. For analogous introductory phrases in charms, see the texts on *pilwissen* in this chapter’s discussion of ‘For a Sudden Stitch’.

precedes the incomer), captures a significant component of conventional sleep-paralysis reports: the unhindered and sudden intrusion of an evil entity. Similarly, it corresponds closely to the plot of the ‘Blacksmith’s Wife of Yarrowfoot’: “Every night,” he sobbed out, “she comes to my bedside”.

Sleep paralysis reports and migratory legends are perhaps helpful to understand the general gist of the charm’s first line. Nevertheless, they do not elucidate the meaning of *inspidenwiht*. Philip Shaw recently described this term as ‘one of the best-known cruces of Old English literature, and, indeed, in the history of the English language’.³⁷³ The previous 150 years have witnessed the publication of so many interpretations that providing an unproblematic translation is probably not attainable.³⁷⁴ There are, however, some circumstances that are still worth considering.

First, it is advantageous to acknowledge that *inspidenwiht* occurs in a mostly alliterative poem. If the half-line which the expression composes is not corrupt or irregular, the phrase *inspidenwiht* must consist of two words: *inspiden* (with stress on the first syllable) and *wiht*. This would make it a so-called ‘E type’ in Sievers’ classification system.³⁷⁵

Second, *inspiden* resembles an adjectival past participle. If it is, it must be based on a Class I strong verb with an added prefix, *in-*. **Spidan*, is not attested in Old or Middle English, and other Indo-European languages preserve no cognates to suggest it ever existed in Proto-Germanic. However, Old English scribes sometimes confused ‘p’ and ‘p’ (the latter being a runic letter signifying ‘w’). *Inspiden* may be an incorrect

³⁷³ Shaw 2006: 101.

³⁷⁴ So far, all translations have necessitated emendation. Past propositions include ‘Hausspin’, ‘Spinne’, ‘spider’, or ‘spider-wight’, emending MS *spiden* to *spider*: Holthausen 1925; Brie 1906: 22; Grendon 1909: 167; Storms 1948: 167. ‘Swathed’, emending MS *inspiden* to *inswiðen*: Grattan 1927: 5; Singer and Grattan 1952: 161. ‘Wretched’, emending MS *inspiden* to *unspedig*: Stuart 1977: 40. ‘Heated within’, emending *inspiden* to *inswiden* and postulating OE **swidan*, ‘to burn’: Hutcheson 2012: 186. Some scholars have argued the passage was ‘presumably as much mumbo-jumbo to the scribe’: Hines: 39.

³⁷⁵ Sievers 1893: 31.

transcription of *inspiden*.³⁷⁶ The Class I strong verb **swidan* is not attested in Old English sources either. Nevertheless, it does have convincing cognates. In Old Norse, *svíða* commonly means ‘to burn’ or ‘to scorch’. The verb sometimes occurs with *innan*, signifying ‘burn inside’ and connoting psychological suffering: ‘hjártat svíddi innan svá fast sem skorit væri’ (the heart burned within as much as if it had been cut).³⁷⁷ An early Old High German gloss suggests the same verb was also known to some West Germanic speakers. While one copy of the *Abrogans* (an eighth-century glossary) translates Latin *cremare* as *smerzan*, another prefers *suuethan*.³⁷⁸ Old English *inspiden* may be a mistranscription of a rare participle that meant ‘scorched’ or ‘burning inside’ and connoted ‘wretched’ or ‘blackened’.³⁷⁹

Third, nightmarish and demonic entities are commonly called ‘wights’ in medieval sources. In such cases, the term is regularly prefaced with negative adjectives that imply demonic personality traits. Chaucer’s carpenter in *The Miller’s Tale* casts a ‘night spell’ to ‘crouche’ his deceitful tenant Nicholas from pestering nocturnal spirits, as well as to ‘Blesse this hous from every wikkud wight’.³⁸⁰ A line from another Middle English poem, a South-English rendition of the life of St Brendan (c. 1300), uses almost precisely the same phraseology as ‘Against a Dwarf’ to initiate a frightful episode: just after Brendan’s ship has drifted off to an ominous, stinking land, ‘Þo cam þare out a luper [evil] wyzt [...] | Þoru-out swart and brenninde’.³⁸¹

A late medieval charm, ‘ffor the nygthe-mare’, also echoes some of the themes and phrases of ‘Against a Dwarf’. It runs:

³⁷⁶ The identification of OE **swidan* as a form of ON *svíða* was first proposed in Hutcheson 2012. This chapter closely follows the argument presented in this article. Also see Laing 1999: 255.

³⁷⁷ Cited in *The Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* 1989-2020, s.v. ‘sárr adj. [compar. -ari, superl. -astr]’.

³⁷⁸ See ‘smerzan’ in Riecke 2004: 433.

³⁷⁹ My thanks to Richard North for his advice on this passage.

³⁸⁰ Lines 3480–3485 in Benson, Robinson, and Cannon 2008. Also see Thoms 1878.

³⁸¹ Lines 475–6. Edited in Horstmann 1887: 233.

Seynt lorge, our lady knyȝth,
 He walked day, he walked nyȝth,
 Till þat he fownde þat fowle wyȝth;
 And whan þat he here fownde,
 He here bete & here bownde,
 Till trewly þer here trowthe she plyȝth
 Þat sche sholde not come be nyȝthe,
 With-Inne vij rode of londe space
 Þer as Seynt leorge i-namyd was.
 St. leorge. St. leorge. St. [leorge.]³⁸²

‘Against a Dwarf’ describes an intrusive dwarf that, as an *inspiden wiht*, ‘Her com ingangan’. The Middle English charm is similar because it typifies a ‘nyȝthe-mare’ that ‘come be nyȝthe’ as a ‘fowle wyȝth’. It also reprises the idea that nightmarish beings can be forbidden from coming back by repelling them with holy names and submitting them to the binding power of oaths. In ‘Against a Dwarf’, the names of the so-called Seven Sleepers³⁸³ are the antidote, and it is the sister that ‘aðas swor | ðæt næfre þis ðæ(m) adlegan derian ne moste’. In ‘for the nyȝthe-mare’, the name of ‘Seynt leorge’ secures at least ‘vij rode of londe space’ between ‘þat fowle wyȝth’ and the patient, while the pestering demon herself ‘here trowthe she plyȝth | Þat sche sholde not come be nyȝthe’.

Two additional elements demonstrate links to sleep paralysis and nightmare mythology. First, ‘Against a Dwarf’ makes use of equestrian imagery. Significantly, the *wiht* is clutching a ‘teage’ and a ‘haman’.³⁸⁴ Both of these terms have been translated in various ways and it is useful to examine them more closely. Cameron summarised the relevant entry from Bosworth and Toller and argued that ‘*Teage* has two meanings in Old

³⁸² No. 66 in Robbins 1952: 61. Also see Roper 2005: 119–120.

³⁸³ See this chapter’s section on sleeping saints (page 108).

³⁸⁴ For a visual summary of all these terms, see ‘Figure 2’.

English, “cord” or “bond” and “box” or “chest”³⁸⁵ Meaney suggested it could be an Old English equivalent of *phylacterium* and *ligatura*, and proposed the translation ‘amulet’.³⁸⁶ This discussion argues that the charm’s *teag* is the same as the second element of the Old English word *sweor-teah*, ‘neck-harness’, sometimes glossed as *collarium*, ‘(horse) collar’.³⁸⁷ Such a translation fits with the context in which the word occurs: ‘cwæð þ(æt) þu his hæncgest wære. | Leg[d]e þe his teage an sweoran’ (said that you were his steed; laid his harness on your neck).³⁸⁸ A further argument to support *teag* means ‘(horse) harness’ is that it appears to be cognate to Middle Dutch *getuuch* and *tuuch*, as well as Middle High German *gezuic* and *ziuc*. All of these can translate to ‘harness’.³⁸⁹ In particular, the terms denote strappy harnesses such as those used for horses. *De Geschiedenis van Antwerpen* (c. 1450) mentions a ‘peert met zijn ghetuych’ (horse with its harness).³⁹⁰

Hame also appears to be related to horse tack. Wordsworth translated the word as ‘ham’, an archaic term for ‘buttock, the back of the thigh’, currently used predominantly to denote pork slices.³⁹¹ Other scholars have later interpreted the term as a form of the Old English *ham*, ‘covering’, ‘undergarment’, or ‘skin’.³⁹² Storms, who emended *inspiden* to *in spider*, suggested the expression referred to a web.³⁹³ The context of the charm implies the Old English word is the earliest attestation of a technical term for the collar of a draught horse.³⁹⁴ A thirteenth-century French manuscript writes ‘Les cous de chiuiaus portunt esteles’ (the necks of

³⁸⁵ Cameron 1993: 153.

³⁸⁶ Meaney 1981: 16.

³⁸⁷ See *Bosworth–Toller* s.v. ‘sweor-teáh’; *DMLBS* s.v. 1b ‘collarius’.

³⁸⁸ Lines 10–11.

³⁸⁹ See *Middelnederlandsch Woordenboek Online* 2018, s.v. ‘GETUUCH^{II}’ and ‘TUUCH^{II}’.

³⁹⁰ Quoted in *Middelnederlandsch Woordenboek Online* 2018, s.v. ‘GETUUCH^{II}’.

³⁹¹ *OED*, s.v. ‘ham, n.1 and adj.’. See footnote 313, as well as 29.

³⁹² For interpretations that support versions of ‘garment’, see Skemp 1911b: 294–295; Neville 1999: 104. Also see *OED*, s.v. ‘† hame, n.1’.

³⁹³ Storms 1948: 167.

³⁹⁴ *OED*, s.v. ‘hame, n.2’. This interpretation was already suggested in 1907; later scholars have often preferred to translate differently. See Schlutter 1907b: 257.

horses carry *esteles*) and glosses the last word as 'hames'.³⁹⁵ A sixteenth-century text talks about 'Horses with open collars, and large hames'.³⁹⁶ The charm's descriptions of horse tack components as instruments of demonic subjugation fits with 'The Blacksmith's Wife of Yarrowfoot', in which a nightmarish entity subdues a victim with a magical bridle.

The second sleep paralysis element concerns the notion of being led 'of þæm lande'. Again, this idea recurs in 'The Blacksmith's Wife of Yarrowfoot', where the witch-cum-mistress uses her distressed lover as a means of transportation to visit a secret conventicle at some remote location. We have already contextualised the semantic and lexical shapeshifting of disease demons, so we should perhaps not be surprised that stories which conflate nocturnal intruders and witches are common in European folklore. English nightmare reports frequently mention 'Old hags' and Scandinavian *maran*, 'mares', often behave like German *hexen*, 'witches'.³⁹⁷ Dutch versions of the 'The Blacksmith's Wife of Yarrowfoot' are unproblematic and use the word *nachtmerrie* to refer to the intruder.³⁹⁸ An entry in *Leechbook III* implies that early English audiences also sometimes associated evil women with nocturnal intruders and nightmares. It describes a salve against 'ælfcynne & nihtgengan & þam mannum þe deofol mid hæmð' (elf kin, night-wanderers, and people with whom the devil has intercourse).³⁹⁹

³⁹⁵ Quoted *OED*, s.v. 'hame, n.2'.

³⁹⁶ Quoted *OED*, s.v. 'hame, n.2'.

³⁹⁷ See, for example, Ness 1978; Oates 2003; Wells-Oghoghomeh 2017.

³⁹⁸ Blécourt 2003: 235.

³⁹⁹ LXI in Cockayne 1865: 344. For a discussion which discusses the interrelation of these entities at a later point in history, see Millar 2018.

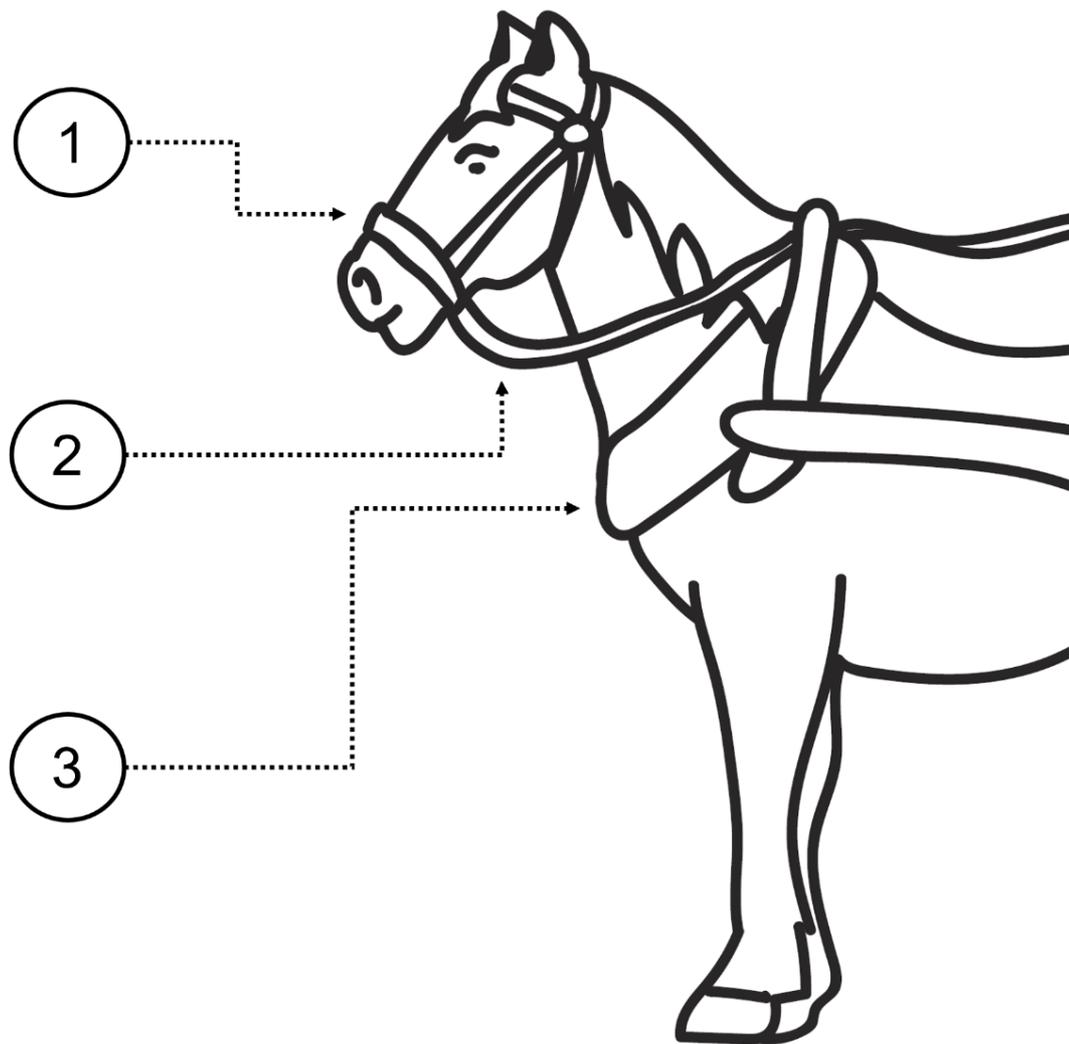


Figure 2 The equipment of a draught horse and some modern and Old English words for its different parts. 1: *bridel*, 'bridel'. 2: *healsleper*, (*ge*)*wealdleper*, 'rein'. 3: *hama*, 'horse collar'. Together, these parts could be designated with the term *teag*, 'harness'.

The idea that lecherous nocturnal spirits and supernatural evil women were sometimes believed to be analogous is essential to this discussion. It allows us to make a brief excursus that concerns a theoretical problem in later medieval witchcraft narratives: how do witches achieve *transvection* (paranormal flight)?⁴⁰⁰ This will help clarify further why the nightmarish *wiht* transforms his victim into a horse (paraphrased as a *deor*, 'beast'), rides him off the land, and presumably spurs him on into the air.

One standard theory about witches' flight stated that malevolent women could travel through the air because they rode animals such as goats, cows, and horses. A kernel of this concept appears in Regino of Prüm's collection of Canon law from the early tenth century. This document describes maleficent flying women riding 'super quasdam bestias' (on certain beasts) and traversing 'multa terrarum spatia' (the space of many lands).⁴⁰¹ Theories about witch-transportation were sometimes also brought into relation with the idea that magical bridles could turn people into animals. In 1634, ten-year-old Edmund Robinson accused several people in his neighbourhood of witchcraft after carrying a malevolent woman on his back. She had 'offered [the] examinant twelvecence to say nothing, and [...] she [had] put a bridle into the boy's mouth, whereupon he became a white horse'.⁴⁰²

A second explanation for witches' flight argued that some evil women never leave their bed. The seeds for these ideas predate the often-studied witch trials that occurred at the end of the Middle Ages. Burchard of Worms, who wrote around the year 1000, condemned the following behaviour:

credidisti quod multae mulieres retro Satanam conversae credunt et affirmant verum esse, ut credas in quietae noctis silentio cum te

⁴⁰⁰ For more on this subject, see Goodare 2016; Hutton 2014; Behringer 1998; Pócs 1997; Behringer and Ott-Koptschalijski 1991; Gerulaitis 2008; Mitchell 1997; Henningsen 2009.

⁴⁰¹ *Wasserschleben* 1840: 355.

⁴⁰² *Bruce* 1858: 141.

collocaveris in lecto tuo, et marito tuo in sinu tuo jacente, te, dum corporea sis, januis clausis exire posse, et terrarum spatia cum aliis simili errore deceptis pertransire valere, et homines baptizatos et Christi sanguine redemptos, sine armis visibilibus, et interficere.⁴⁰³

Have you believed what many women, turning back to Satan, believe and affirm to be true? Do you believe, during the silence of the quiet night when you have gone to bed and your husband lies on your bosom, that when you are in bodily form, you can go out by closed doors and can cross the spaces of the world with others deceived by the same error and without visible weapons slay persons who have been baptised and redeemed by the blood of Christ?⁴⁰⁴

It is important to emphasise that narratives about Sabbaths — a technical term medieval demonologists used for witches' meetings — only start to appear in the written record after the early medieval period.⁴⁰⁵ However, Burchard here seems to have drawn on more widely attested motifs that begin to appear in Christian texts from the sixth century and are still popular by the thirteenth.⁴⁰⁶ Perhaps, performers of the Old English charm would have been able to imagine debauched nocturnal gatherings as the potential destination for the *wiht* and his equine victim. 'Against a Dwarf' does not indicate this. It is, however, appropriate to note that the Old English text appears to group three motifs that are prominent in both contemporary and later witchcraft narratives: that evil characters

⁴⁰³ See book IX of the *Decretum* in Migne 1880: 974.

⁴⁰⁴ Translation based on McNeill and Gamer 1990: 339.

⁴⁰⁵ For studies which explore the origins of witches' meetings, see Bailey 1996; Ostorero 2008; Sörlin 2008; Blécourt 2013; Hutton 2014; Ostorero, Paravicini Bagliani, and Tremp-Utz 1999; Agostino and Martine 2000; Anheim et al. 2002; Tremp-Utz 2011. For the role misogyny and the 'feminization of magic' played in the construction of the gendered witch stereotype in the late Middle Ages, see Nighman 2014; Bailey 2002.

⁴⁰⁶ Maraschi 2019: 36-37. Also see Bailey 2002: 120. For a recent discovery with regard to a twelfth-century adaptation of the Burchard's *Decretum* and its disproportionate emphasis on the (supernatural) sins of women, see Burden 2020: 93, n. 85.

(specifically associated with the night) can transform humans into riding-animals, sometimes using bridles; that they can ‘pass over many lands’ while they ride ‘on certain beasts’; and that they can enter into some dreamlike realm in order to intrude the spaces of other humans and to hurt them, presumably after both parties have ‘settled down in bed’.

In 1634, the court of Charles I decided that Edmund Robinson had lied about his animalistic transformation: ‘Nobody was ever acquainted with any part of his fiction or invention, nor did any body ever advise him, but it merely proceeded out of his own brain’.⁴⁰⁷ Given the close link between Edmund’s story and early English ideas about nightmarish wights that call their victims stallions, subdue them with horse harnesses, and ride them ‘of þæm lande’, this historical verdict is possibly mistaken. Edmund undoubtedly told untruths when he accused local women of witchcraft. Nevertheless, the lore he used as a basis for his fiction had not ‘merely proceeded out of his own brain’. Instead, it seems to have ‘proceeded’ out of a common font of folklore and contemporary beliefs, perhaps similar in some ways to those which informed the demonic-riding motif of ‘Against a Dwarf’.

Sleeping Saints, Helpful Virgins, and Amuletic Necklaces

‘Against a Dwarf’ begins with describing a complicated procedure that involves the collection of ‘VII lytle oflætān’ (seven little mass wafers). On these, users should record seven names. These were not ‘taken at random’, as Donald Scragg recently asserted.⁴⁰⁸ Instead, they are the names of the so-called Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, characters from a

⁴⁰⁷ Bruce 1858: 153.

⁴⁰⁸ Scragg 2014: 57.

Christian legend about seven devout men that managed to escape persecution by sleeping in a cave for an extraordinarily long time. Some versions of the story claim the slumber lasted more than three hundred years; others are more modest and declare it continued a little over one or two hundred.⁴⁰⁹ Gregory of Tours' (c. 538–594) influential version of the story includes an episode where the names of the saints are written down on a tablet and stored with the men inside the cave. Did such a small anecdote influence the ceremonial directions of the Old English charm? This question is almost certainly impossible to answer.⁴¹⁰ 'Against a Dwarf' undeniably assigns much power to the transcribed wafers: the virgin should hang them around the patient's neck for three consecutive days.⁴¹¹

Writing on mass wafers, invoking the Seven Sleepers, and enlisting the help of a virgin are common procedures in medieval charms. One leechbook remedy against wens states that a *mædenman* should go to a well and pour water from one vat into another while intoning liturgical prayers.⁴¹² Numerous Old English compositions prescribe the names of the Seven Sleepers. One seems to follow the charm's example in recommending the use of an amuletic necklace.⁴¹³ Two remedies (which are also against dwarfs) present analogues for writing on wafers and adorning the body with holy symbols. The first includes the advice 'wið þone dwoh on Ill oflætan writ';⁴¹⁴ the second suggests writing down

⁴⁰⁹ For more on the presence of these figures in, specifically, early English literature, see Atherton 2013; Bonser 1945; Liuzza 2016; Magennis 1996, 1991, 1985.

⁴¹⁰ Lynch 2011: 62.

⁴¹¹ The charm's phraseology is not clear about the object that the virgin should hang around the patient's neck. It uses the nondescript pronoun 'hit'. Grendon argued this was a spider amulet. Kemp proposed it was a transcription of the charm. Pettit cites close analogues to argue the charm refers to a necklace made from the inscribed wafers. This seems sensible as these wafers otherwise have no purpose in the charm. See Grendon 1909: 215; Skemp 1911b: 294; Pettit 1996: 537, 549–550.

⁴¹² No. 21 in Storms 1948: 246–247.

⁴¹³ Pettit 1996: 537.

⁴¹⁴ No. 78 in Storms 1948: 305. Donald Scragg reads 'an oflætan', but this is not grammatically correct. *Oflætan* is dative here, and requires an inflected adjective, *ane*. See Scragg 2014: 56. Scragg acknowledges the grammatical incongruity of his reading but argues 'erratic forms' were common in the tenth century, when the charm was probably written down.

Christian symbols and the names of two saints, Macutus and Victorici, ‘ondlang ða earmas’.⁴¹⁵

Helpful virgins, Seven Sleeper invocations, and Eucharist remedies are prevalent in early medieval incantations, and they often occur separately. Nevertheless, it is perhaps not coincidental that ‘Against a Dwarf’ combines them into a single cure: each element counterbalances a distinctive negative aspect of the targeted problem. The Seven Sleepers are famed for their uninterrupted slumber and are ideal patron saints for patients who are pestered by night terrors.⁴¹⁶ Meanwhile, wafers connote the safe, sacred space of the Christian mass and are appropriate for exorcising demonic forces that ‘Her com ingangan’. The assistance of a virgin is relevant because medieval individuals — somewhat understandably — considered folkloric entities with a penchant for chest-riding and nocturnal intrusions as lecherous (agreeing to some extent with the priest Sinastrari).⁴¹⁷ As Jan van der Heiden put it: nightmare reports from the Middle Ages can often be typified as accounts of ‘Satan op vrijersvoeten’ (Satan on the lookout for romance).⁴¹⁸

That the supportive *mædenman* and the *dweorh* are somehow competing for the patient’s health seems clear from the fact that their performances in the charm are almost identical. When the patient can cooperate (presumably when he is awake), the former should ‘ga to’ and hang the rest-inspiring wafers ‘on his sweoran’. When the patient is open to attack (presumably when he is asleep), the latter ‘com in gangan’ and spurs him into action with the same gesture: ‘Leg[d]e þe his teage an

⁴¹⁵ Entry LXXCI a and LXXCI a–b in Pettit 2001a. For a comparison between these texts and ‘Against a Dwarf’, see Lynch 2011.

⁴¹⁶ See further Lynch 2011: 61–62.

⁴¹⁷ Note words such as *mare* and *incubus* were sometimes used to denote prostitutes. For an example, see Bremmer 1998: 100–102. Meanwhile, references to literary accounts of mares, elves, incubi, and other nocturnal intruders that perpetrate sexual offences can be found in the following articles: Petrina 1994; Riviere and Wallace 2013; Cavanagh 1994; Stewart 2002; Blécourt 2003; Davies 2003; Gordon 2015; Sharpless and Doghramji 2015a; Milne 2017; Lecouteux 1987; Raudvere 1993, 1995; Van Der Eerden 1995; Blöcker-Walter 1985; Yamamoto 1994; Heiden 1994; Fass Leavy 1994; Van Der Lugt 2001.

⁴¹⁸ Heiden 1994.

sweoran. Ongunnan hi(m) of þæm lande liþan'. The virgin somewhat resembles the other female character in the charm, the sister of the transformed horse. She also mimics the behaviour of the *wiht* — 'Pa co(m) ingangan deores sweostar' — before resolving the situation.

Lastly, a recent archaeological find perhaps presents an analogue to the idea that dwarfs can be cured with necklaces. A metal early medieval pendant from a field near Fakenham (Norfolk) displays two different engravings. The first is 'reminiscent of a grotesque human mask, particularly in respect of what resembles a pair of pointed eyes'. The second constitutes a runic inscription: 'dead is dwerg'.⁴¹⁹ Amulets such as these are difficult to interpret without further context. The fact that the pendant associates the word 'dwerg' with a depicted entity that needs to be 'dead' perhaps suggests it meant to achieve comparable results as the inscribed wafers in 'Against a Dwarf'.

'Against a Dwarf' as a Cure for Fever?

As explained at the beginning of this discussion, some scholars have interpreted 'Against a Dwarf' as a charm that means to cure fever.⁴²⁰ Three arguments favour this reading. The first is that 'dwarf' is sometimes glossed as 'fever' in early medieval medicine books. The twelfth-century translation of the *Peri Didaxeon*, for example, renders the Latin phrase 'interdum et feбриunt' as 'hwile he ripap swylce he on dueorge sy'.⁴²¹ The second is based on the misinformed assumption that the Seven Sleepers uniquely occur in fever charms.⁴²² The third argument, as Shaw has put it,

⁴¹⁹ Hines 2019: 36.

⁴²⁰ See footnote 325.

⁴²¹ The Old English translation of the *Medicina de quadrupedibus* also glosses 'ad fugandem febrem' with 'dweorg onweg to donne'. See Cameron 1993: 152.

⁴²² Shaw 2006: 100; Pettit 2001b: 174.

is that ‘something cools in line 4 of the metrical formula’ (see premise 10).⁴²³

Disease demons are typically associated with many different conditions, and it is, therefore, possible that the *Peri Didaxeon* uses the term in one way while the charm uses it in another. Nevertheless, interpreting the *wiht* of ‘Against a Dwarf’ as a fever demon, is not, as Shaw presumes, unproblematically in line with the charm’s narrative content. If the Old English text means to treat feverish symptoms, we would expect the aid-bringing sister, not the intruding disease demon to cause that ‘þa ongunnan hi(m) ða liþu colian’. Additionally, Old English poems that mention ‘cooling’ bodies are predominantly related to death and dying. The phrase probably does not describe convalescence.⁴²⁴

Conversely, it is essential to point out that the fact that the text’s narrative draws on nightmare mythology and describes demonic riding does not automatically discount the notion that the charm was used to cure specific fevers.⁴²⁵ Febrile diseases sometimes cause hallucinations. Like dreams, these can delude patients into believing they can perceive some otherworldly realm. Meanwhile, individuals caring for a patient suffering from feverish convulsions may be persuaded that some evil entity has commandeered the sufferer’s body. A safe approach to the poem is to consider it as one which draws its power from stories that connote uninterrupted rest. Like the helpful sister ensures the patient is left alone and the Christian God guaranteed the Seven Sleepers could sleep without interruption, so should ‘þæm þe þis galdor [...] ongalan cuþe’ be able to ward off unwelcome and disruptive harmful influences.

⁴²³ Shaw 2006: 127. See footnote 334.

⁴²⁴ Examples are given in Pettit 1996: 561. Also see Waller 1816: 34; Milne 2017: 103. See further Gordonensis 1617: 220.

⁴²⁵ This has been noted in passing before: Hall 2009: 207.

Conclusion

‘Against a Dwarf’ combines written and spoken words to exorcise a demonic entity. The chapter argues that the narrative of the charm—which contains ambiguous pronominal constructions and several contested expressions—incorporates references to nightmare mythology. Citing etymological, medical, and literary evidence, the discussion demonstrates that early medieval nightmares were often associated with demonic ‘riding’.

The chapter offers a review of the charm’s contested terms *teag*, *hame*, *inspiden*, *dweorh* and *deor*, arguing that these words all fit with more broadly attested stories about riding nocturnal demons. *Teag* and *hame* are rare, technical labels for specific types of horse tack: they are here translated as ‘harness’ and ‘horse collar’. The chapter further develops Hutcheson’s argument from 2012 to identify the notorious crux *inspiden* as an adjective that assigns demonic characteristics to the charm’s *wiht*. A lexicographical examination of the word *dweorh* indicates that the term occurs in similar contexts as ‘elf’ and ‘mare’. Medieval sources sometimes describe the latter two as pestering nocturnal demons and as ‘wicked wights’.

The argument presented in this chapter differs from previous discussions in one crucial aspect. It interprets the term *deor* not as a textual corruption that should refer to the *dweorh*, but as a deliberate reference to the charm’s victim. This new interpretation helps resolve why ‘Against a Dwarf’ changes its pronouns from singular to plural halfway through its verbal formula: the victim becomes ‘plural’ after acquiring a separate, bestial identity.

Finally, the chapter provides analogues from antiquity to the early modern period that describe evil figures that transform humans into horses or ride animals through the air. The discussion singles out one analogue that is specifically important to the interpretation of ‘Against a Dwarf’: a nineteenth-century folktale known as ‘The Blacksmith’s Wife of Yarrowfoot’. This narrative presents a similar constellation of story motifs

as the Old English charm. It describes an individual who endures nocturnal attacks from an invasive demonic entity. The victim is turned into a horse with a magic bridle and forced to gallop to a distant location. A helpful sibling eventually incapacitates the demonic intruder. Even though 'The Blacksmith's Wife of Yarrowfoot' was recorded much later than 'Against a Dwarf', similar narratives survive from late antiquity and early modern England. That the folktale possibly preserves a constellation of older motifs is also supported by the fact that it constitutes a single iteration of a widely distributed migratory legend.

3. Nettling Spears and Piercing Incursions: ‘For a Sudden Stitch’

Introduction

‘For a Sudden Stitch’ has been a popular Old English composition ever since it was first published in 1835.⁴²⁶ John Mitchell Kemble called it ‘a beautiful spell’ in 1837, and William Clarke Robinson typified it as a ‘pretty little piece’ in 1885.⁴²⁷ Sixty years later, Kemp Malone described it as ‘a little masterpiece of its kind’.⁴²⁸ In 1996, Edward Pettit noted that this is ‘perhaps the only Anglo-Saxon charm with enough aesthetic appeal to warrant serious critical assessment of its artistic merits’.⁴²⁹

One circumstance that explains such consistently enthusiastic reviews is that the text contains images that are simultaneously obscure and evocative. Stephen Glosecki characterised the Old English poem as

⁴²⁶ Other titles are as follows: ‘Wið Færstice’ (opening phrase in Old English), ‘Seitenstichsegen’ (Grimm), ‘Gegen Hexenstich’ (Wülker), ‘Gegen Hexenschuss’ (Horn), ‘For a Sudden Stitch’ (Dobbie), Against Rheumatism (Storms). This thesis uses CXXVIIa–b in Pettit 2001a: 90–95. Other modern editions are Grendon 1909: 164–166; Dobbie 1942: 122–123; Storms 1948: 140–151; Stuart 1973: 718–740; Sandmann 1975: 74–75; Abernethy 1983: 27–29; Bjork 2014: 204–207. Earlier editions are as follows: Grimm 1876: 1039; Wright and Halliwell 1845: 237; Ettmüller 1850: 302; Bouterwerk 1854: lxxxv; Rieger 1861: 142; Cockayne 1866: 52; Kemble 1849: 403; Sweet 1876: 122; Wülcker 1882: 33; Wülcker and Grein 1883: 317; Brooke 1892: 159–161; Robinson 1885: 152–153; Koegel 1894: 93; Stevens 1935: 168. The medieval text appears on fols. 175^v–176^r of London, British Library, Harley 585.

⁴²⁷ Wiley 1971: 153; Robinson 1885: 152.

⁴²⁸ Malone 1948: 42.

⁴²⁹ Pettit 1996: 593.

filled with ‘stranded [...] abandoned and disjointed microstories’.⁴³⁰ The poem’s combination of memorable poetry with enigmatic narrative content has inspired numerous commentaries. Nevertheless, researchers still commonly regard it as ill-understood. After surveying 150 years of scholarship, Pettit observed that researchers had often been ‘overstating their cases’.⁴³¹ In 1989, Glosecki admitted that ‘quibbles creep in over almost every line of this lyrical charm’.⁴³²

An anecdote about one of the most famous poets of the twentieth century presents a stimulating example of the extent to which ‘For a Sudden Stitch’ can take hold of the imagination. Ezra Pound, who translated the charm around 1905, as a requirement for his bachelor studies at Hamilton College, New York, would later become one of the most well-known interpreters of Old English verse with his translation of *The Seafarer*.⁴³³ His first experience with early English poetry left a lasting impression. He remarked around 1931 in an unpublished essay on ‘The Music of Beowulf’:

For twenty years thereabouts I have had in my head a few fragments of anglo-saxon:

Hlude waeron hy la ~~hyde~~ hlude
Tha hy ofer thon long rydon
Waeron anmode, tha hy ofer thon lond rydon⁴³⁴

That Pound had indeed stored the verses ‘in his head’, and not in a book somewhere, is illustrated by the fact that he misremembered them: the phrase he recalled as ‘ofer thon long’, for example, actually runs ‘ofer pone

⁴³⁰ Glosecki 2007: 66.

⁴³¹ Pettit 1996: 595.

⁴³² Glosecki 1989: 109. This statement is also referred to in Pettit’s discussion.

⁴³³ Pound’s translation of the charm is published in Pound and Ward 1981.

⁴³⁴ Pound 2019: 2.

hlæw'.⁴³⁵ Nevertheless, that verses such as these cause misunderstandings — residing in the recesses of human memory where they can be 'made new' through creative invention — may have been what attracted Pound in the first place. One of his college papers includes an early poem about

Words of subtle might and terrible
As some word wizzards woven spell
That none may grasp.⁴³⁶

This chapter means to prevent that 'For a Sudden Stitch' becomes a Poundian 'wizzards woven spell | that none may grasp'. The argument presented below divides the Old English text into four sections, reviewing its thought-provoking yet ambiguous passages in turn. The first section focuses on the composition's herbal medicine and argues that the linguistic designations of the charm's ingredients participate in its verbal remedy. The subsequent three discussions consider the narrative part of 'For a Sudden Stitch'. These will argue that the text assembles fragmented stories and more widespread formulas that concern the production of stabbing weapons or the infliction of stinging pains. Citing parallels from contemporary and later sources, the chapter proposes that 'For a Sudden Stitch' uses rhetorical figures and etymological word games to develop the aetiological backstory of its targeted ailment.

⁴³⁵ Robinson 1982: 204.

⁴³⁶ Cited in Robinson 1982: 205.

Section 1: Herbal and Verbal Medicine

The first section of ‘For a Sudden Stitch’ describes a herbal recipe. This states the name of the condition, *færstice* — a hapax that can be translated as ‘sudden stitch’⁴³⁷ — and lists three herbs that need to be boiled in butter.

Wið færstice: feferfuige 7 seo ræde netele ðe þurh ærn inwyxð 7 wegbrade; wyll in buteran.⁴³⁸

Against sudden stitch: feverfew, the red nettle that grows through ears of grain and waybroad; boil in butter.

Edward Pettit suggested that perhaps the herbal remedy and the charm ‘are to be distinguished as two quite separate entities’, but this hypothesis is improbable. The composition seems to refer back to the herbal preparation described in the introduction at a later time: the final line of the text tells performers to place a knife ‘on wætan’ (in [the] liquid).⁴³⁹

A literary argument equally supports that the herbal recipe is part of the charm. The listed plants contain active substances, and at least one is recommended elsewhere in a recipe for a condition with a comparable name: ‘Gif stice butan innoðe sie. genim þonne þa readan netlan’.⁴⁴⁰

Nevertheless, the herbs in ‘For a Sudden Stitch’ also reveal their significance in other ways. First, the stalks of *wegbrede* — a plant which medieval manuscripts often call *plantago* or *plantago maior* — resemble spikes or spears. People from medieval England also noticed the similarity.

⁴³⁷ See footnote 142.

⁴³⁸ CXXVIIa in Pettit 2001a: 90.

⁴³⁹ Line 27. See Pettit 1996: 596–599. Also see Doane 1994: 142.

⁴⁴⁰ Lines 54.2 in Doyle 2011: 303. Also see Cameron 1993: 142–144.

They sometimes called *plantago minor* — which is closely related to the *maior* variety — *lanceolata*, ‘armed with a lance’, as well as *sperewort*.⁴⁴¹

Meanwhile, ‘seo ræde netele’ is probably the red deadnettle. The serrated leaves of this plant are ‘dead’ and have no stinging hairs. On a linguistic level, this is not significant; the plant’s name still evokes prickly sensations. The designation *feferfuige*, which derives from *febris*, ‘fever’, and *fugare*, ‘to chase away’, also connotes pharmacological efficacy. The name matches the phraseology of some of the charm’s subsequent statements about pain-inducing women that should be put to flight with a ‘fleogende’ arrow and disease demons that should heed the imperative ‘Fleoh!’. The Old English verbs *fleon* and *fleogan* can both be used to gloss the Latin verbs *fugere*, ‘to flee, to fly’, and *fugare*, ‘to chase away’.⁴⁴²

‘For a Sudden Stitch’ completes its interrelation of herbal and verbal cures in its closing line. Here, it directs the user to plunge a knife into what is presumably the herbal preparation: ‘Nim þon(n)e þ(æt) seax; ado on wætan’ (then take the knife, place it in the liquid).⁴⁴³ Initially, this command seems somewhat odd. Perhaps we can understand it as a performative counterpart to the imagery of the incantation.⁴⁴⁴ The poem’s speaker clearly articulates his ambition to retaliate elsewhere (‘ic him oðerne eft wille sændan / fleogende flane forane togeanes’). The text also mentions a story about a smith that ‘sloh seax’ (wrought a knife).⁴⁴⁵ The charm’s plant remedy seems to combine contemporary, botanical medicine with sympathetic magic. It adheres to the principle that like cures like.⁴⁴⁶

⁴⁴¹ See the entries for ‘Lanceolata’ and ‘Plantago’ in Hunt 1989: 154, 209.

⁴⁴² The manuscript is probably corrupt and reads ‘fled’ in line 27. See *DOE*, s.v. ‘fleon’ and ‘fleogan’.

⁴⁴³ Line 27.

⁴⁴⁴ For the use of knives in Old English charms, see Storms 1948: 146.

⁴⁴⁵ Line 11.

⁴⁴⁶ *Pro*: Glosecki 1982; Weston 1985. *Contra*: Pettit 1996: 619. For the efficacy of butter, see the discussion of the text quoted at footnote 491.

Section 2: Loud, Mighty Women

The poetic part of the text begins *in medias res* with a memory-like description of loud women, riding over a mound:

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 herinne sie!
Stod under linde, under leohtu[m] scylde,
þær ða mihtigan wif hyra mægen beræddon
7 hy gyllende garas sændan
Ic him oðerne eft wille sændan,
fleogende flan(e) forane togeanes.
Ut, lyte[l] spere, gif hit herinne sy!⁴⁴⁷

They were loud, yes, loud, when they rode over the mound.
They were of one mind, when they rode over the land.
Now shield yourself — you must escape this hostility.
Out, little spear, if it is in here!
I stood under a linden [board], a light shield,
When the mighty women deliberated their power,
And they sent spears yelling,⁴⁴⁸
I will send them back another,
A flying arrow in return.
Out, little spear, if it is in here!

⁴⁴⁷ Lines 1–10.

⁴⁴⁸ The syntax does not indicate whether the spears or the women are yelling. The provided translation preserves the ambiguity of the Old English text. The discussion offered in this chapter quotes the collocation ‘yelling spears’ but not ‘they [...] yelling’ to highlight the similarity of this text to other contemporary sources and to thus provide an indication of the charm’s possible influences. See footnote 454. See also Grimm 1871.

In this first scene, we witness two thematic confluences that, as we will discover throughout this discussion, are characteristic of the entire poem. The text maintains a vague relation between historical and present time. Its speaker starts in the past tense, recounting a memory about when he *stood* under a shield, and mighty women *rode* over the land and *sent* screaming spears. Yet, the recurring phrase ‘Ut, lytel spere, gif her inne sie!’, indicates that the ‘lytel spere’ is troubling the speaker’s addressee (‘þu’) in the present moment: ‘ðysne nið’, that is, the painful malady that causes problems, must be cured *nu*, ‘now’.⁴⁴⁹

The second confluence concerns the metaphoric union between battling opponents and battling diseases. The word *stice* had at least two separate meanings in Old English: it could signify a stab or thrust, as well as stinging ailments in various body parts. The *Laws of Æthelberht* state that ‘Gif man þeoh ðurhstingþ, stice gehwilce VI scillingas’ (If a person stabs through a thigh, each thrust [costs] 6 shillings).⁴⁵⁰ Various English medicine books, on the other hand, prescribe remedies against ‘miltewærce & stice’, ‘Styche, peyne on þe syde’, ‘wynde in mannys guttys and for stycchys’, ‘broke bones & for sodeyn goutes, for stychis’, as well as ‘stychis in a mannis eyne’.⁴⁵¹

The Old English charm makes use of various senses of the same expression to furnish its targeted ailment with a mythological backstory. The vague distinction between past and present facilitates the efficacy of this play on words: in the same way that the speaker once stood underneath a ‘leohtu(m) scylde’ to deflect life-sized spears, the patient should now shield him or herself (‘Scyld ðu ðe nu’) to recover from a nettling ailment. The condition is appropriately symbolised as a ‘lytel spere’.

The idea that a battle against opponents resembles a fight against illness also governs the poem’s retaliatory strategy. The charm clarifies its

⁴⁴⁹ Here, also see Weston 1985: 179.

⁴⁵⁰ No. 67 in Liebermann 1903: 7.

⁴⁵¹ All quoted from *MED*, s.v. ‘stich(e n.(1))’.

conviction that diseases stem from the evil intentions of outsiders early on, as it describes the shooting pains as a form of *nið*, a term that can be translated as ‘ill-will’, ‘envy’, ‘malice’, or ‘hostility’.⁴⁵² In *Beowulf*, Grendel is purportedly ‘rof’ (famous) for perpetrating ‘nīpgeuorc’ (malice work).⁴⁵³ The text later explores the implications of its animate aetiological theory further, as the speaker divulges his intention to mount a counter-attack: the ‘gyllende garas’ (yelling spears) of the ‘mihtigan wif’ should be countered with a ‘fleogende flan(e)’ (flying arrow).

Because the first section of the poem describes a battle scene, it is perhaps not surprising that it uses phrases that also appear in heroic poetry. The alliterative formulas ‘gyllende garas’ and ‘fleogende flane’ recur in several contemporary texts.⁴⁵⁴ Similarly, to stand *under linde* is a common expression in medieval Germanic verse. Lyricists such as Walther von der Vogelweide (c. 1170–1230) used such phraseology to describe peaceful romantic hideouts: ‘Under der linden | an der heide | dâ unser zweier bette was’ (under the linden tree, by the heath, there the two of us had our bed).⁴⁵⁵ Perhaps Felix Grendon assumed the Old English charm also described such a safe and peaceful dwelling place when he wrote that ‘the sufferer is directed to seek shelter under linden-trees’.⁴⁵⁶ Nevertheless, early medieval compositions almost exclusively use the word *lind*, ‘linden’, to describe a shield. To stand *under linde* is a lofty idiom for holding such a defensive piece of equipment above one’s head. The following passage from the Old High German *Hildebrandslied*, which relates a fight between a father and his son, helps to illustrate the charm’s indebtedness to the phraseology of early medieval heroic verse:

Do lættun se ærist asckim scritan,
Scarpên scûrim: dat in dem sciltim stônt.

⁴⁵² Bosworth and Toller, s.v. ‘nīp., es; *m.*’. See also Atherton 1993: 654–656.

⁴⁵³ Line 683, edited in Klaeber et al. 2008.

⁴⁵⁴ See Hall 2007b: 2, fn. 6.

⁴⁵⁵ Krause 1950: 52.

⁴⁵⁶ Grendon 1909: 117.

Dô stoptun tô samane staim bort chlodun,
Heuwen harmlicco huittę scilti,
Unti im iro lintun lutilo wurtun,
Giwigan miti wabnum.⁴⁵⁷

They first let ash wood spears advance
in sharp showers, so that these stood in the shields.
Then they stepped towards each other, cleaved bejewelled boards,
hewed harm-like, white shields,
until their linden [shields] became small,
destroyed by weapons.

The *Hildebrandslied* goes further than ‘For a Sudden Stitch’, in that it juxtaposes offensive and defensive types of timber. Spears are made from ash, and shields are made from linden wood. The parallels between the two passages are evident, however, as the German poem talks about two warriors who obstruct each other’s javelins with ‘huittę scilti’. These objects are later paraphrased as ‘lintun’. The speaker in the English charm stands ‘under linde, under leohtum scylde’ and averts a similar ‘sharp shower’ of ‘yelling spears’.

If the phraseology of heroic poetry presents one influence, the language of incantatory formulas presents another. We will explore the literary tension between original narrative content and stock phrases more extensively later in this discussion. It merits pointing out here that the speaker’s statement that ‘I will send them back another | a flying arrow in return’ re-emerges in later charms.⁴⁵⁸ A fourteenth-century German text says to a parasitic worm: ‘dz du mir wilt dun, dz wil ich dir dun’ (what you

⁴⁵⁷ Lines 62–68a, edited in Braune, Helm, and Ebbinghaus 1994: 85.

⁴⁵⁸ Monika Schulz has described this paradigm as ‘the boomerang effect’. See Schulz 2000a: 107.

want to do to me, I want to do to you).⁴⁵⁹ Likewise, a Scandinavian formula from 1750 runs:

Hørst, du onde Menniske! Det forgiftige Skud og Aakast du nu haver udsendt, skal jeg idag hjem til dig saaledes vende

ud fra vort Hoved
ud af vor Hjerne
ud af vort hjerte og Hjerterødder,
[...]
hjem i det onde Menneske, som dig haver udsendt.⁴⁶⁰

Listen, you evil man! The poisonous shot and assaulting throw you have now sent, I will return to you today.⁴⁶¹

Out from from our head.
Out of our brain.
Out of our heart and the innermost part of our heart.
[...]
Home to the evil man who has sent you.

This formula was recorded much later than ‘For a Sudden Stitch’. Nevertheless, its phraseology is remarkably similar. The Old English charm appears to rehearse a traditional argument when it maintains that ‘an eye for an eye’ is a suitable strategy for regaining bodily health.

Modern scholars have suggested a range of interpretations to clarify the identity of the charm’s powerful, loud women, the *mihtigan wif*. One of the oldest, most well-known, and also most controversial theories is that

⁴⁵⁹ Birlinger 1882: 228.

⁴⁶⁰ No. 106 in Bang 1901-1902: 55–56.

⁴⁶¹ See *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*, s.v. 1–3 ‘á·kast sb. n’. The term contains the element *kast*, ‘throw’, and often specifically describes verbal assaults and demonic incursions.

these female figures are ‘followers of Woden, humble relations of the Valkyries’.⁴⁶² Such powerful women ride on flying steeds in Old Icelandic poems.⁴⁶³ The evidence that they enjoyed the same reputation in tenth- and eleventh-century England as they must have done among pre-Christian Scandinavians, however, is not substantial.

A safer but not uncontested explanation connects the *mihtigan wif* of ‘For a Sudden Stitch’ to a motif in European folklore that is sometimes referred to as ‘The Wild Hunt’. Stories which use this motif vary significantly from period to period and place to place; some may have separate origins. However, all of them are consistent in that they relate a boisterous trek across the night sky.⁴⁶⁴ The previous chapter cited Burchard of Worms and Regino of Prüm’s descriptions of supernatural female figures that cause havoc and ‘ride with Diana’.⁴⁶⁵ Because these texts are contemporary with the Old English charm, they may provide some indication of the folkloric material that users of ‘For a Sudden Stitch’ would have recognised.⁴⁶⁶

Less often cited but still interesting are the images of haunted mounds that we find in some later medieval German (and post-medieval Scandinavian) charms. These charms do not mention riders. They do describe ill-willed women and folkloric disease demons that cause shot. One fourteenth-century specimen relates a conversation between ‘Unser herr’ (our Lord) and his ‘lieb traud muter’ (dear faithful mother). When the latter asks why her son is so ‘trawrig’ (sad) he responds:

ach herczenliebew muter mein,

⁴⁶² Stuart 1976: 320. For a collection of some of the earliest Valkyrie propositions, see Horn 1925: 89 See specifically footnote 4. A recent proponent is Glosecki 2007: 66.

⁴⁶³ For Old Norse references to Valkyries in flight, see Ruggerini 2006: 207, footnote 29, 231. For some examples and a discussion of Romantic depictions of this motif, see Ljøgdø: 148–149, 159–160.

⁴⁶⁴ This is an extensive subject. For more information and bibliographical references, see Hutton 2014; De Mayo 2006; Houston 1964; Lecouteux 2011; Greenwood 2009; Novak and Duncan 2002.

⁴⁶⁵ See footnote 401.

⁴⁶⁶ See Hall 2004: 168–170.

solt ich nit trawrig sein?’
da kom ich an pulwecks perg gangen,
da schoz mich der bulwecks,
da schoz mich die bulwecksin.⁴⁶⁷

Oh, dearest mother of mine,
should I not be sad?
I arrived at the bilwis mountain,
Then the bilwis shot me,
Then the female bilwis shot me.

Another formula from around the same time describes a similar scenario. The inhabitants of the dangerous ‘perg’ (the Old English poem uses the word *hlæw*, ‘mound’) are no longer solely called *pilwissen* (field spirits as well as disease demons which are somewhat comparable to elves⁴⁶⁸) but also ‘übeln weip’ (vile women):

Er chom gangen vil verre
Hin auf den pilwissen perg.
Do chomen die übeln weip
Und benamen im seinen leib.⁴⁶⁹

He came from very far,
towards the bilwis mountain.
Then came the vile women,
and took his life from him.

The assumption behind interpretations that draw parallels between the Old English charm and contemporary or later analogues is that the medieval

⁴⁶⁷ *Beschwörung XL^b* in Grimm 1878: 503. Also see Hampp 1961: 69–72.

⁴⁶⁸ For more on these entities, see Ernst 2011b: 253–255; Hanika 1953; Mackensen 1927.

⁴⁶⁹ Lines 3–6 of *Spruch 174* in Holzmann 2001: 212.

poem preserves a reduced reference to a more widespread story or story motif and that this has become obscure over time. This hypothesis is also endorsed to some extent here. However, it has not escaped criticism. Howell Chickering, for instance, argued in 1971 'that the possibility of a mythical story as a source of the speaker's power is extremely unlikely. It is more likely that the imaginative force of his magical practice, that is, the literary power in the texture of words, creates the special magic of the charm'.⁴⁷⁰

We have seen that the Old English charm does extract narrative content from single expressions. Throughout this section, we will discover it also draws on formulaic phraseology. Nevertheless, short, fragmented narratives that remember mythical or historical events to dictate how current events should proceed are prevalent in medieval incantations. Modern scholars commonly call such literary devices *historiolas*. By way of comparison, a charm against *stice* from Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 85 (s. xi), p. 17 runs:

Writ Cristes mael, and sing driwe daer on dis and Pater Noster:
*Longinus miles lancea ponxit dominum et restitit sanguis et recessit dolor.*⁴⁷¹

Write the sign of Christ and sing over it [the affected area] this [the charm] three times, as well as the Pater Noster: Longinus punctured the Lord, and the blood replenished, and the pain receded.

In this composition, the painful symptom *stice* is brought into relation with the actions of a legendary spear carrier. However, the *historiola* of the early English charm is straightforward to contextualise because we still have a written source that records the narrative to which it refers. The

⁴⁷⁰ Chickering 1971: 99.

⁴⁷¹ No. 49 in Storms 1948: 286.

apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus* (4th cent.) relates Longinus was a Roman soldier who examined whether Christ was still alive by stabbing him with a javelin.⁴⁷²

The Old English charm fluctuates between present and past tenses, suggesting it invokes a historical moment, too. It seems plausible the incantation develops one or more established motifs. The origin of this motif is presumably not biblical, but that does not necessitate individuals who used 'For a Sudden Stitch' considered it to be pagan or indeed fundamentally religious.⁴⁷³ To illustrate: charms that have only an anecdotal relation to the Bible and which relate vague narratives about supernatural shot-causing archers that are ensconced on mountaintops also circulated in nineteenth-century (Christian) Sweden:

Trollet uppå berget stod med sin båga spänd:

'Hvi står du här med båga spänd?'

'Jo, jag skall skjuta både folk och fä'

'Det skall jag dig förmena,

du skall skjuta i stockar och stenar'⁴⁷⁴

The troll stood on the mountain with his bow pulled back:

'Why are you standing here with your bow pulled back?'

'Yes, I will shoot both people and cattle.'

'That I will forbid you.

You shall shoot in sticks and stones'.

⁴⁷² The Longinus motif is omnipresent in medieval incantations, especially in charms that mean to staunch blood. See Hälsig 1910: 75–81; Haver 1964: 459; Schulz 2003a: 77–79.

⁴⁷³ Jolly 1996: 140; Abernethy 1983: 94–95.

⁴⁷⁴ No. 805 in Linderholm 1917-1940: 346.

Section 3: Seated Smiths

Following a second reiteration of the charm's catchphrase — 'Ut, lytel spere, gif hit her inne sy!' — the poem moves on to describe a gathering of seated smiths, manufacturing wound-spears:

Sæt smið, sloh seax lytel,
[...].⁴⁷⁵
Ut, lytel spere, gif herinne sy!
Syx smiðas sætan, wælspera worhtan.
Ut, spere! Næs in spere!⁴⁷⁶

A smith sat, wrought a little knife,
[...].
Out, little spear, if you are in here!
Six smiths sat, wrought wound spears.
Out, spear, not in, spear!

The precise explication of these smiths is yet another scholarly bone of contention. Researchers have disagreed over the moral leanings of these metalworkers. The argument is presently still unresolved and might even be irresolvable.⁴⁷⁷ The following hypotheses have been advanced:

- The smiths are on the side of the speaker. They are helping to create weapons to mount a counterattack.⁴⁷⁸

⁴⁷⁵ This line is corrupt. The manuscript reads 'iserna wund swiðe'. The line cannot be restored because it is uncertain how much is missing. See Storms 1948: 143, 148.

⁴⁷⁶ Lines 13–17.

⁴⁷⁷ European folklore presents distant parallels for both malign and helpful smiths. See, for instance, Forsblom 1927: 417; Randolph 1941: 195.

⁴⁷⁸ Horn 1925: 92; Chickering 1971: 101; Storms 1948: 156.

- The smiths are on the side of the opposition. Their weapons are a potential cause of the victim's pain.⁴⁷⁹
- The lonely smith is on the side of the speaker; the group of smiths is not.⁴⁸⁰

The charm provides no obvious clues about the moral leanings of the metalworkers it describes. Perhaps it mentions six because this unconventional number — medieval charms prefer three and nine — alliterates with other expressions in the same line, *smiðas*, *sætan*, and *spera*.⁴⁸¹ 'For a Sudden Stitch' may also refer to a story that involves six or seven craftsmen.⁴⁸²

Scholars who have assumed that either just the first or all of the smiths are on the speaker's side have often sought to associate the just-cited passage with stories about Weland. In early medieval England, this famous smith from Germanic legend was known specifically for the production of high-quality armour and weaponry.⁴⁸³ Grendon even conjectured the charm's exorcistic catchphrase was thought to be one of Weland's own inventions.⁴⁸⁴ This hypothesis is highly speculative, as are most theories that involve this character. Even so, Weland seems to have had a strong influence on the imagination of early medieval English individuals. Modern scholars are not the only ones who think 'Weland' when they hear 'smith'. After reading Boethius' depiction of the death of a certain Fabricius (compare: *faber*, 'craftsman'), King Alfred asked in Old English: '*Hwær sint nu þæs wisan Welandes ban, | þæs goldsmiðes, þe wæs geo mærost?*' (Where are now the bones of wise Weland, of the

⁴⁷⁹ Doskow 1976; Richardson 2001: 37; Olsen 2007: 27; Hall 2007b: 113.

⁴⁸⁰ Skemp 1911b: 292; Hauer 1978: 255.

⁴⁸¹ Storms 1948: 146.

⁴⁸² See further Richardson 2001: 30.

⁴⁸³ The literature on this subject is extensive. See Ellis-Davidson 1958; Christie 1969; Bradley 1987; James 1990; Kopár 1999; Alff 2013; Brunning 2019: 123, 140.

⁴⁸⁴ Grendon 1909: 112.

goldsmith that was once most celebrated?).⁴⁸⁵ Pettit offers an accurate indication of how difficult it is to come to any firm conclusion regarding the influence of the semi-divine artificer on the poem's potential associative resonances: '*If the smith is Weland — and he certainly need not be — this might (but need not) raise further unresolvable possibilities*'.⁴⁸⁶

Straightforward analogues to the passage in 'For a Sudden Stitch' that mentions a team of smiths are absent. Nevertheless, incantations for stabbing pains from other linguistic and cultural regions sometimes associate piercing weapons with the skilled individuals that make them. In the past, several scholars have commented on resemblances between 'For a Sudden Stitch' and Finnish charms that summon the divine smith Ilmarinen, another archetypal mythological artificer.⁴⁸⁷ The parallels between the two traditions are evident, even though it is not always straightforward to explain why.⁴⁸⁸

One ninth-century Irish charm also demonstrates some similarities to 'For a Sudden Stitch'. The text exorcises a 'delg' (thorn or pointed implement). It begins with relating the addressed ailment to the nail-inflicted wounds of Christ: 'Ar nóibbríathraib ro-labrastar Crist | assa chr[oich] | Díuscart dím a ndelg' (By the holy words that Crist spoke from his cross: Remove from me the thorn / pointed implement).⁴⁸⁹ Afterwards, it compares the same ailment to the 'Aird' (point) of the mythological smith Goibniu:

Benaim béim n-and
dod-athsceinn,
tod-scenn,

⁴⁸⁵ This interpretation was first suggested by Ellis-Davidson 1958: 145. Pettit repeated it in 1996: 635. The provided text is from Alfred's verse translation of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. See lines 33–34, Meter 10 in Irvine and Godden 2009: 427.

⁴⁸⁶ Pettit 1996: 635.

⁴⁸⁷ Grendon 1909: 214; Sandmann 1975: 82; Pettit 1996: 609–610. For more information about this smith and his connection to charm magic, see Tormey 2017: 137–142.

⁴⁸⁸ Compare Koegel 1894: 94. See also Bradley 1987: 2–15, esp. 7–9.

⁴⁸⁹ The translation and edition are based on Tuomi 2013: 62–63. Also see Carey 2019: 22–23, 32.

tod-aig.
Rogarg físs Goibnen.
Aird Goibnenn,
re n-aird Goibnenn
Ceingeth ass.

Fo-certar ind epaid-se i n-im nad tet i n-uisce 7 fu-slegar de imma
ndelg immeacuáirt 7 ní tét fora n-airrinde nach fora n-álath 7 mani bé
a n-delg and du toéth ind ala fiacail airthir a chinn.⁴⁹⁰

I strike a blow on it
which makes it spring out,
which makes it spring forward,
which drives it out.
Very harsh Goibniu's wisdom!
The point of Goibniu,
before the point of Goibniu,
Let it step out of him!

This charm is put in butter which does not go into water. This is
smeared all around the thorn, and it does not go on the point or the
wound. And if the thorn is not there, one of the two teeth in front of
his head will fall out.⁴⁹¹

Goibniu is a smith in Irish, rather than early English narratives.
Nevertheless, his name appears in a charm against a 'thorn' that was
recorded around the same time as 'For a Sudden Stitch'. To understand
the context of the English poem better, it is useful to examine some

⁴⁹⁰ Lines 7–15.

⁴⁹¹ The translation is based on Tuomi 2013: 62–63.

additional parallels between both texts. The Old Irish charm's reference to the application of butter — an expellant that is so powerful that it can make the patient's front tooth fall out — seems reminiscent of the Old English composition's direction to 'wyll' (boil) herbs 'in buteran'. That the Irish charm talks explicitly about 'the point of Goibniu' can be contextualised further: Goibniu seems to have been famous for manufacturing hurtful spears and creating an enchanted shaft called *nes*. The Old Irish *Sanas Cormaic* explains this weapon could 'immediately raise up a lump, full of bloody liquid and puss and it would burn like fire'.⁴⁹² Also interesting is that Goibniu's legendary biography involves an episode where he mass-produces spears together with two mythical co-workers.⁴⁹³ Gofannon, Goibniu's analogue in Welsh tradition, is in a thirteenth-century poem remembered as the creator of 'seith gwaew' (seven spears).⁴⁹⁴

However, without further context, it is imprudent to assume more than speculative, anecdotal associations between 'For a Sudden Stitch' and the legends of mythical smiths such as Weland, Goibniu, and Gofannon. Metalworkers are traditionally associated with magic in folklore on account of their association with the mystical power of fire. Some medieval sources suggest that practitioners of the profession could conjure up supernatural connotations even if they remained unnamed.⁴⁹⁵ One decree from 1511 forbids 'cōmon Artificers as Smythes Wevers and Women' from using 'socery and which crafte'. It claims such individuals were prone to resort to supernatural practices for healing purposes.⁴⁹⁶ The eighth-century 'Lorica of St Patrick' seeks to protect its speaker 'fri brichtu

⁴⁹² The text is traditionally ascribed to Cormac mac Cuilennáin (d. 908). The efficacy of the spear depends on whether or not the victim is a sinner. For an edition, translation, and discussion of the relevant passage, see Carey 2019: 33–35. Also see Randolph 1941: 193–194.

⁴⁹³ See Koch 2006b.

⁴⁹⁴ The poem is *Ymddiddan Myrddin a Thaliesin*, 'The Dialogue of Myrddin and Taliesin'. For information on this smith and his relation to Goibniu and other Celtic smiths, see Koch 2006a; Blažek 2008. Also see Ettlinger 1945: 299–300.

⁴⁹⁵ On the associations between magic and smiths in folklore, see Randolph 1941; Eliade 1955; Motz 1983; Budd and Taylor 1995; Hinton 1998; Barndon 2006; Tormey 2017.

⁴⁹⁶ '3° Hen. VIII c. 11' in 1817: 31–32.

ban ocus gobann ocus druad' (against the spells of women and smiths and druids).⁴⁹⁷

Section 4: Supernatural Snipers: *Ylfe*, *Ese*, and *Hægtessan*

The next segment of the poem offers a series of conditional statements. In these, the charm fleshes out the mythological undertone of its previous sections as it catalogues the potential malevolent influence of various supernatural beings:

Gif herinne sy isenes dæl,
hægtessan geweorc, hit sceal gemyltan.
Gif ðu wære on fell scoten, oððe wære on flæsc scoten,
oððe wære on blod scoten,⁴⁹⁸
oððe wære on lið scoten, næfre ne sy ðin lif atæsed.
Gif hit wære esa gescot oððe hit wære ylfa gescot
oððe hit wære hægtessan gescot, nu ic wille ðin helpan.
Þis ðe to bote esa gescotes, ðis ðe to bote ylfa gescotes,
ðis ðe to bote hægtessan gescotes; ic ðin wille helpan.⁴⁹⁹

If there is in here, a fragment of iron,
a hag's work, it shall melt.
Whether you have been shot in the skin, or shot in the flesh,
or shot in the blood,
or shot in a limb, may your body never be imperilled.
If it is the shot of demonic deities, or the shot of elves,

⁴⁹⁷ Edited and translated in Carey 1998: 133. For another Irish incantation against the spells of craftsmen, see Carey 2019: 47.

⁴⁹⁸ Pettit supplies 'oððe wære on ban scoten'.

⁴⁹⁹ Lines 18–26.

or the shot of hags, I will help you now.

This for you as a cure for the shot of demonic deities, this for you as
a cure for the shot of elves,

This for you as a cure for the shot of hags; I will help you.⁵⁰⁰

In the quoted section, the charm further explores the literary possibilities of words with more than one meaning. Earlier, the poem constructed a narrative from the polysemy of *stice*. The poem also utilises *anthimeria* to create narratological content out of single expressions. This rhetorical figure uses a word from one class as if it belongs to another. The charm is fond of turning adjectives and nouns into verbs and vice versa. Shields and flying arrows become defensive and offensive commands ('fleogende flan(e)' vs. 'Fleoh!' and 'under leohtu(m) scylde' vs. 'Scyld ðu ðe nu'). The industrious image of working smiths ('Syx smiðas sætan, wælspera worhtan') eventually solidifies into an iron 'hægtessan geweorc'. In the quoted section, however, the poem's main preoccupation is with the word *gescot*. Like *stice*, this expression had several meanings in early medieval England. Ordinarily, it denoted the trajectory of some sort of projectile. In (folk) medicine, it again seems to have signified a vague condition that could afflict people, cattle, and even plants. Middle English sources relate *schotes* to 'sekenesses of þe corne', 'crykke: Tetanus', and 'þe prikkynges in sydes'.⁵⁰¹ One remedy agrees with 'For a Sudden Stitch' about using herbs that remind of piercing weapons. It says: 'For þe schothe: Drynk pigle, þat is, schotworthe'.⁵⁰²

The previous section explained that 'For a Sudden Stitch' likens battling disease to battling opponents. The just-cited passage draws on this metaphorical device to supply the targeted ailment with an aetiology. Even in modern times, it can be challenging to establish the physical

⁵⁰⁰ The charm uses the singular genitive form of *hægtesse*. This is perhaps because it levels the endings. This chapter follows Alaric Hall's position that the implied meaning is plural. See footnote 8 in Hall 2004: 11.

⁵⁰¹ See *MED*, s.v. 4 'shōt n.'.

⁵⁰² Quoted in *MED*, s.v. 'pikle n.'.

causes of a specific bodily condition. The Old English charm circumvents this problem by endorsing a rationale that is supported chiefly by etymological evidence: a ‘shot’ is not only something that comes from somewhere; it also comes from something or someone. The text offers several hypotheses about specific demonic characters that are to blame for the patient’s bodily suffering. Following the implication of mighty women and seated smiths, the incantation accuses *ylfe*, ‘elves’, *ese*, ‘demonic deities’, and *hægtessan*, ‘hags’.⁵⁰³

Scholars have traditionally explicated ‘For a Sudden Stitch’ and other Old English remedies against *gescot* by referring to post-medieval folklore about elf shot and fairy shot.⁵⁰⁴ These mysterious ailments were attributed to the actions of well-armed supernatural characters with ambiguous moral standards.⁵⁰⁵ In 1681, Joseph Glanvill — a steadfast proponent of the idea that folklore could serve as proof for the supernatural — claimed that the sickness of a certain Will Black was an elf shot.⁵⁰⁶ Four decades later, a man called Farquhar Ferguson confessed before the Kirk Session of Kilmory that he had skills in curing elf shot and that he had frequently been asked to ‘search for holes in people that were suspected to be shot’.⁵⁰⁷ Sometimes, flint arrowheads and other spear-shaped stones were used to corroborate elf and fairy beliefs. These were known as elf or fairy darts and they had various significances in folk medicine.⁵⁰⁸

Despite some alluring analogues, the time-honoured ideas that elves are exceptionally proficient marksmen and that ‘For a Sudden Stitch’ counteracts chiefly ‘elf shot’ are somewhat misleading. First, the Old English charm does not *just* blame elves. It also implicates several other

⁵⁰³ See footnote 500.

⁵⁰⁴ See, for example, Bonser 1926; Singer and Grattan 1952: 58–61; Meyer 1903a; Kittredge 1929b; De Vries 1931.

⁵⁰⁵ The phenomenon was studied widely during the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. See, for example, Cromek 1810; Lukis 1867-1868; Meehan 1906; Davidson 1956, 1960; Thun 1969.

⁵⁰⁶ Glanvill 1681: 303.

⁵⁰⁷ Passage quoted with further context in Henderson and Cowan 2001: 79.

⁵⁰⁸ See, for example, Lukis 1867-1868; Dalgarno 1892; Evans 1897; Meehan 1906; Hall 2005b, a.

entities (*mihtigan wif*, *smiðas*, *ese* and a *hægtesse* [commentators have commonly agreed the implied meaning is plural: *hægtessan*⁵⁰⁹). Second, disease names that mention a stinging sensation and some sort of demonic entity are common in European languages.⁵¹⁰ Such terms usually conform to regional and period-specific belief patterns about what kind of characters are harmful.

The usual suspects are the occupants of liminal zones.⁵¹¹ Christian monks from eleventh-century Germany used charms ‘contra saggitam diaboli’.⁵¹² Sources from (early) modern Scandinavia reveal fears about ethnically-inflected ailments such as *finnskot* and *lapskot*.⁵¹³ The Swedish philologist Johan Ihre recorded the following charm in his dissertation on ‘today’s superstitions’ from 1740:

Det kom tre finnar östan över land,
de gorde åt hottskott [?], trollskott,
hiertskott, lapskott, hælskott, tarmskott.⁵¹⁴

Three fins came east over the country,
they caused threat shot(?), troll shot,
heart shot, lap shot, heel shot, bowel shot.

We saw earlier that medieval Germans sometimes blamed *bilwissen* for shot.⁵¹⁵ The same individuals dreaded *Hexen*, ‘witches’, and *Albe*, ‘elves’, and they, therefore, also used words such as *Hexenschuss* and *Alpschoss*.⁵¹⁶ Some English speakers from the 1700s seem to have specifically worried about the disastrous (lit.: ‘dis-astral’) influence of

⁵⁰⁹ See footnote 500.

⁵¹⁰ Storms 1948: 142; Honko 1959.

⁵¹¹ Conceptual and lexical shape-shifting again plays an important role. See footnote 349.

⁵¹² Heim 1892: 551. See also Atherton 1993.

⁵¹³ For some examples beyond those given in this chapter, see Lid 1921.

⁵¹⁴ No. 851 in Linderholm 1917-1940: 366. Also see Lid 1921.

⁵¹⁵ See footnote 468.

⁵¹⁶ *Hexenschuss* is still used today; for a historical attestation of *Alpschoss*, see Gesner 1603: 863.

planets. These heavenly bodies were also implicated in the 'shot conspiracy'. The glossary of a collection of English and Scottish songs from 1740 explains 'elf shot' as 'planet struck'.⁵¹⁷

We do not know very much about English *ese* and *hægtessan*, the characters which the Old English charm blames for *gescot* along with elves. The latter are etymologically related to modern English 'hag' and modern German *Hexe*, 'witch'. The same word is also a cognate of Old High German *hagazissa*, 'witch', Middle Dutch *haghetisse*, 'witch', and Norwegian *haugtusse*, 'supernatural woman'.⁵¹⁸ Glosses show that early English scribes connected *hægtessan* to characters from classical mythology such as the Furies, goddesses of vengeance, the Parcae, goddesses of fate, and *strigae*, initially blood-drinking nocturnal spirits but later also witches.⁵¹⁹ Whether such glosses are suitable for our lexicographical objective is not clear, as they intend to convey the meaning of classical concepts to individuals who already know what a *hægtesse* is, rather than explain what a *hægtesse* is to individuals who do not know classical mythology. What is undeniable, however, is that these beings are a category of *mihtigan wif*. Thus, the poem begins with a story about powerful women who throw spears and ends with a section that exorcises the *gescot* of one or more *hægtessan*.⁵²⁰

Ese may be related to Old English *os*, which probably means 'pagan-' or 'demonic deity'.⁵²¹ Old Icelandic stories about the cognate *æsir* are well documented. It is unclear to what extent we can use these to contextualise the Old English term. The word only recurs as the designation of a glyph in the runic alphabet and as an element in specific names (e.g. Oswald, Osbert, Osmund). *Ese* has been interpreted as 'a

⁵¹⁷ *The Lark. Containing a Collection of Four Hundred and Seventy Four Celebrated English and Scotch Songs*. 1740: 420.

⁵¹⁸ See *OED*, s.v. 'hag, n.1'. Also see Lecouteux 1983; Polomé 1987. Dated but still useful is Franck 1901.

⁵¹⁹ See *DOE*, s.v. 'hægtesse, hægtes, hæts'; Wellington 1978; Hall 2004: 171-174.

⁵²⁰ For a study which explores this idea further, not always convincingly, see Hauer 1978.

⁵²¹ Bosworth and Toller, s.v. 'ós'. Also see Abernethy 1983: 109-110; Hall 2007b: 63-67, 112-114, 116.

unique survival of the old heathen name with its full references to the high gods, Thunor (Thor), Woden (Odin), Tiw (Tyr), &c.’⁵²² However, such an explication is not persuasive: ‘For a Sudden Stitch’ was recorded during the Christian period and the specific context in which the term occurs suggest it is more likely that the *ese* have here been demoted to a lower class of pain-inflicting demons.⁵²³

The disease demons in ‘For a Sudden Stitch’ are, admittedly, nebulous figures. This makes it even more intriguing that the incantatory formulas in which they occur have numerous analogues. A fourteenth-century exorcism from England envisions demonic temptations to originate from, among other beings, ‘strige et elfes’.⁵²⁴ *Beowulf* also associates elves with a more extensive litany of liminal beings. The relevant section seeks explicitly to catalogue the monstrous spawn of Cain, and runs as follows:

panon untydras ealle onwocon,
 eotenas ond ylfe ond orcneas,
 swylce gigantas, þa wið gode wunnon.⁵²⁵

From there all monstrous births awoke,
 giants and elves and spirits from the underworld,
 also titans, who contested with God.⁵²⁶

Equally, the exorcistic collocation of ‘fell’, ‘flæsc’, ‘blod’, and ‘lið’ appears to be ancient — some scholars have proposed a connection to lexically similar Sanskrit analogues— and it appears also in contemporary

⁵²² Singer and Grattan 1952: 174.

⁵²³ Abernethy 1983: 109–110. For an example of a charm which envisions *Wutan* (whose Old Norse cognate, *Óðinn*, is a member of the *æsir*) as a demonic being, see the fourteenth-century ‘Münchner Nachtsegen’, edited in Schulz 2000b.

⁵²⁴ The text has not been made available in print. Original in London, British Library, Harley 273, fol. 213^v.

⁵²⁵ Lines 111–113, edited in Klaeber, et al. 2008.

⁵²⁶ Translating names for monstrous entities is difficult. The given terms are approximations.

charms.⁵²⁷ A short incantation from tenth-century Saxony, ‘Contra vermes’, includes the following statement:

ut fana themo marge an that ben,
fan themo bene an that flesg,
ut fan themo flesgke an thia hud,
ut fan thera hud an thesa strala.⁵²⁸

Out from the marrow to the bone,
from the bone to the flesh,
from the flesh to the skin,
from the skin to this arrow.

It is not uncommon for charms against shot to hedge their bets and to divide conditions into lists of different types. We have already seen that some nineteenth-century Scandinavians used incantations that cure *hottskott trollskott, hiertskott, lapskott, hælskott, and tarmskott*.⁵²⁹ In 1607, Bartie Paterson was interrogated in Scotland for witchcraft allegations. She knew the following charm:

I charm thé for arrow-schot,
For dor-schot, for wondo-schot,
For ey-schot, for tung-schot,
For hert-schot, all the maist.⁵³⁰

As a final point of interest, we may add that the poem’s catchphrases — ‘Ut, lytel spere’ and ‘Ut, spere, næs in, spere’ — resemble the phraseology of some other charms, too. The following exorcistic statements, taken from

⁵²⁷ Ivanov 1999; Schulz 2000a: 211.

⁵²⁸ Spruch 1 in Holzmann 2001: 133.

⁵²⁹ See footnote 514.

⁵³⁰ Pitcairn 1833: 536.

sources from various periods, provide an indication of the typicality of commands for some sort of demonic entity or pain-inspiring object to leave a patient's body:

English	14 th cent.	But kanstow playen raket, to and fro, Nettle in, dok out, now this now that, Pandare? ⁵³¹
	19 th cent.	Out 'ettle, in dock! ⁵³²
	19 th cent.	Owt fyer in frost! ⁵³³
Old Saxon	10 th cent.	Gang út, Nesso! ⁵³⁴
Old Norse	13 th cent.	Út y! Inn kyl! ⁵³⁵
Danish	c. 1912	[U]d alle onde skudder! ⁵³⁶
Swedish	c. 1904	[B]o du härinne, så skall du här ut! ⁵³⁷
	20 th cent.	Värk ut Men värk int in! ⁵³⁸
	c. 1658	Vem sköut? Trolle sköut

⁵³¹ Lines 461–462 of *Troilus and Criseyde*, edited in Benson, Robinson, and Cannon 2008: 544.

⁵³² Quoted in Mason 1873: 555. Also see Roper 2005: 143.

⁵³³ Quoted in Durrant Cooper 1850: 482. Also see Roper 2005: 116–119.

⁵³⁴ Spruch 1 in Holzmann 2001: 133.

⁵³⁵ B 252 in McKinnell, Simek, and Düwel 2004: 133. Also see Roper 2005: 116–119.

⁵³⁶ No. 213 in Ohrt 1917: 186.

⁵³⁷ No. 364 in Linderholm 1917-1940: 182.

⁵³⁸ No. 622 in Forsblom 1927: 162.

Pilar stora å små

Flåj ut!

Flåj ut!

Flåj ut!⁵³⁹

Conclusion

‘For a Sudden Stitch’ excels in raising questions. Who are the *mihtigan wif* in the charm’s opening scene? Why are they so loud? Who are the seated smiths, and what is their intention? What is the relationship between the charm’s various characters? ‘For a Sudden Stitch’ does not offer unequivocal responses to these questions. Early medieval audiences may have known some of the stories behind its vague references. If so, these appear to have eluded the archival efforts of contemporary authors.

At the same time, the charm’s evocative imagery derives in part from the successful implementation of specific literary techniques. This chapter has provided a range of analogues to argue that ‘For a Sudden Stitch’ extracts stories from single words and expressions. The charm dramatises the etymology of disease names and exploits evocative botanical labels to integrate verbal and herbal cures. The text also juxtaposes and pieces together various incantatory formulas. The latter are often common and sometimes ancient. The overarching objective of ‘For a Sudden Stitch’ is universality: the body should be protected in all places and regardless of the cause. Come what may, the charmer assures, ‘ic ðin wille helpan’.⁵⁴⁰

⁵³⁹ No. 903 in Forsblom 1927: 272.

⁵⁴⁰ Line 24. Compare line 22.

4. Teary Eyes and Fungal Fingernails: ‘For the Water Elf Disease’

Introduction

‘For the Water Elf Disease’ combines a herbal remedy with poetic formulas.⁵⁴¹ It appears on fols. 125^r-125^v of London, British Library, Royal 12. D. xvii, a tripartite medical manuscript. The first two parts of the codex comprise *Bald’s Leechbook*, a widely studied vernacular remedy book. ‘For the Water Elf Disease’ appears in the manuscript’s lesser-known third section. This is often called *Leechbook III*.⁵⁴² The complete charm runs as follows:

Gif mon biþ on wæterælfadle, þonne beoþ him þa handnæglas wonne and þa eagan tearige and wile locian niþer. Do him þis to læcedome: eoforþrote, cassuc, fone niopoweard, eowberge, elehtre, eolone, merscmealwan crop, fenminte, dile, lilie, attorlape, polleie, marubie, docce, ellen, felterre, wermod, streawbergean leaf, consolde; ofgeot mid ealap, do hæligwæter to, sing þis gealdor ofer þriwa:

⁵⁴¹ Other titles are ‘Gif mon biþ on wæterælfadle’ (Opening phrase in Old English) ‘Wið Wæterælfadle’ (Grendon’s modern Old English title) ‘For the Water-Elf Disease’ (Dobbie) ‘For the Water-Elf-Disease’ (Williamson).

⁵⁴² For this manuscript, see Kesling 2020: 57–94.

Ic benne awrat betest beadowræda,
swa benne ne burnon, ne burston,
ne fundian, ne feologan,
ne hoppettan, ne wund waxsian,
ne dolh diopian; ac him self healde halewæge,
ne ace þe þon ma, þe eorþan on eare ace.

Sing þis manegum sipum: Eorþe þe onbere eallum hire mihtum and
mægenum.

Þas galdor mon mæg singan on wunde.⁵⁴³

If a person has water elf disease, his handnails are brown and his eyes teary and he wants to look down. Administer this medicine to him: carline thistle, reed, the lower part of flag [a plant of the iris family], yew berry, lupin[?], elecampane, a head of a marshmallow, water mint, dill, lily, *attorlape*,⁵⁴⁴ pennyroyal, white horehound, [curled or broad-leaved] dock, elder, common centaury, wormwood, strawberry leaves, comfrey [or daisy].⁵⁴⁵ Soak them in ale; add holy water. Sing this charm over it three times:

I wrapped the wounds in the best of battle-bandages;⁵⁴⁶
That the wounds may neither burn nor burst,
Neither spread nor putrify.

⁵⁴³ 'Metrical Charm 7' in Dobbie 1942: 124–125. Other modern editions are Grendon 1909: 194–195; Storms 1948: 158–159; Stuart 1973: 707–719; Sandmann 1975: 42–43; Abernethy 1983: 36, 39–40; Bjork 2014: 214–215. Superseded editions are as follows: Grimm 1876: 1039; Cockayne 1865: 350; Leonhardi 1905: 107; Brooke 1892: 138.

⁵⁴⁴ For a discussion of this plant, see the discussion of *Namenzauber* starting at page 72.

⁵⁴⁵ These plant names were translated using the respective lemmas in the *Dictionary of Old English Plant Names* 2007–2009.

⁵⁴⁶ An alternative, less obvious translation of the line is 'I wrote down the best of battle troops for the wounds'. See footnote 566 and 567.

Nor may they hop around; nor may the wounds increase,
Nor may the wound deepen; instead, [I] myself offer him [the
wound/ the patient] a healing potion.
May it not ache any more for you than the earth aches in
ploughland.⁵⁴⁷

Sing this many times: earth will destroy you with all her might and
power.

One may (also) sing the charms on a wound.⁵⁴⁸

This chapter offers an analysis of the just-cited text and concentrates on three interpretative issues. Its first section will clarify the name of the targeted illness and discusses the literary and physical implications of being 'on wæterælfadle'. The chapter's subsequent two sections will contextualise the parts of the charm that the performer needs to 'sing'. Here, the discussion will concentrate on explicating the text's poetic compounds, technical terms, and abstruse syntax. The final section of the chapter will shed light on the pharmacology of the herbal recipe. As argued below, 'For the Water Elf Disease' incorporates the earliest English attestation of a later much more widespread incantatory motif concerning the treatment of wounds. The charm deviates from later analogues in that it demonstrates a remarkable interest in arcane phraseology and possibly exotic ingredients.

⁵⁴⁷ Another possible translation is of the second part of the line is: 'than the earth aches in the sea'. See footnote 614.

⁵⁴⁸ The index of *Leechbook III* indicates that this sentence means to point out another application of the charms. It runs: 'LXIII. Tacnu hu þu meht ongitan hwæþer mon sie on waeter aelf adle on laecedom wiþ þam ond gealdor on to singanne ond þæt ilce mon maeg singan on wunda'. Cockayne 1865: 304-305.

Possible Identifications of Water Elf Disease

Wæterælfadl has been translated as ‘water-elf disease’ (a disease somehow associated with water-elves) and as ‘water elf-disease’ (an elf-disease somehow associated with water).⁵⁴⁹ Some prolific early commentators have favoured the first of these interpretations. Nineteenth-century discussions often claim that ‘water-elves and sea-elves [are] a curious bit of illustration of our Anglo-Saxon popular mythology’.⁵⁵⁰ In 1972, Heather Stuart argued the **wæteryllfe* were the original elves, servants of Thunor and especially active during storms’.⁵⁵¹ Nevertheless, the second method of dividing these three nouns is probably more accurate: ‘water elves’ were most likely not part of the standard Old English lexicon. The words *wæterælfen* and *sæælfen* do appear in some glossaries. Yet, in these instances, they function as translations for female characters from classical lore that resemble elves, aside from the fact that they dwell in aquatic habitats. Such wordlists are, moreover, often paradigmatic, and they render *oreades* as ‘duun . aelfinni’; *maiades* as ‘feld aelfinne’; and *driades* as ‘uudu . aelfinne’.⁵⁵² Old English words for elemental subclasses of elves are probably not ‘curious bit[s]’ of ‘popular mythology’ but neologisms invented by early medieval glossators.⁵⁵³

Meanwhile, English sources from various periods mention a range of different elf- and water diseases. Old English medical texts do not only list *wæterælfadl*, but also *ælfadl*, ‘elf disease’, *ælfsgoða*, ‘elf hiccup’, and *ælfside*, ‘elf magic’.⁵⁵⁴ The same texts use words such as *wæteradl*,

⁵⁴⁹ For the first translation, see Storms 1948: 160; Schneider 1969: 295. For the second, see Bonser 1963: 162–163; Hall 2004: 116–117.

⁵⁵⁰ Wright 1884: 457.

⁵⁵¹ Stuart 1976: 318.

⁵⁵² Goodrich 2015: 435.

⁵⁵³ This observation follows Hall 2004: 85. For a leechbook remedy which seems to use the terms *castalides* and *ælf* interchangeably, see No. 17 D in Storms 1948: 226–227. This remedy is discussed further in Závoti 2013: 74–75.

⁵⁵⁴ For discussions of these terms, see Hall 2004: 113–131. One may also wish to consider some of the qualifying comments in McGowan 2009: 118–119. For the

‘water disease’, *wæterbolla*, ‘dropsy(?)’ [lit.: ‘water bowl’], *wætergeblæd*, ‘water blister’, and *wæterseocness*, ‘water sickness’. Middle English and (Early) Modern sources occasionally mention conditions in the order of water gall, water blister, water brash, water canker, water farcin, water garget, water murrain, water pang, water stroke, water weal, and water pox.⁵⁵⁵ Some of the just-mentioned terms are hard to define, but it is clear that they have something to do with either elves or water. The Old English charm probably seeks to cure an ailment whose designation unites these discrete naming traditions.

‘For the Water Elf Disease’ prevents wounds from ‘burning and bursting’. Aside from an inclination to look down, patients might have brown fingernails and teary eyes. These symptoms are not typical for any distinct ailment we would recognise today. There are several possibilities to explain the disparity, three of which stand out.

The first is that ‘water elf disease’ is a disease that is no longer common. Leprosy, for instance, is rarely diagnosed in modern Western hospitals. It can cause ulcers and burning skin sensations. Sometimes, it also affects the tear duct.⁵⁵⁶

Another possibility is that ‘water elf disease’ is a collective description for ailments that regularly co-occur. Diabetes combined with candidiasis fits the described symptoms. Insulin-related disorders were poorly understood in the early Middle Ages and often misdiagnosed. If diabetes remains untreated, the disease causes an unquenchable thirst, watery eyes, and ulcerous, slow-healing sores. Patients pass water so frequently that Aretaeus of Cappadocia (81–138 AD) understood diabetes as ‘a melting down of the flesh and limbs into urine’. He related: ‘The patient never stops drinking water but the flow is incessant as if from the

occurrence of elves in disease terminology, see further Thun 1969; Závoti 2013; Fraaije 2019.

⁵⁵⁵ See *OED*, s.v. ‘water-gall, n.’ and c11 ‘water, n.’. It seems unlikely that all *OED* definitions have been dated correctly. Cross-reference these with Norri 2016.

⁵⁵⁶ I wish to thank Susan Irvine for suggesting this possibility.

opening of aqueducts'.⁵⁵⁷ The brown fingernails which 'For the Water Elf Disease' mentions are not a direct symptom of diabetes, but the condition increases a patients' susceptibility to fungal infections. A recent team of researchers concluded people with diabetes often suffer from nails 'under fungal siege'.⁵⁵⁸

A third possibility is that that the Old English term approximates a range of similar, lesion- and blister-related conditions. Papilloma- and herpes viruses can cause 'burning' blisters, warts, sores, and watery eyes. In rare cases, viral infections such as chickenpox and hand, foot, and mouth disease (HFMD) can provoke a sensitivity to light (which may cause patients to look down) as well as onychomadesis (nail shedding) and onychomycosis (a fungal infection of the nail).⁵⁵⁹

Similar expressions from other languages can also provide insight into the type of conditions we may associate with water elf disease. The previous two chapters have demonstrated medieval and post-medieval individuals thought of elves as disease demons and that it is not uncommon to encounter them in aetiological explanations and disease names. 'For the Water Elf Disease' singles out a watery version of elf sickness. Intriguingly, Norwegian uses the fossilised word *elveblest*, 'elf-blown', to refer to hives, an 'allergisk hudsykdom med kløende vabler' (allergic skin disease with itchy blisters).⁵⁶⁰ The same language calls the chickenpox *vannkopper*, 'water-cups'.⁵⁶¹

Some medieval sources express the same triangular association between skin injuries, damaging gusts of breath, and folkloric notions about ill-willed elves. One Middle English source from 1475 prescribes a

⁵⁵⁷ Adams 1856: 338–339.

⁵⁵⁸ Pierard and Pierard-Franchimont 2005.

⁵⁵⁹ Hoy et al. 2012; Podder, Das, and Gharami 2015; Kim et al. 2014; Cameron 1993: 154; Sechi et al. 2018.

⁵⁶⁰ *Det Norske Akademis Ordbok (NAOB)*, s.v. 'elveblest substantiv'. Also see Backman 1927; Thun 1969: 387. For a related phenomenon from more modern folklore, see Barbara 1991.

⁵⁶¹ *Det Norske Akademis Ordbok (NAOB)*, s.v. 'vannkopper substantiv'. Dutch uses *waterpokken* and German *Wasserpocken*. One of the just-cited historical English diseases is water pox. See footnote 555.

remedy for a person that is ‘ful of elue bleynes’ (‘blaynes’ in Middle English are ‘vesicles containing liquid or putrid matter’).⁵⁶² Meanwhile, a treatise on the Fall in the Vernon Manuscript (c. 1390) explains that if ‘eny mon is [...] elf-iblowe he hit hath of the angelus that fellen out of hevene’.⁵⁶³ The ‘Münchner Nachtsegen’ presents an incantatory analogue for the idea that an *alb* can infect individuals with foul breath. The fourteenth-century *Segen* makes sure to point out the peculiar shape of the pestering being’s respiratory instrument: ‘alb mit diner crummen nasen | ich vorbithe dir aneblasen’ (*alb* with your crooked nose, I forbid you to blow on [me]).⁵⁶⁴

Heroic Bandages and Echoic Wound Incantations

Now that we have a better understanding of what conditions water-elf-disease connotes, we can examine the phraseology of the verbal remedy. In the past, the composition’s first poetic line, ‘Ic benne awrat betest beadowræda’, has been translated as ‘I have inscribed the best of fighting troops against the wounds’.⁵⁶⁵ It has also been rendered as ‘I have bound on the wounds the best of war-bandages’.⁵⁶⁶ The first translation interprets the verb *awrat* as a past form of *awritan*, ‘to write down’, and the noun *beadowræd* as a heroic kenning for the collection of herbs mentioned in the recipe (reading *wræd* as ‘troop’). The second presumes *awrat* is a past form of *awriþan*, ‘to bind up’, and that the second element of the noun *beadowræd* derives from this same verb. In this case, *wræd* does not mean ‘troop’ but ‘bandage’.⁵⁶⁷

⁵⁶² See definitions A.1 and B.2 of ‘blain’ in Norri 2016: 99.

⁵⁶³ Blake 1972: 106–107. For additional examples, see Bonser 1926: 359.

⁵⁶⁴ Lines 33–34, edited in Schulz 2000b: 153.

⁵⁶⁵ Nelson 1989: 51.

⁵⁶⁶ Storms 1948: 159.

⁵⁶⁷ DOE, s.v. ‘beadu-wræd. Noun (m., cl. 1)’.

Both of these interpretations are linguistically possible.⁵⁶⁸ The former, however, requires a stretch of the imagination. It also necessitates that the charm and the recipe were composed together. Meanwhile, collocations of *awriþan*, 'to bandage' and *wræd*, 'bandage', are common. In the Old English translation of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, for example, a man 'up asæt & sylfa his wunda awrað' (sat up and bound his wounds himself).⁵⁶⁹ King Alfred's translation of Pope Gregory's *Pastoral Care* includes the following observation: 'Sio wund wile toberan, gif hio ne bið gewriðen mid wræde' (the wound will separate if it is not bound up with a bandage).⁵⁷⁰ Evidence from some other charms also stress the idea that the charm's *beadowræd* describes a dressing. A Dutch incantation from the nineteenth century begins:

Ik heb een gelukzalig uur gevonden
En verbind ik deze wonden;
Dat het niet tot zweren komt
Geen roos en ook niet zwellen doet.⁵⁷¹

I have found a fortunate hour,
and I bandage these wounds,
so that they will not fester,
will not infect, and also not swell.⁵⁷²

Meanwhile, the poem's diction *is* reminiscent of the elevated register of heroic poetry, a genre that conventionally discusses the feats of war troops. For example, the element *beado*, 'battle, conflict', almost

⁵⁶⁸ See Bosworth and Toller, s.v. 'wræd, wræð, es; m.'.

⁵⁶⁹ Miller 1890: 326.

⁵⁷⁰ Sweet 1871: 122.

⁵⁷¹ No. 354 in Haver 1964: 156.

⁵⁷² Like the Old English text, the Dutch charm switches between plural and singular forms. The translation stays in the plural. 'Roos' is probably not shingles but 'wondroos'. This is often translated as 'erysipelas' in English, but in this context it is perhaps better to prefer the term's broader meaning, 'infection'. Also see the second cited German charm in the next section (footnote 582).

exclusively occurs in elevated literary expressions that describe war-related matters.⁵⁷³ A *beadupreat* is a war troop, while *beadoleoma*, ‘battle-light’, and *beadumece*, ‘battle blade’, are poetic descriptions for swords. In ‘For the Water Elf Disease’, *beado* appears in conjunction with the superlative adjective *betst*, producing a collocation which is equally reminiscent of the phraseology of heroic poetry. In *Beowulf*, the protagonist describes his armour as ‘beaduscruða betst’ (the best of battle garments); the poem later nominates the character *Hnæf* as ‘Herescyldinga betst beadorinca’ (the best warrior of the Herescyldings).⁵⁷⁴

Equally, the term *benne* seems to have been rare in conversational Old English. As a simplex, the word is attested just nine times, exclusively in verse, and often in an alliterative position.⁵⁷⁵ *Christ B* characterises the devil’s deceptions as ‘Blatast benna’ (the lividest of wounds).⁵⁷⁶ *Andreas* includes the following passage:

sint me leoðu tolocen, lic sare gebrocen,
banhus blodfag, benne weallað
seonodolg swatige.⁵⁷⁷

My limbs are dislocated, my body sorely broken;
my bone-house blood-stained, wounds weal
gory sinew-gashes.

The Old English charm may not deliberately muster a battle troop composed of herbs. Nevertheless, its lexical choices do summon up associations to an exalted poetic register, often used to extoll martial feats and relay heroic feats.

⁵⁷³ See the compounds listed in *DOE*, s.v. ‘beadu. Noun, f., cl. 2’.

⁵⁷⁴ Line 453a, and lines 1108b–9a, edited in Klaeber, et al. 2008.

⁵⁷⁵ *DOE*, s.v. ‘benn’.

⁵⁷⁶ Line 771a, edited in Krapp and Dobbie 1936.

⁵⁷⁷ Lines 1404–6a, edited in Krapp and Dobbie 1936.

The next section of the charm presents a sequence of alliteratively paired verbs that describe undertakings the *benne* should eschew. They should ‘ne burnon, ne burston | ne fundian, ne feologan | ne hoppettan’. Moreover, the incantation asserts that ‘ne wund waxsian | ne dolh diopian’.⁵⁷⁸ Heroic poetry again provides analogues. A similar alliterative doublet occurs in *Beowulf*:

ōa sio wund ongon
 þe him se eorðdraca aer geworhte
 swelan ond swellan.⁵⁷⁹

Then the wound,
 which the earth-dragon inflicted on him before,
 began to burn and swell.

Nevertheless, numerous incantations from several European languages also use such phraseology. Oskar Ebermann collected a significant number of these in his 1903 work *Blut- und Wundsegen in ihrer Entwicklung dargestellt*.⁵⁸⁰ It remains invaluable as an academic resource. Several charm collections have been published since that, along with new material, offer more proficiently edited versions of the primary sources. Some relevant quotations from these more recent editions are given below:

German	11 th cent.	[D]az tu niewedar ni gituo noh tolc noh tōt houpit. ⁵⁸¹
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⁵⁷⁸ ‘waxsian’ has been read in the past as ‘waco sian’. The manuscript reading is not clear, and the word seems to include an erasure. It resembles ‘waco sian’. The term probably uses an ‘x’ with rounded sides, which can be mistaken for ‘co’. See Dobbie 1942: 214.

⁵⁷⁹ Lines 2711b–13a, edited in Klaeber, et al. 2008.

⁵⁸⁰ Ebermann 1903: 52–64. For a comparable contemporary study, see Hälsig 1910: 85–88. For these charm’s later development in (medieval) England, see Smallwood 2004; Roper 2005: 113–115.

⁵⁸¹ Heim 1892: 551. The translation is contested. Abernethy (1983: 209) reads: ‘that you cause neither thing, neither wound nor death (?)’.

	13 th cent.	Daz olei troufet in die wunden, Diu wolle sî dar ûf gebunden. [...] Unt daz infûlte noch inswar Noch geschôz quam dar. ⁵⁸²
	15 th cent.	[A]lse der Jude Longinus unseme herren in sine siten stach, die wunde en hiccethe noch en sweizethe noch en eiterthe noch en fulete noch en swal noch en swar, also muozen alle die wunden dun da dise wort uber gesprochen werden. ⁵⁸³
	15 th cent.	[D]as dis weder enchwilt weder enhelt. ⁵⁸⁴
Swedish	c. 1870–1880	[A]tt din kropp skall hvarken härpa eller värka, hvarken svulna eller svida. ⁵⁸⁵
	c. 1880	[D]itt ben eller arm [...] skall hvarken spränga, värka eller svida

⁵⁸² Spruch 193 in Holzmann 2001: 221–222. ‘The oil drips into the wounds; the wool be bound on there. [...] And that neither putrefied nor suppurred, nor did shot come there’.

⁵⁸³ Spruch 195 in Holzmann 2001: 224. ‘When the Jew Longinus stabbed our Lord in his side, the wound did not throb(?) nor bleed, nor fester, nor putrefy, nor swelled, nor hurt, so must do all wounds as these words are spoken over them’.

⁵⁸⁴ Spruch 198 in Holzmann 2001: 225–226. ‘That this neither swells nor grows’.

⁵⁸⁵ No. 193 in Linderholm 1917-1940: 119. ‘That your body shall neither sting nor ache, neither swell nor burn’.

		mer än det ben, som togs ur Adams sida! ⁵⁸⁶
Norwegian	c. 1780	Inte ske dig Værk Inte ske dig Svide Inte ske dig Svul(l)en. ⁵⁸⁷
Danish	17 th cent	Du skalt huerchen stiche eller verche, bryde eller blaane! ⁵⁸⁸
	19 th cent.	Du skal hverken stinge eller springe, du skal hverken bryde eller blaane! ⁵⁸⁹
Dutch	15 th cent.	[S]o manic dij dattu en moet swellen noch zweeren nemmermeer, no deren, ende dattu moets dwinen ende vergaen! ⁵⁹⁰
English	14 th cent.	[P]at þe wounde ne ake, ne swelle, Ne rancle, ne festre, ne blede. ⁵⁹¹
	1400–1430	Hise woundes ne swollen ne ne

⁵⁸⁶ No. 704 Linderholm 1917-1940: 317. 'Your leg or arm shall not burst, ache, or burn any more than the bone that was taken from Adam's side'.

⁵⁸⁷ No. 1227 in Bang 1901-1902: 543. 'You shall not ache. You shall not burn. You shall not swell'.

⁵⁸⁸ No. 358 in Ohrt 1917: 235. 'You shall neither sting nor spring, burst nor darken'.

⁵⁸⁹ No. 357 in Ohrt 1917: 235. 'You shall neither sting nor spring, you shall neither burst nor darken'.

⁵⁹⁰ No. 89 in Braekman 1997: 131. 'So I adjure that you will not swell nor ache nevermore, nor harm, and that you will diminish and disappear'.

⁵⁹¹ 'Aliud ad idem' in Fritz 1896: 161–166.

bolned, ne neuere þis sor so schal
ranclen. Hise woundes ne smorten
ne ne swote, ne neuere so þis
wounde mote.⁵⁹²

1605 Christe was the first man that ever
 thorne prickt uppon, He did neither
 swell nor bell nor feel any
 payne.⁵⁹³

1664 [!]t neither wealed, nor belled,
 rankled, nor boned.⁵⁹⁴

The cited fragments of charms in Germanic languages use several poetic techniques to yoke their prohibitions together. Some employ alliteration in the same way as the Old English poem ('noch en swal noch en swar'), while others — mostly from later literary periods — use rhyme ('weder enhelt noch enschelt'). A few compositions combine the two: 'Hise woundes ne smorten ne ne swote, | Ne neuere so þis wounde mote'.

All these Germanic incantations, however, can be linked to Latin charms from a few centuries earlier. The Gaulish doctor Marcellus Burdigalensis (fl. c. 400) knew the following 'marvellous' rhyme for curing *glandulae*, 'tonsils':

Albula glandula, nec doleas, nec noceas, nec paniculas facias, sed
liquescas tamquam salis in aqua.⁵⁹⁵

⁵⁹² No. 4 in Smallwood 2004: 25.

⁵⁹³ No. 7 in Smallwood 2004: 26.

⁵⁹⁴ No. 8 in Smallwood 2004: 27.

⁵⁹⁵ No. 51 in Heim 1892: 478.

White tonsils do not hurt, do not harm, do not swell into a tumour,
but dissolve like salt in water.

The gist of the Old English charm is similar to that of Marcellus' *carmen*: the condition should not worsen. Nevertheless, the meanings of the Old English verbs that communicate this message are not always explicit. Most end in *-an*, which is usually an infinitive ending. This text probably uses it for the plural subjunctive present, which is more commonly *-en*.⁵⁹⁶ Also, *fundian* and *hoppetan* are rare words whose standard definitions, 'set out' and 'hop around', are somewhat unexpected within the context of a wound incantation. The verb *diopian* only has Middle English parallels, and a persuasive argument for the translation of *feologan* has not yet been published. The *DOE* questioningly repeats the speculations of Toller and Storms that it could be the verbal derivation of either *fealu*, 'yellowish brown', or *feal*, 'many'.⁵⁹⁷ Karl Jost argued it was a derivative of *feolaga*, 'fellow'.⁵⁹⁸ More likely, the expression relates to *fulian*, 'to putrefy, to become foul'.⁵⁹⁹ This fits the context of the poem and the manuscript: Old English medical books contain remedies 'þæt dolh ne fulige'.⁶⁰⁰ Two of the cited German charms mean to make sure a wound not 'infülte' or 'fulete'.⁶⁰¹

As argued above, water elf disease is probably a disease that causes long-lasting ulcerous wounds (leprosy or diabetes) or contagious blisters (chickenpox). Therefore, it seems reasonable to understand all these verbs as vivid expressions that mean to evoke (and restrict) the behaviour of such sores. The infection should under no circumstances 'spread' (*fundian*), 'spring up', 'jump to other body parts' or 'erupt' (*hoppetan*), 'deepen' (*diopian*), or 'putrefy' (*feologan*).

⁵⁹⁶ Magoun 1937b: 29.

⁵⁹⁷ *DOE*, s.v. 'feologan'. Also see Storms 1948: 161.

⁵⁹⁸ Jost 1950: 103.

⁵⁹⁹ The same translation is offered without discussion in Olds 1984: 150.

⁶⁰⁰ Search 'fulige' in *DOE Web Corpus* 2009.

⁶⁰¹ See footnote 582 and 583.

Muddy Ears and Sacral Cups or Healing Potions and Painless Ploughland?

The closing section of the charm has again caused issues for translators. The noun *halewæge* has been understood in many different ways. Some have read ‘sacred water’ or ‘holy cup’.⁶⁰² Storms argued ‘[t]here is no need to make a compound of *hale wæge*. It is an instrumental’.⁶⁰³ He translated ‘with health-giving water’.⁶⁰⁴ The expression has also been interpreted as two separate words: ‘healing way’.⁶⁰⁵ All of these interpretations are susceptible to criticism: Middle English sources show *halewæge* — a compound of *hale*, ‘health’, and *wæge*, ‘cup’ — is probably a fixed (although esoteric) Germanic expression that denotes ‘[a] sweet healing liquid, used either as potion or lotion’.⁶⁰⁶ More broadly, it signifies ‘any medicinal antidote’.⁶⁰⁷ In *Laʒamon's Brut* (c. 1200), an injured King ‘Arðure’ visits Argante in Avalon because ‘Heo sculde mid haleweie helen his wunden’.⁶⁰⁸ A Middle English manuscript from around 1475 explains how to make ‘þe moder of baume þat is cleped haliwei’.⁶⁰⁹

The cited analogues explain the implied meaning of Old English *halewæge*, but they do not immediately elucidate the line in which the expression occurs: ‘ne dolh diopian; ac him self healde halewæge’. As the editors of the *DOE* explain, the difficulty here is determining the subject of the verb, ‘healde’.⁶¹⁰ An additional, perhaps less obvious source of confusion is that the Old English collocation ‘him self’ does not translate to ‘himself’ in Modern English. Instead, ‘self’ seems to refer to the missing

⁶⁰² Dobbie 1942: 214.

⁶⁰³ Storms 1948: 159.

⁶⁰⁴ Storms 1948: 159.

⁶⁰⁵ Lee 2016: 113.

⁶⁰⁶ *MED*, s.v. ‘hāle-wei(e n.)’.

⁶⁰⁷ *MED*, s.v. ‘hāle-wei(e n.)’. There are Middle High German and Old Icelandic cognates: ‘heilawāc’ and ‘heilivágr’. Also see *OED*, s.v. ‘† haliwey, n.’.

⁶⁰⁸ Lines 11512–11514, edited in Brook and Leslie 1963–78.

⁶⁰⁹ Cited in the lemma ‘halewei’ in Norri 2016: 488.

⁶¹⁰ *DOE*, s.v. ‘hāle-wæge’.

subject, which is probably the ‘ic’ that wraps the wounds at the beginning of the poem. Meanwhile, ‘him’ is a dative pronoun that appears to stand in for either the wound(s) or the patient.

Perhaps the best way to decipher the meaning of the phrase is to render *healde* as ‘hold out, offer’; the protagonist in *Guthlac A* also feeds some birds through such a construction: ‘he him æte heold’ (he held out food to them).⁶¹¹ In ‘For the Water Elf Disease’ the nourishment is not birdfeed but a potent herbal preparation, *halewæge*. The recipient is not a flock of birds but a painful bandaged injury or perhaps the wounded patient himself. Thus, the sense is: ‘[I], myself, offer the wound/ the patient a healing potion’.⁶¹²

The following line — ‘ne ace þe þon ma, þe eorþan on eare ace’ — is also complicated. The word *ear* has several meanings in Old English. Ordinarily, it denotes the same sensory organ as in modern English. It can also be an ear of grain, the ocean, the earth, a runic letter, ploughland, or perhaps even a harrow.⁶¹³ Felix Grendon preferred ‘ocean’ in 1909. He translated the whole line as ‘Then it will pain you no more than it pains the land by the sea’.⁶¹⁴ Thirty years later, Magoun argued that ‘eorþan’ signified ‘a dressing made from warm healing mud’ and translated ‘on eare’ as ‘in the ear’.⁶¹⁵ In 1950, Karl Jost rejected both of these and some other earlier translations because they were ‘highly complicated’. His interpretation was no less convoluted: ‘may the patient no more suffer pain than the earth suffers from an ear-ache’.⁶¹⁶

The grammar of the Old English line is unusually complicated: the subjects of the verb *ace* seem to be missing. Significantly, *acan* supports transitive and impersonal constructions.⁶¹⁷ The charm appears to use this

⁶¹¹ See *DOE*, s.v. A.6.a–b ‘healdan’.

⁶¹² A very similar translation of this line is given in Jost 1950: 103; Schneider 1969: 299. See footnote 57 of the latter study for a succinct summary of previous translations of *halewæge*.

⁶¹³ See *DOE*, s.v. ‘ēar¹’, ‘ēar²’, ‘ēar³’.

⁶¹⁴ Grendon 1909: 195.

⁶¹⁵ Magoun 1937b: 29.

⁶¹⁶ Jost 1950: 104.

⁶¹⁷ See *DOE*, s.v. 1–2 ‘acan’.

impersonal sense in both half-lines. It designates the sufferer with an accusative ('þe', 'eorþan') and the place of suffering with a prepositional dative construction ('on eare'). Because the Modern English verb 'to ache' is not as flexible, it is preferable to translate 'þe' and 'eorþan' as if they are the subjects rather than the objects of the verb. Similarly, the meaning of the archaic impersonal construction 'me thinks' can in Modern English be made more explicit by converting it into 'I think'.

A translation that uses one of the less common meanings of *ear* gives the best results. Two options stand out: 'ploughland' and 'sea'. The first is the most appropriate on a contextual level: the patient should ache no more from real wounds than the earth from being tilled. An impediment to this rendering is that medieval sources rarely use *ear* to designate ploughland. The evidence consists of hard-to-interpret glosses, cognates in other Germanic languages, and words from Middle and Early-Modern English such as 'ere-ground' and 'ere-time'.⁶¹⁸ The term certainly existed. Nevertheless, some Old English speakers might have agreed with modern scholars that other meanings of *ear* come to mind more readily. The second option, 'ocean', is a little more conventional and still works within the elemental theme of the poem: the patient should not ache any more than the earth aches in the sea.

The just-suggested interpretations each have their specific advantages and disadvantages. Nevertheless, both have the benefit of being consistent with the phraseology of other texts for similar purposes, as well as with the charm's overarching symbolism. There are no other charms that mention a stretch of land with an earache or a patient with muddy earlobes. Yet, incantations that employ elemental similes to eliminate pain are very common.⁶¹⁹ Marcellus' fourth-century charm tells *glandulae* to stop hurting and to 'become liquid like salt in water'.⁶²⁰ The

⁶¹⁸ See *DOE*, s.v. 2 'ēar¹'. Also see *MED*, s.v. 'ēre-tīme n.' and '?ēre-grōund n.'; *OED*, 'ear, v.1' and '† ear, n.3'.

⁶¹⁹ For more examples and a theoretical discussion, see Franek and Urbanová 2019.

⁶²⁰ See footnote 595.

chapter on ‘Against a Wen’ considers additional examples from Germanic languages.⁶²¹ It merits pointing out in passing that most of the wound incantations cited earlier also proceed to use similes — often biblical ones — that seek to clarify the insignificant amounts of pain that specific injuries will produce. They resemble the second Swedish incantation, which ends with claiming the speaker’s leg or arm will ‘not sting more than the bone taken from Adam’s side’.⁶²²

Charms often associate the earth with immunity to discomfort and suffering. Some even envision it as an appropriate place of exile for harmful influences.⁶²³ The Old English charm ‘Wið ymbe’ declares that ‘eorðe mæg [...] wið andan and wið æminde’ (earth has power against malice and jealousy) while a Dutch charm against thrush states ‘Spreeuw, spreeuw, spreeuw, | gij komt van de aarde | gij gaat naar de aarde’ (thrush, thrush, thrush, you come from the earth you go to the earth).⁶²⁴ An early example of a similar idea occurs in Varro’s *De re rustica* (c. 37 BCE), an educational book on agriculture that takes the form of a dialogue between various fictive individuals. In a section that appears to lampoon the problems of rich Roman men and treatises that include superfluous and superstitious information, the character Fundanius is presented with a formula which runs ‘terra pestem teneto, salus hic maneto’ (earth take the disease, health remain here). The charm should not only ‘uproot’ the corns on Fundanius’ feet (something he finds more important than learning how to plant beetroots correctly) but also reduce the frown on his brow.⁶²⁵

As argued above, the interpretation ‘ploughland’ is appealing because of the analogous relation between pain-free wounds and insensate furrows. Grendon’s idea that *ear* means ‘sea’, however, has the added advantage that ‘For the Water Elf Disease’ seems to demonstrate a

⁶²¹ See footnotes 746–748.

⁶²² See footnote 586. The charm is edited as No. 704 in Linderholm 1917-1940: 317.

⁶²³ Compare Ward 1984.

⁶²⁴ No. 352 in Haver 1964: 152.

⁶²⁵ Goetz 1912: 16.

thematic preoccupation with juxtaposing earth- and water imagery.⁶²⁶ The charm hopes to cure a water disease by repeating a formula that invokes the power of the earth along with ‘eallum hire mihtum and mægenum’. In the same way, the composition targets an ailment that can cause burning, perhaps blistery wounds, as well as watery eyes. Regardless of whichever interpretation one ultimately prefers, the fact that ‘For the Water Elf Disease’ means to combat a water disease makes it appropriate that the text summons the cool and dry properties of invulnerable earth as antidotes.

Pharmacological Efficacy

‘For the Water Elf Disease’ is unambiguous about the efficacy of its herbal preparation. The speaker claims he (or she) has prepared the ‘betest beadowræda’ as well as a *halewæg*, a type of concoction that appears as a legendary cure in the Early Middle English *Brut*, and as ‘pe moder of baume’ in a later medieval medical book.⁶²⁷ Making exalted claims about the efficacy of specific herbal preparations is not untypical for the manuscript in which the charm occurs. The index of *Leechbook III* records a reference to a lost remedy for ‘hu man scyle halige sealfe wyrcean’; another entry, which does survive, claims about a ‘dolh sealfe’ (wound salve) that it is possible to cure with it ‘wel aelc dolh’ (pretty much every wound).⁶²⁸ Nevertheless, translating Old English plant names is challenging, and it is difficult to assess whether the herbal *halewæge* is indeed as efficacious as the charm asserts.

Recently, several research teams have attempted to shed light on the efficacy of some remedies from early medieval England by reproducing

⁶²⁶ This has been noticed before. See Singer and Grattan 1952: 60; Storms 1948: 162.

⁶²⁷ See footnotes 607–610.

⁶²⁸ See the index no. 76 and entry xxxii in Cockayne 1865: 304–305, 326–327.

them in laboratories. Such an approach — ideally supported by a large-scale statistical cross-referencing of ingredients — will ultimately yield the most persuasive answers.⁶²⁹ This methodology is presently still in its infancy, however, and the two most significant studies that have been conducted in this burgeoning field have come to almost contradictory conclusions about the efficacy of some early medieval preparations. The first, from 2006, used a Kirby–Bauer method (which uses Petri dishes to test antibiotic susceptibility) to sample some herbal recipes and revealed ‘how ineffective most medicine was before the discovery of antibiotics’.⁶³⁰ The second, from 2015, used a ‘mouse chronic wound model’ and stressed ‘the scholarship of premodern doctors and the potential of ancient texts as a source of new antimicrobial agents’.⁶³¹

In the absence of more concrete findings, we will concentrate on contextualising the Old English charm’s general approaches to herbs and healing.⁶³² First of all, it merits acknowledging that its manuscript, *Leechbook III*, contains many more remedies that seek to expel demonic forces with combinations of ‘drencas 7 gebedu’ (drinks and prayers).⁶³³ The codex includes antidotes for various other elf diseases, as well as remedies against such demonic influences as night-wanderers, tricks of the devil, and the spells of women.⁶³⁴ These cures are often (but not always) more extensive and complicated than ones that deal with concrete problems such as pain in the ears or eyes.

Leechbook III claims that the devil can be repelled with red mullein (verbascum) over one’s door and under one’s pillow,⁶³⁵ that *ælfsgoba*, ‘elf hiccup’, can be cured by transcribing a charm, dipping it in a herbal drink, and making a sign of the cross with the drenched writing on each of the

⁶²⁹ Potential methodologies for future research are outlined in Connelly, Del Genio, and Harrison 2020.

⁶³⁰ Brennessel, Drout, and Gravel 2006: 194.

⁶³¹ Harrison et al. 2015: 1.

⁶³² For a similar discussion, see Sandmann 1975: 43–45.

⁶³³ Cockayne 1865: 304. Table of contents no. 62. See also Kesling 2020: 57–94.

⁶³⁴ See, among others, entries xli, xli, liv, lvii, lviii, lxi, lxii, lxiii, lxvii, lxviii in Cockayne 1865: 334–357.

⁶³⁵ Entry lviii in Cockayne 1865: 342–343.

patient's body parts;⁶³⁶ and that the preparation of a remedy for cardiac problems necessitates walking around the requisite herbs three times while singing the Litany, the Creed, and the Pater Noster before picking them.⁶³⁷ This shows the manuscript often interprets the roles of specific ingredients in the healing process in much broader terms than modern pharmacologists. Perhaps the same circumstance provides a rationale for the fact that the work tends to use more ingredients for ailments that have supernatural causes. The extensive recipe that we find at the beginning of 'For the Water Elf Disease' may have been compiled with the idea that complicated herbal cures hold more power.

That some herbs were added to the recipe for other reasons than their material properties might also explain why the charm calls for *elehtre*, a difficult plant name that probably means 'lupin'.⁶³⁸ In the early Middle Ages, this shrub was native mainly to the Mediterranean and North Africa. It is presently making a comeback in Western European diets as the base ingredient of gluten-free snacks and meat substitutes.⁶³⁹ In early medieval England, (the plant may have been imported in dried form⁶⁴⁰), *elehtre* seems to have been known as a typical elf repellent: it recurs in six other remedies against such beings, making it the most popular herb for this purpose.⁶⁴¹ Meanwhile, distinguishing between rational and magical medicine is not always straightforward. Current and medieval authors tend to disagree about the curative properties of specific plants. Modern lab workers have found few chemical compounds in *marubie*, 'white horehound' — another of the charm's ingredients — that are particularly

⁶³⁶ Entry lxii Cockayne 1865: 344–351.

⁶³⁷ Entry lxxviii in Cockayne 1865: 356–357.

⁶³⁸ See *DOE*, s.v. 'elehtre'. See also Dendle 2001; D'Aronco 2016.

⁶³⁹ Lucas et al. 2015: 4.

⁶⁴⁰ For documentary sources from the early medieval period that provide evidence of a lively trade in (dried) herbs between northern Europe and the Mediterranean, see Voigts 1979: 259–261.

⁶⁴¹ Kesling 2016: 99. Also see Dendle 2001; Kesling 2020; 57–94.

remedial.⁶⁴² Nevertheless, medieval herbals consider the plant as efficacious. Old English leechbooks include it in various preparations for such everyday ailments as fever and breast pain.⁶⁴³

Some of the most remarkable herbs in ‘For the Water Elf Disease’ are the toxic *eowberge*, ‘yew berry’, and *polleie*, ‘pennyroyal’. The dangers of yew trees were well-known among medieval and classical writers. Influential physicians such as Galen (129–c. 200/c. 216 CE) and Dioscorides (c. 40–90 CE) even claimed that lounging underneath the branches of these trees could have fatal consequences.⁶⁴⁴ Furthermore, yew berries and yew needles are traditional ingredients in homemade poisons and other lethal concoctions. In 1836, the physician Samuel Hurt recalled three incidents where the unskilled application of folk remedies had caused the death of patients.⁶⁴⁵ Even though England’s most famous herbalist, John Gerard (c. 1545–1612), claimed that ‘when I was yong and went to schoole, diuers of my schoole-fellowes and likewise my selfe did eat our fils of the berries’, the toxicity of yew seeds makes these berries mostly unsuitable for herbal preparations.⁶⁴⁶ ‘For the Water Elf Disease’ is the only Old English text that prescribes them as an ingredient.

Pennyroyal is a common ingredient in medieval recipes. Nevertheless, it is deadly if it is taken in the wrong dosages.⁶⁴⁷ The herb, which emits a strong minty scent, is an effective abortifacient and an emmenagogue (a stimulant of the blood flow in the pelvic area and uterus). Old English remedies also recommend it for a range of other medical problems, including stomach pain, headache, and tertian fever.⁶⁴⁸ Just like *elehtre*, the herb may have possessed folkloric associations: it was known

⁶⁴² Ettaya et al. 2016: 446. The article concludes the positive results were probably due to the plant’s ‘anti-oxidant properties as well as the presence of phenolic acids and flavonoids’. These are found in almost all fruits and vegetables.

⁶⁴³ Search ‘marubie’ in *DOE Web Corpus* 2009. The term has 8 matches: 1 gloss and 7 medical remedies.

⁶⁴⁴ M. R. Lee 1998: 571.

⁶⁴⁵ Hurt 1836; also see Reijnen et al. 2017.

⁶⁴⁶ Gerard 1936: 1371.

⁶⁴⁷ Anderson 1996.

⁶⁴⁸ Doyle 2008: 115.

by the evocative but ill-understood name *dweorgedwostle* (dwarf-*dwostle*). It appears alongside *brembel æppel*, ‘blackberry’, and *elehtre*, ‘lupin’, in a remedy ‘Wip ælcra yfelre leodrunan 7 wið ælfsidenne’ (against every evil witch and against elf magic).⁶⁴⁹

Consolde is one of the few herbs in the recipe of which the designation unambiguously matches the objective of the charm. ‘For the Water Elf Disease’ is the only Old English text which uses this plant name. Nevertheless, it is clear from glosses and later evidence that medieval individuals associated the designated herb with the healing of wounds and broken bones. *Consolde* is the English form of Latin *consolida*, ultimately derived from *consolidare*, ‘to merge’, ‘to heal wounds’, and ‘to knit bones’.⁶⁵⁰ The *Durham Plant-Name Glossary* (12th cent.) glosses *consolda* as ‘banvyrt’ (bone herb).⁶⁵¹ In the Middle English period, *consouden* became a technical term that meant ‘closing a wound or fracture’.⁶⁵² One source discusses ‘A consowdyngge oynement’; another mentions a ‘wounde pat was consowdid bi a sori leche’.⁶⁵³ These quotations are redolent of the objective of the Old English charm, which uses a *halewæge* that includes *consolde* so that wounds neither ‘burst’ nor ‘deepen’.

⁶⁴⁹ On the contextualisation of the plant name, see Doyle 2008: 114–116. For the relation between pennyroyal and this plant, see the citations in *DOE*, s.v. ‘dweorge-dwostle Noun, f., occas. wk.’. The element ‘dwarf’ might have been used to denote ‘fever’ or ‘small’, but the ability of folkloric characters to impose their narrative background on contexts which have otherwise little to do with this background should not be underestimated. *Ælfpone*, ‘woody nightshade’, also appears often in remedies for ailments with a supernatural cause. See Hall 2013b, a. For recent discussions of the plant name, see Battles 2005: 35; Schäfke 2015: 361–362; Doyle 2008: 114–116. For an older study, see Jente 1921: 131, 175. For the remedy, see entry I.64.2 in Doyle 2011: 143.

⁶⁵⁰ *DMLBS*, s.v. ‘consolida’ and 1a–d ‘consolidare’.

⁶⁵¹ *OED*, s.v. ‘bān-wyrt’. See also *Dictionary of Old English Plant Names 2007-2009*, s.v. ‘bān-wyrt’; Bierbaumer 1975-1979: 16.

⁶⁵² See *MED*, s.v. ‘consouden v.’. Also see *OED*, s.v. ‘† consoude | consound, v.’.

⁶⁵³ citations given in *MED*, s.v. ‘consouden v.’.

Conclusion

'For the Water Elf Disease' treats physical concepts with lexical cures and vice versa. Disease names that mention water are remedied with formulas that summon the properties of earth. Meanwhile, herbs with various pharmacological and folkloric properties are drenched in ale and holy water before they are turned into effective verbal cures through the bestowal of exalted lexical titles. The charm's plants are not merely ingredients in a herbal poultice. They are the components of a legendary *halewæge* and a heroic *beadowræd*.

The chapter shows that some of the phraseology of the Old English charm belongs to a much broader, older, and probably ultimately foreign incantatory tradition. The text's 'neither... nor' sequence, specifically, resembles a common and widespread motif in European wound charms. 'For the Water Elf Disease' echoes Latin incantations from late antiquity, as well as later Danish, German, Dutch, and Norwegian formulas. Nevertheless, the Old English text does not just translate stock phrases. On the contrary: it is preoccupied with exploring the significances of rare English words: *halewæge* and *beadowræd* illustrate this point. More examples are 'wæterælfadle', 'eare' (here translated for the first time as 'ploughland'), 'benne', 'hoppettan', and 'feologan'. The occurrence of such expressions suggests the text purposefully draws on advanced connotations of an elevated Old English poetic register.

It is unclear what disease the charm means to treat. The symptoms it claims to cure (teary eyes, wounds, looking down, and brown fingernails) are not immediately characteristic of a specific condition. The chapter reviews three possibilities: leprosy, chickenpox, and diabetes. These can all in some way be related to the problematic term 'wæterælfadl'. However, the last of these is particularly plausible because insulin disorders were not well understood during the early Middle Ages. Untreated, the condition typically causes the frequent passing of water, thirst, retina problems, and

slow healing wounds. It also makes patients more susceptible to fungal infections.

The herbal remedy of 'For the Water Elf Disease' further demonstrates the seriousness of the targeted condition. The prose section lists a relatively high number of different ingredients and prescribes poisonous and exotic plants. The chapter discusses four ingredients in detail: 'eowberge' (yew berry), 'polleie' (pennyroyal), 'consolde' (comfrey or daisy), and 'elehtre' (perhaps lupin). The first is toxic and uncommon in Old English remedies. The second is more common but still dangerous in higher dosages. Meanwhile, *consolde* possesses a name that reflects its ability to 'consolidate' cuts and fractures. *Elehtre* is a contested plant name that may denote 'lupin'. The plant seems to have been known in early medieval England specifically as an elf repellent, although it was probably native only to southern Europe. This last circumstance further suggests 'For the Water Elf Disease' preserves traces of communication between the medical traditions of the Mediterranean and early medieval England.

5. Concealed Flora and Dismembered Fauna: ‘Against a Wen’

Introduction

‘Against a Wen’ gained a worldwide audience in 2019, when a performance of it was incorporated into an episode of *Vikings*.⁶⁵⁴ Such fame would have seemed improbable at the turn of the twentieth century. In fact, the twelfth-century charm can boast the curious honour of having been discovered twice. Walter de Gray Birch published the text in 1875 as an anecdotal addition to an article about another subject: two manuscripts from the Cottonian library which he had ‘never failed to look upon [...] with more than ordinary feelings of interest’.⁶⁵⁵ Julius Zupitza reprinted the poem twelve years later because it was ‘nur wenigen bekannt’ (known only to a few).⁶⁵⁶ After another decade, Robert Priebsch wrote to Elias von Steinmeyer, a fellow professor in Germanic philology, that he had stumbled on a charm in a Cottonian manuscript. It began: ‘Wenne, wenne,

⁶⁵⁴ *Vikings*, season 5, episode 18, ‘Baldur’, directed by Helen Shaver, written by Michael Hirst, featuring Katheryn Winnick, Alexander Ludwig, Gustaf Skarsgård, aired January 16, 2019, on History.

⁶⁵⁵ Birch 1875: 463, 485–486.

⁶⁵⁶ Zupitza 1887: 45–46.

wenthicenne' (*sic*).⁶⁵⁷ Had his colleague ever heard of it? Von Steinmeyer replied he had not.⁶⁵⁸

Despite its obscure beginnings, 'Against a Wen' has received much praise from scholars. Kemp Malone said it was 'marked by humour and lightness of touch'.⁶⁵⁹ Jacqueline Banerjee called it a gem in her review of Jane Roberts' *Guide to Scripts* (2005) (this features the text as an example of Protogothic *textualis*).⁶⁶⁰ Marijane Osborn, commenting on the charm's 'archaic magic' in 2013, admitted she had had 'quite a good time translating'.⁶⁶¹ She offered an interpretation that addresses the poem's bothersome protagonist as a 'hickey, hickey, chickety-bump' and tells it to 'pucker up like a drop in a bucket'.⁶⁶²

The charm applies poetic language to achieve medical results. It offers an exorcistic narrative that personifies and obliterates a *wenn*—Old English for 'cyst', 'cutaneous growth', 'wart', 'tumour', or 'skin blemish'.⁶⁶³ The text runs as follows:

Wenne, wenne, wenchichenne,
her ne scealt þu timbrien, ne nenne tun habben,
ac þu scealt north eonene to þan nihgan berhge,
þer þu hauest, ermig, enne broþer.
He þe sceal legge leaf et heafde.
Under fot wolues, under ueþer earnes,⁶⁶⁴
under earnes clea, a þu geweornie.

⁶⁵⁷ Closs 1979: 68–69.

⁶⁵⁸ Closs 1979: 70. Von Steinmeyer was the right person to ask. The scholar edited the *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum* from 1874 to 1890. Julius Zupitza published 'Against a Wen' in this journal in 1887.

⁶⁵⁹ Malone 1967: 39.

⁶⁶⁰ Banerjee 2007: 484; Roberts 2005: 120–122.

⁶⁶¹ Osborn 2013: 226.

⁶⁶² Osborn 2013: 226.

⁶⁶³ See Bosworth and Toller, s.v. 'wenn'; *MED*, s.v. 'wenn'; *OED*, s.v. 'wenn'; Norri 2016, s.v. 'wenn'.

⁶⁶⁴ The manuscript has 'uolmes fot'. This is commonly emended to 'wolues fot'. See Dobbie 1942: 219; Osborn 2013: 224–225. Holthausen disagreed and proposed to emend *earnes*, 'eagle's' to *earmes*, 'arm's'. See 1908: 214.

Clinge þu alswa col on heorþe,
scring þu alswa scerne awage,
and weorne alswa weter on anbren.
Swa litel þu gewurþe alswa linsetcorn,
and miccli lesse alswa anes handwurmes hupeban,
and alswa litel þu gewurþe þet þu nawiht gewurþe.⁶⁶⁵

Wen, wen, wen-fledgling,
Here you shall neither build nor have an estate.
Instead, you shall go north, to the nigh barrow.
There, wretched raspberry, you have a brother.
He shall place a leaf at your head,
under the wolf's foot, under the eagle's feather,⁶⁶⁶
under the eagle's claw; may you waste away forever.
May you diminish like coal in a hearth.
May you shrivel like dung on a wall,
and vanish like water in a bucket.
May you become just as little as linseed.
And much smaller, just as a handworm's hipbone.
And may you become so little that you become nothing at all.

'Against a Wen' provides a still frame of a period that witnessed literary and linguistic change.⁶⁶⁷ The composition includes themes and vocabulary

⁶⁶⁵ Dobbie 1942: 128. Other modern editions are: Grendon 1909: 166–167; Storms 1948: 154–155; Stuart 1973: 766–773; Sandmann 1975: 62–63; Abernethy 1983: 48–49; Bjork 2014: 226–227. Earlier editions are: de Gray Birch 1875: 485–486; Zupitza 1887: 46; Holthausen 1908: 214; Brie 1906. The medieval text appears on fol. 106^v of London, British Library, Royal 4. A. xiv. It was added as a marginal inscription c. 1150. The charm's language is close enough to Old English to warrant inclusion in the Metrical Charm corpus. See Zupitza 1887: 46; Dobbie 1942: cxxxii; Storms 1948: 154.

⁶⁶⁶ The unaltered manuscript text, 'uolmes fot', translates to 'footsale' instead. Perhaps this passage contains a deliberate pun to express the interrelation between feet and plants. The Latin expression *planta* evokes both concepts simultaneously. Also see footnote 664.

⁶⁶⁷ For an overview of literary and linguistic changes in the twelfth century, see the discussion and references in Dance 2014: 153–160.

that are characteristic of Old English poetry, but it untypically combines alliteration with rhyme and rhythmic prose.⁶⁶⁸ Several phonological and syntactic features signal further departures from Old English. The charm writes ‘wenne’ as if it is a weak feminine noun. Historically, *wenn* is a strong masculine noun.⁶⁶⁹ The use of *an* as an indefinite article (‘enne broper’) is not characteristic of early poetry.⁶⁷⁰ There are also several orthographic inconsistencies. A contemporary decline in the differentiation of unstressed syllables helps explain forms such as ‘habben’, ‘timbrien’, and ‘broper’ (as opposed to *habban*, *timbr[i]an*, *bropor*). Nevertheless, diachronic phonological change cannot rationalise the appearance of ‘fot’ alongside ‘ueper’. The former resembles a West Saxon form; the latter is southern. The text most probably contains two scribal errors: line 1 spells ‘fot uolmes’ instead of ‘fot wolues’; line 9 writes ‘scesne’ instead of ‘scerne’.

Scholars have disagreed about the charm’s age. ‘Against a Wen’ accumulates common motifs and formulas, and the presence of scribal inaccuracies and dialectal inconsistencies suggests the text is a modified copy.⁶⁷¹ Whether the surviving text — a marginal annotation in Royal 4. A. xiv — is the product of a textual transmission process that predates the twelfth century remains a point of contention. In 2019, Eric Weiskott described the poem’s composition date as ‘unknown and probably unknowable’.⁶⁷² He pointed to evidence of syllable counting and rhyme in the charm’s initial lines (1–2) and proposed an influence of ‘French or Latin poetic practice’.⁶⁷³ Nevertheless, the traditional nature of the text’s opening

⁶⁶⁸ Compare lines 1–2 and 12–13. That ‘Against a Wen’ uses a ‘loose rhythm of poetry’ was recognised by its first editor. See Birch 1875: 485. The poem’s scansion remains a point of contention. For the most recent studies, see Batten 2021: 6, 15–17; Weiskott 2019: 347. See further Stanley 1984: 205–206; Abernethy 1983: 173–175; Sandmann 1975: 61, 71–72; Schneider 1969: 283 (n. 5), 293; Storms 1948: 156; Dobbie 1942: cxxxviii.

⁶⁶⁹ Inorganic -e’s are a feature of early Middle English verse. See Weiskott 2019: 348; Dobbie 1942: cxxxviii, n.1.

⁶⁷⁰ See *OED*, s.v. 1a ‘a adj.’. The earliest quotation from the *OED* for a similar use of ‘an’ is from c. 1160.

⁶⁷¹ Some twelfth-century English scribes were ‘willing to replace the archaic forms in their exemplars with new spellings’. See Liuzza 2000: 163.

⁶⁷² Weiskott 2019: 348.

⁶⁷³ Weiskott 2019: 348.

invocation (discussed later in this chapter) and the absence of borrowed vocabulary cause that Julius Zupitza's proposition from 1887 remains compelling: 'dass wir es nur mit der sprachlichen erneuerung eines altenglischen denkmals zu tun haben, scheint mir nicht zu bezweifeln' (it seems to me indisputable that we are simply dealing with a linguistic modernisation of an Old English source).⁶⁷⁴

While translators have commonly agreed that 'Against a Wen' is amusing and historically significant, they have also interpreted the charm as down-to-earth and forthright. Kevin Crossley-Holland admired its 'simple fresh imagery'.⁶⁷⁵ Louis Rodrigues repeated Godfrid Storms and described the charm as 'simple and straightforward'.⁶⁷⁶ Another prevalent assumption is that 'Against a Wen' incorporates no Christian influences.⁶⁷⁷ The composition is vernacular and traditional, not 'bookish' or monastic.⁶⁷⁸ This chapter challenges such views. The discussion presented below will argue that 'Against a Wen' is a complex poem suffused with Christian teachings. After establishing the specific condition the charm means to treat in the first section (see 'What is a Wen?'), the chapter will provide evidence to show that the text features an Anglo-Latin word game (see 'Name Calling') and an artfully disguised reference to a traditional herbal remedy (see 'Cadaverous Analogies'). The final section of the chapter ('Belittling Similes') will provide a focused discussion of the charm's use of traditional metaphors, highlighting the text's incorporation of a hitherto unnoticed biblical allusion and its indebtedness to riddle phraseology.

⁶⁷⁴ See Zupitza 1887: 46; Dobbie 1942: cxxxii; Storms 1948: 154. Compare Mark Faulkner 2012: 277.

⁶⁷⁵ Crossley-Holland 1984: 269.

⁶⁷⁶ Rodrigues 1993: 44; Storms 1948: 156.

⁶⁷⁷ Abernethy 1983: 177. See further Shaw 2019: 754. Shaw describes 'Against a Wen' as 'a charm that contains nothing obviously liturgical within its text'.

⁶⁷⁸ Grendon 1909: 120, 124; Schneider 1969: 288; Sandmann 1975: 72–73; Osborn 2013: 237–238; Roper 2011: 117.

What is a Wen?

Old English sources often associate wens with imperfections near the eyes and on the face. One leechbook entry prescribes a remedy for ‘Gif men synd wænnas gewunod on ðæt heafod foran oððe on ða eagan’ (if a person has wens on the forehead or on the eyes).⁶⁷⁹ Another states ‘Wip wenne on eagon genim þa holan cersan, gebræd, do on þæt eage swa he hatost mæge’ (against wens on the eyes take hollow cress, roasted; put on the eye as hot as he can bear).⁶⁸⁰ Later periods offer similar evidence. One fifteenth-century manuscript advocates a fabulous ‘poudre’ that ‘staunchip moost merueylously þe flux of blood and also he corrodip wennys & cancris, ffestris, pustules and wertis, and alle superfluytees in fleisch’.⁶⁸¹ A journal article from 1711 uses the expression to relay Plutarch’s debatable conjecture about the origin of Cicero’s name (‘chickpea’): ‘Cicero, who was so call’d from the Founder of his Family, that was marked on the Nose with a little Wenn’.⁶⁸²

Folk cures against wens focus on transferring these undesirable ‘superfluytees’ onto decaying substances. Wens and warts should be given away to something or someone through a magical exchange or rubbed against items that should afterwards be buried or discarded.⁶⁸³ Some of the more innocuous remedies from England entail contaminating and interring foodstuffs such as cuts of meat, apples, onions, or potatoes.⁶⁸⁴ The historical record is also filled with prescriptions that involve bringing wens into contact with the cadavers of animals and humans.⁶⁸⁵ One representative Early Modern remedy says: ‘let her take a dead man’s hand

⁶⁷⁹ Entry CXII in Pettit 2001a.

⁶⁸⁰ Entry I.2.36 in Doyle 2011: 39.

⁶⁸¹ *MED*, s.v. 1a ‘wen n.’.

⁶⁸² *OED*, s.v. 1b ‘wen, n.1’.

⁶⁸³ The classic study on this subject is Hand 1965.

⁶⁸⁴ Murray-Aynsley 1928: 389; Davies 1937: 47; Rudkin 1933: 202; Groome 1895: 121; Newman and Wilson 1951: 257–259; Latham 1878: 41.

⁶⁸⁵ Peacock 1896: 268–269; Davies and Matteoni 2017; Hand 1980.

(if a man, then a woman's). Stroke the wen with it, once, twice and thrice. As the hand rotteth in the grave, so will the wen rot on the living'.⁶⁸⁶ An excerpt from an article in *Gentleman's Magazine* dated 19 April 1758 runs as follows:

James White, aged 23, and Walter White, his brother, aged 21, were executed at Kennington Common, for breaking open and robbing the dwelling house of farmer Vincent of Crawley [...] While the unhappy wretches were hanging, a child about nine months old was put into the hands of the executioner, who nine times, with one of the hands of each of the dead bodies, stroked the child over the face. It seems the child had a wen on one of its cheeks, and that superstitious notion, which has long prevailed, of being touched as before mentioned, is looked on as a cure.⁶⁸⁷

The principle behind all of the just-mentioned customs and remedies — that cutaneous protrusions can be medicated by associating them with decomposing substances — is ancient and most of the English traditions look back in some way or another to practices that were already common in the time of Pliny (d. 79 CE). The Roman scholar not only recorded a cure which involved rubbing protuberances of the skin with soon-to-be-thrown-away chickpeas; he also affirmed that the hand of a prematurely deceased criminal could help to cure scrofulous tumours, diseased parotid glands, and throat affections.⁶⁸⁸

⁶⁸⁶ Cited in Weisser 2009: 334. Originally from Bamford and Aspinall-Oglander 1936: 220.

⁶⁸⁷ Quoted in Davies and Matteoni 2015: 686.

⁶⁸⁸ See 22.72 and 28.12 in Mayhoff 1875-1906.

Name-Calling, Fraternal Diseases, and Fruity Mountains

The poem's opening line uses a traditional invocation technique, the duplication (or triplication) of the same name. Currently, people often consider this literary device as an archetypal feature of fairy tales, folk songs, and nursery rhymes. Some iconic duplicated invocations from these genres are 'mirror, mirror, on the wall', 'ladybird, ladybird', and 'rain, rain, go away | come again another day'. Charms commonly focus on addressing a specific problem or entity. It is not surprising we repeatedly encounter similar, albeit less well-known invocations in the opening lines of incantations both from the medieval and post-medieval period.⁶⁸⁹ This thesis' discussion of 'For the Water Elf Disease' quotes a charm against 'spreeuw, spreeuw, spreeuw'.⁶⁹⁰ An Old English example occurs in the opening poetic section of 'For Unfruitful Land': 'Erce, erce, erce'.⁶⁹¹

The first line of 'Against a Wen' is noteworthy because it combines reduplication with pejorative name-calling. The malignant wen enters the formulaic construction as its full-grown self but exits as an enfeebled 'wenchichenne'.⁶⁹² The derogatory epithet is often rendered as 'wen chicken'.⁶⁹³ It is more accurately translated as 'wen-chick' or 'wen-hatchling': *chiken* meant 'A young chicken' or 'The young of any bird' in (early) Middle English.⁶⁹⁴ The *MED* shows some later poems use analogous compounds to denote 'the devil's offspring, rascal'. The listed examples are 'deuels chyke' (c. 1330), 'fendes chike' (c. 1380), and 'churles chekyne' (c. 1440).⁶⁹⁵ Meanwhile, administrative rolls preserve

⁶⁸⁹ On similar charms, see Roper 2005: 148–153. Also see Roper 2006: 66–67.

⁶⁹⁰ See footnote 624.

⁶⁹¹ Line 51, edited in Dobbie 1942: 117. The translation of this invocation is discussed later in this thesis. See page 313.

⁶⁹² See further Mathieu 1999: para. 3.

⁶⁹³ See Fry 1971: 249–50, n. 13.

⁶⁹⁴ *MED*, s.v. 1–2 'chiken'. See further Hall 2007: 227–28.

⁶⁹⁵ *MED*, s.v. 3 'chiken'.

such thirteenth-century names as ‘Rogerus Chike’, ‘Willelmus Chiken’, Claricia Chiken, and ‘Alexandro Chikehed’.⁶⁹⁶ The charm seems to have adapted more common appellation and nickname techniques to suit its central aim: shrinking the wen. The literary transformation, which turns the skin blemish into a smaller, immature version of itself, feels particularly decisive because it is locked into place by rhyme and alliteration.⁶⁹⁷

After belittling the skin condition, ‘Against a Wen’ outlines an exorcism: ‘Here you shall neither build nor have an estate. | Instead, you shall go north, to the nearby mound’.⁶⁹⁸ The charm echoes standard incantatory phraseology here, although some of the earliest analogues are marred by corruptions. A partially legible exorcistic statement in ‘For a Sudden Stitch’ may run ‘Fleoh þær [...] on fyrgenheafde’ (fly there to the mountain top).⁶⁹⁹ ‘Contra rehin’, an Old High German charm, banishes a demonic creature by saying: ‘var in dinee. ciprige’ (go into the mountains).⁷⁰⁰

A formula from early nineteenth-century Aurskog, Norway, casts a distant but illuminating sidelight. An abbreviated version runs:

Hr. Ulv, Hr. Ulv, Hr. Ulv!
Er du herinde,
Saa skal du herud,
Nord paa Klubenmo.⁷⁰¹

Mr Wolf, Mr Wolf, Mr Wolf,⁷⁰²
if you are in here,
then you will go out of here,

⁶⁹⁶ *MED*, s.v. 4 ‘chiken’.

⁶⁹⁷ See further Vaughan-Sterling 1983: 195; Weiskott 2019: 348.

⁶⁹⁸ Lines 2–3.

⁶⁹⁹ Dobbie 1942: 123, l. 25. Edward Pettit reads: ‘Fled þ(æ)r on fyrgenheafde’. See 2001a: 94, l. 27.

⁷⁰⁰ No. 4 in Holzmann 2001: 134.

⁷⁰¹ No. 51 in Bang 1901-1902: 27–28.

⁷⁰² This demonic disease may constitute a play on words: *herulv* seems to have been a word for colic in eastern Norwegian dialects. See Lid 1950: 103.

North, to *Klubbenmo*.

The late Norwegian analogue does not use its reduplicative invocation as an opportunity for belittling ridicule. However, it does banish an intrusive entity, a 'Hr. Ulf', to a more northerly locale.⁷⁰³ *Klubbenmo* is perhaps somewhat similar to Blåkulla, a demonic location, often a mountain, that plays a prominent role in Early Modern witchcraft narratives from Scandinavia.⁷⁰⁴ In 'Against a Wen', the *nihgan berghe* is both literally and figuratively the big brother of the targeted ailment. In the Norwegian charm, the topos of a northern location as a place of exile re-appears as a distinct toponym that is redolent of a legendary demonic haunt.⁷⁰⁵ Bengt af Klintberg's conclusion about the exorcistic commands that feature in a corpus of similar Swedish Charms provides more context for this statement:

Riktningen går [...] vanligtvis åt norr, där man föreställde sig att demonerna hade sitt hem. I en formel manas sjukdomen till Island [...], i andra till ett nordliggande berg, t.ex. "Dårfjället", dvs. Dovre fjäll [...] I många formler befalls den att sätta sig "överst på Blåkullan"

The direction is usually to the north, where people imagined demons had their home. In one formula, the disease is directed to Iceland [...], in others to a northern mountain, e.g. 'Dårfjället', i.e. Dovre

⁷⁰³ On the exorcism of demonic wolves in Scandinavian charms, also see the Sigtuna amulet, edited in McKinnell, Simek, and Düwel 2004: 126.

⁷⁰⁴ Klubbemo is the name of a croft in the parish of Kristdala in Sweden. I have not been able to find out whether *Klubbenmo* is also a Norwegian place name.

⁷⁰⁵ The relationship between the places of exile in charms (so-called *Bannungsorte*) and the meeting locations of demonic conventicles in later witchcraft narratives remains understudied. See further Schneider 1969: 285. On the 'familial connection between wen and mound', see Hall 2007a: 228.

mountain [...] In many formulas, the disease is commanded to settle 'at the top of Blåkulla'.⁷⁰⁶

The fourteenth-century 'Münchner Nachtsegen' also mentions a demonic mountain. However, this charm is from Germany, so instead of associating evil spirits with Klubenmo or Blåkulla (Scandinavian locations), it associates them with the 'brochelsberge', a haunted precipice in West Germanic folklore.⁷⁰⁷

After sending its bothersome subject away to an elevated, northern location, 'Against a Wen' informs the skin condition about the welcome it can expect upon arrival: first, it will be greeted by its own brother. Afterwards — the wen is now given yet another name, 'ermig' — it will be placed underneath a leaf, a wolf's foot, an eagle's feather, and an eagle's claw. These poetic statements sound ominous, but they are also somewhat vague. To clarify their meaning, we need to consider them separately first.

We may begin with contextualising the idea that harmful entities belong to larger families. In the ninth-century Old Saxon charm 'Contra vermes', we encounter an exorcism that reads 'Gang ut, Nesso, mid nigon nessiklinon' (Go out, Nesso, with nine Nesso children).⁷⁰⁸ The English charm is interested in animal imagery and uses *chichenne*, 'fledgling', an ornithological alternative for *klinon*, 'little ones'. The implications of these words are similar; both denote immature versions of adult disease demons. We find additional examples of diseases with family members in some medieval Latin exorcisms that banish seven febrile sisters: 'In nome dei patris [...] Coniuro uos frigores, VII sorores'.⁷⁰⁹ The fourteenth-century 'Münchner Nachtsegen' expels not just one *alb*, but its entire family, too:

⁷⁰⁶ Af Klintberg 1965: 27. For charms that mention Blåkulla as a place of exile, see Sahlgren 1915: 105–114.

⁷⁰⁷ Line 10, edited in Schulz 2000b: 152. On this mountain, see Weiser 1927; Peuckert 1956; Bertau 1956; Köhler-Zülch 1993. On demonic mountains in the Middle Ages more generally, see Tschaikner 2008.

⁷⁰⁸ No. 1 in Holzmann 2001: 133.

⁷⁰⁹ Schulz 2003a: 104; Simek 2011: 34.

Alb vnde elbelin
Ir sult nicht lenger bliben hin
Albes svestir vnd vatir
Ir sult zu varen obir dem gatir
Albes mutir trute und mar
Ir sult uz zu den virste varen
[...]
albes kinder ir wihtelin
lazet vwer tastin noch *mir* sin.⁷¹⁰

Alb and *elbelin*,
you shall not stay around any longer.
Alb's sister and father,
you will go out over the gate.
Alb's mother, *trute*, and *mar*,
you will go out via the ridge of the roof.
[...]
Alb's children, you, his little ones,
cease your groping after me.

The preceding discussion shows 'Against a Wen' is not the only charm that imagines mountains as appropriate places of exile. It also demonstrates the English poem is typical in assuming disease demons have families. Nevertheless, the manner in which the text integrates these traditions is highly original: the charm employs humour and bilingual ingenuity.

Scholars have often translated the nickname that the poem ascribes to the wen, *ermig*, as 'wretch' or 'poor one'. In this regard, they have overlooked a bilingual pun. *Earming* or *erming* does mean wretch in both Old English and Early Middle English. 'The Soul's Address to the Body',

⁷¹⁰ Lines 25–28, 37–38, edited in Schulz 2000b.

another Early Middle English poem with potential Old English roots, uses the expression in this manner:

Ȝet sæip þe soule
soriliche to hire licame:
[Wen]dest þu, la! erming,
her o to wunienne?⁷¹¹

That said the soul,
Sorrowfully to the body:
'Did you think, truly, wretch,
to reside here forever?'

The *erming* in this passage is a corpse that seems to be under the impression it will remain exactly where it is. The soul, who is the speaker, makes clear this assumption is misguided. The body will someday have to 'up arisen' and justify its 'morth deden', its deadly sins, 'thonne domes daie *cumeth*'.⁷¹²

The wen that is addressed in the charm is a similar example of an *erming* who mistakenly believes its current indolence and inertia are future proof. The Old English medical texts cited at the beginning of this discussion use the same verb, *wunian*, to describe the behaviour of wens as that which the 'Soul's Address to the Body' employs to typify the conduct of the corpse.⁷¹³ Nevertheless, in the charm, the moniker *ermig* is probably also a nod to the Latin word *ermigio*, 'raspberry'. Such berries were called *hindberge* in Old English. The pun helps explain why the wen and its brother are siblings: they have the same family name.⁷¹⁴ The former is a small, *hindan* (towards the back) *berghe* and the latter lives at a big

⁷¹¹ Lines 310–313, edited in Singer 1845.

⁷¹² Lines 305–308, edited in Singer 1845.

⁷¹³ See footnote 679.

⁷¹⁴ See the attested spellings in *DOE*, s.v. 'hind-berie, hind-berige'. Also see 'ermig' in *DOE Web Corpus* 2009.

nighan (towards the front) *berghe*. The humour of this wordplay is amplified by the fact that that some types of warty growths can bear a semblance to raspberries, fruits which themselves somewhat resemble tiny mountains.⁷¹⁵ Frank Crozer Knowles, who was an influential professor of dermatology in the first half of the twentieth century, wrote about the so-called *Verruca acuminata* (venereal wart) that ‘the growths are single or multiple, of a pinkish, reddish, purplish or grayish color, and consist of raspberry-like [...] elevations’.⁷¹⁶ Earlier, the Scottish doctor John Clark discussed ‘warts and raspberry-like excrescences’ in his *Observations on the Diseases in Long Voyages to Hot Countries* (1773).⁷¹⁷

⁷¹⁵ See ‘Figure 3’.

⁷¹⁶ Knowles 1935: 255.

⁷¹⁷ *OED*, s.v. ‘raspberry-like adj.’. See also ‘strawberry-mark n.’ and ‘† strawberryed adj.’.

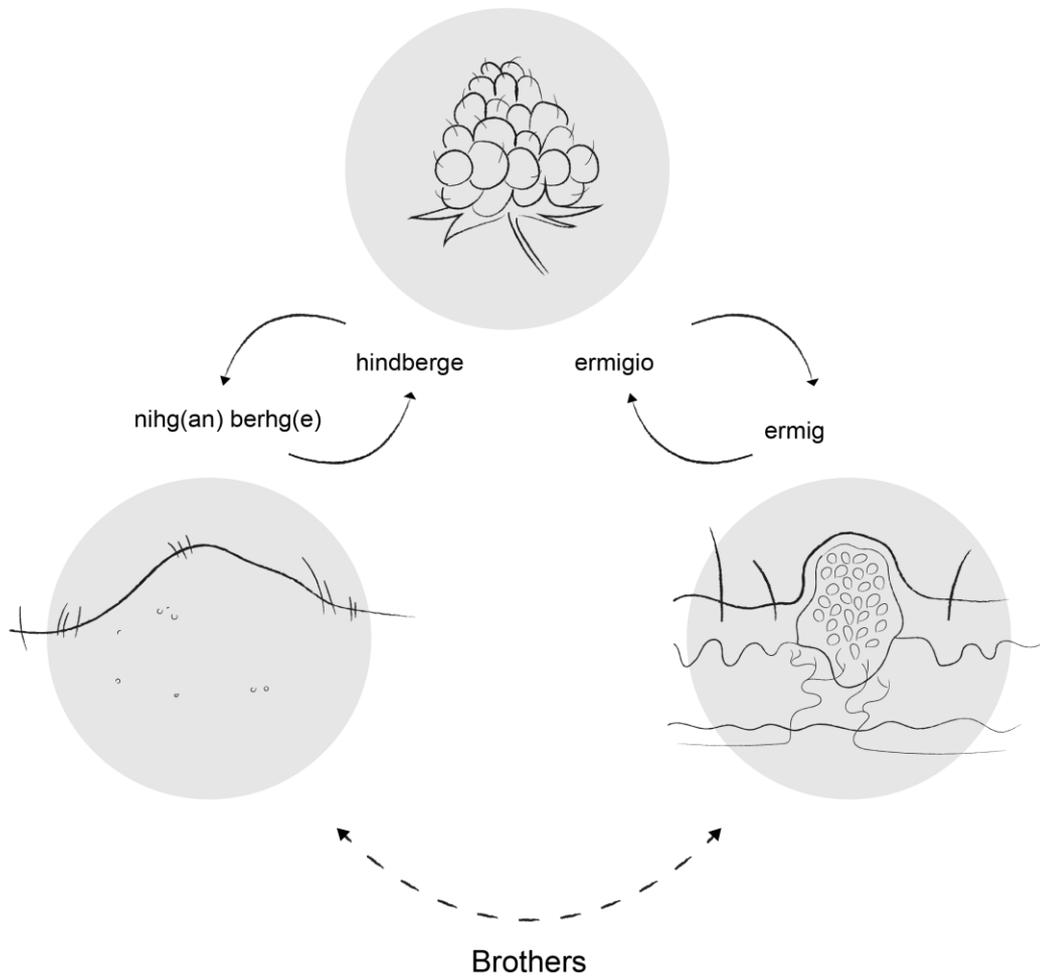


Figure 3 The visual puns of 'Against a Wen'. Bottom right: a cross section of a wart. In Old English such a growth could be called a wen; the poem also calls it an *ermig*. Above: a raspberry; the medieval Latin name for such a fruit is *ermigio*, the Old English name is *hindberge*. Bottom left: an early medieval hill or barrow. In early Middle English, this was called a *berhg(e)*. The brother of the wen lives at a 'nighan berhge'. The text plays with the visual, verbal, and spatial relationships between a cutaneous outgrowth (*ermig*), a raspberry (*ermigio/hindberge*), and a mound ('nighan berhge'). Drawing by Maria Fraaije

Cadaverous Analogies, Battling Beasts, and Carnivorous Plants

The poem tells the wen that its brother will lay a leaf to its head. Scholars have offered several suggestions to explain the mysterious image. Audrey Meaney has proposed ‘the leaf was perhaps a piece of vellum or even the leaf of a tree containing the written charm’.⁷¹⁸ Godfrid Storms has suggested it was a talismanic wrapper, while George Abernethy wondered whether it denoted ‘a burial shroud’.⁷¹⁹ Marijane Osborn has connected the leaf to ‘the sort of herbal remedy found often in medieval recipes’.⁷²⁰ As will be argued below, this last hypothesis receives support from the idea that ‘Against a Wen’ plays riddling word games—specifically, games that involve plant names. Explicating the poem’s incorporation of the medical procedure requires revisiting the wolves’ feet and eagles’ claws.

Scavenging wolves and eagles are common in Old English poetry. As Beasts of Battle, they enact a type-scene that evokes warfare, corpse-eating, and violent death.⁷²¹ The *Battle of Brunanburh*, which commemorates a collision between English troops and an alliance of Vikings, Scots, and Strathclyde Britons (c. 937), provides an example. When the victors (Æthelstan and his half-brother Edmund) return home, the abandoned battleground becomes the site of a macabre banquet:

Letan him behindan hræw bryttian
saluwigpadan, þone sweartan hræfn,
hyrnednebban, and þane hasewanpadan,
earn æftan hwit, æses brucan,
grædigne guðhafoc and þæt græge deor,

⁷¹⁸ Meaney 1981: 19.

⁷¹⁹ Storms 1948: 157; Abernethy 1983: 176.

⁷²⁰ Osborn 2013: 229–230.

⁷²¹ Griffith 1993: 184–85. See further Jesch 2002: 251.

wulf on wealde.⁷²²

They left behind them, to enjoy the corpses,
the dark-coated one, the black raven,
horn-beaked, and the ashen-coated one,
the eagle, white from behind, greedy war-hawk,⁷²³
to partake of carrion, and that grey animal
the wolf in the forest.

Beasts of Battle type-scenes are so common in Old English poetry that Francis Magoun and Eric Stanley could catalogue fifteen instances in 1955.⁷²⁴ The motif has since formed the subject of several articles and PhD theses.⁷²⁵ None discusses ‘Against a Wen’. The evidence presented below suggests the charm deserves to be included in future Beasts of Battle discussions.

The charm’s references to the limbs of wolves and eagles most closely resemble Scandinavian sources.⁷²⁶ In Snorri Sturluson’s *Skáldskaparmál* (c. 1220)—a discussion of ‘the language of poetry’ that takes the form of a mythological dialogue—the Norse god of poetry, Bragi, mentions various poetic figures to paraphrase *orrostu*, ‘battle’. Sinking ‘und arnar hramma’ (under the eagle’s claws) functions as a metaphor for dying in combat.⁷²⁷ Contemporary poems that use the same expression are *Vellekla* (10th cent.) and *Magnússdrápa* (c. 1103). In the former, three hundred men are pushed ‘gammi nás und hramma’ (under the claws of the corpse’s vulture [a kenning for a raven or an eagle]);⁷²⁸ in the latter, a

⁷²² Lines 60–65a in Dobbie 1942: 16–20.

⁷²³ This is most likely not a fourth animal but an epithet for the eagle. See Herring 2008: 11.

⁷²⁴ Magoun 1955: 84–88; Stanley 1955: 442, n. 1–2.

⁷²⁵ See, for instance, Britt 2014: 213–16; Honegger 1999: 294, n. 22; Hrafnhildur 1976: 253–58; Griffith 1993: 186.

⁷²⁶ Sandmann also makes this point and provides additional analogues. See 1975: 68.

⁷²⁷ Faulkes 1998: 67.

⁷²⁸ Marold et al. 2012: 312.

Norwegian king, Magnus, can redder the battlefield and thrust his enemy ‘und gulri grás arnar kló’ (beneath the yellow claw of the grey eagle).⁷²⁹

Skáldskaparmál does not explain what being pushed under a wolf’s paw means. Nevertheless, compositions from the same period show the expressions are interchangeable. In another of Snorri’s texts about the inner workings of poetry, *Háttatal* (c. 1222–23), a stanza exemplifying a type of metre called *óbreytt hrynhent* (unvarying fluid-rhymed) relates how Skúli, ruler of the Þrændir, ‘skóp bana þungan’ (created a burdensome death) for his opponent, Gunnar, the leader of an opposing rebellious faction. Like the wen in the English charm, ‘Gunnarr skaut und gera fótar grimmsetta il hjarna kletti’ (Gunnar pushed his crag of the brain beneath the fierce-placed sole of Geri’s foot).⁷³⁰ The Old Norse poem assumes that audiences understand that ‘crag of the brain’ is a circumlocution for ‘head’ and that ‘Geri’ is the name of one of Óðinn’s wolves.⁷³¹

The cited analogues indicate that the future encounter between the wen and its brother will result in death and destruction. And indeed, the charm goes on to tell the skin blemish that ‘a þu geweorne’ (may you wither forever).⁷³² The text manages to turn what seems like an ordinary, everyday frustration over an unwelcome skin condition into a bathetic micro-narrative replete with the stuff of legends. The wen and its brother are more than unfriendly. They are akin to gladiatorial combatants, embroiled in a fratricidal encounter. The clutching paws and nails of voracious animals, themselves symbols of violent strife, enact the struggle. The wen has at this point received the frail alter egos of a baby bird, a wretch, and a raspberry. It is powerless against the forces of the opposition: a massive mound and several ravenous harbingers of death.

This is an opportune moment to contextualise the charm’s mysteriously withering leaf. Understanding the image requires pointing out

⁷²⁹ Gade 2009: 412–13.

⁷³⁰ Gade 2017: 1176.

⁷³¹ Gade 2017: 1177.

⁷³² Line 7.

that ‘Against a Wen’ only mentions two beasts of battle—an eagle and a wolf.⁷³³ Often, Old English sources that reference these scavengers follow the example of the *Battle of Brunanburh* and also describe a ‘swertan hræfn’ (black raven).⁷³⁴ Joseph Harris emphasised the importance of the scavenging corvid: it is ‘especially the raven’ whose association with battle ‘sticks fast in the imagination’.⁷³⁵

In 1999, Anne Mathieu offered an explanation that accounts for the absent animal. She pointed out that early English medicine books contain herbal treatments against wens. One plant that appears in ingredient lists is *hræfnes fot*, ‘raven’s foot’.⁷³⁶ She published her suggestion in French and called it ‘bien sûr qu’une hypothèse’.⁷³⁷ A section from James Hardy’s article on ‘Wart and Wen Cures’ from 1878 reinforces Mathieu’s hypothesis:

There is a very useful property belonging to the *Ranunculus arvensis*, or common crowfoot, which I do not think is generally known. On breaking the stalk of the growing plant in two, a drop of milky juice will be observed to hang on the upper part of the stem; if this is allowed to drop on the wart, so that it be well saturated with the juice, in about three or four dressings the wart will die, and may be picked off with the fingers [...] [T]his property of crowfoots is in all the Herbals. Thus Gerard, p. 963: the leaves or roots of crowfoots stamped ‘are laid upon cragged wartes, corrupt nailes, and such like excrescences, to cause them to fall away.’ This again is traceable to Pliny. In lib. xxvi. c. 14, the *Batrachii radix* (root of crowfoot) is a taker away of warts.⁷³⁸

⁷³³ Accepting the emendation of ‘uolmes’ to ‘wolves’. See footnote 664.

⁷³⁴ Honegger 1999: 289; Jesch 2002: 253; Griffith 1993: 184–85; Magoun 1955: 83.

⁷³⁵ Harris 2007: 3.

⁷³⁶ Mathieu 1999: para. 12.

⁷³⁷ Mathieu 1999: para. 13.

⁷³⁸ Hardy 1878: 225–26. ‘Gerard’ is John Gerard (c. 1545–1612), author of *Herball, or Generall Historie of Plantes*, first published in 1597.

As the excerpt explains, ‘crowfoot’ preparations—‘buttercup’ in modern English, ‘raven’s foot’ in Old English—were since the time of Pliny (d. 79 CE) ‘laid upon cragged wartes’ for them to ‘die’ or ‘fall away’.⁷³⁹ It is likely that the nondescript ‘leaf’ that is ‘laid’ on the wen’s ‘head’ refers to this herb and also represents the corvid that is absent from the charm’s Beasts of Battle type-scene.⁷⁴⁰ The *Old English Herbarium* provides some further insight into how plant medicine can help to ‘decapitate’ a swelling under the entry for *vermenaca*, ‘vervain’:⁷⁴¹

Wið nadren slite seoð þisse wyrt twiȝu on wine; 7 ȝif slite blynd byð 7 mid þan ȝeswelle unȝeheafod, þanne leȝe þa wyrt þarto; sona hit seal opínien; 7 suddān hit ȝeopened byð, þanne ním þa wyrt onȝesodene 7 cnuca mid honiȝe, leȝe to þara wunde oðþæt heo hal siȝ.⁷⁴²

For snake bite, simmer twigs of this herb in wine; and if the bite is invisible, and the swelling does not have a ‘head’, then lay the plant on it. Soon it will open. And when it has opened, take the [same] herb, unsodden, and crush with honey. Place it on the sore until it has healed.

The allusion to *hræfnes fot* harmonises with some of the charm’s broader literary interests. One of these is constructing puns out of plant and animal names—earlier, the text likened the wen to a mound, a *bergh(e)*, by rebranding it as a raspberry, a *hindberge*. Another is conjuring up images of parasites and scavengers by describing just their hands and feet.⁷⁴³ We

⁷³⁹ *OED*, s.v. ‘crowfoot’.

⁷⁴⁰ See Figure 4.

⁷⁴¹ This reference is indirectly pointed out in Healey 2016: 177; *DOE*, s.v. 7c ‘heafod’.

⁷⁴² De Vriend 1984: 49, iv.11. The quotation is from the ‘O’ manuscript. This was produced in the twelfth century, around the same time as ‘Against a Wen’. See De Vriend 1984: xxx.

⁷⁴³ Significantly, Old English charms are not innocent of playing word games in this manner. ‘For a Sudden Stitch’ conscripts herbs such as nettle and a close relative of *lanceolata* to conquer the pain of a *lytel spere*; the ‘Nine Herbs Charm’ even renames plants to highlight their remedial reputation.

have reviewed the text's references to a wolf's paw and an eagle's claw; later, the charm also mentions a *handwurm*.

It is helpful to remember that the poem possibly operated in a more expansive milieu of folkloric traditions that cured wens by associating them with items that would soon be buried, or with objects that were destined to rot or decay. The sepulchral connotations of being sent to perish at a *berghe* — in Early Middle English this word could signify 'gravemound' or 'tumulus' — are evident. The poem's imagery regarding the wen's position below the feet of animals — body parts that are usually already at ground level — also connotes interment. We observed that from Roman to post-medieval times wens were treated by bringing them into contact with the hands of corpses. It seems fitting that the poem cures the same condition by associating it with the hands and feet of animals that consume and conjure up dead bodies.

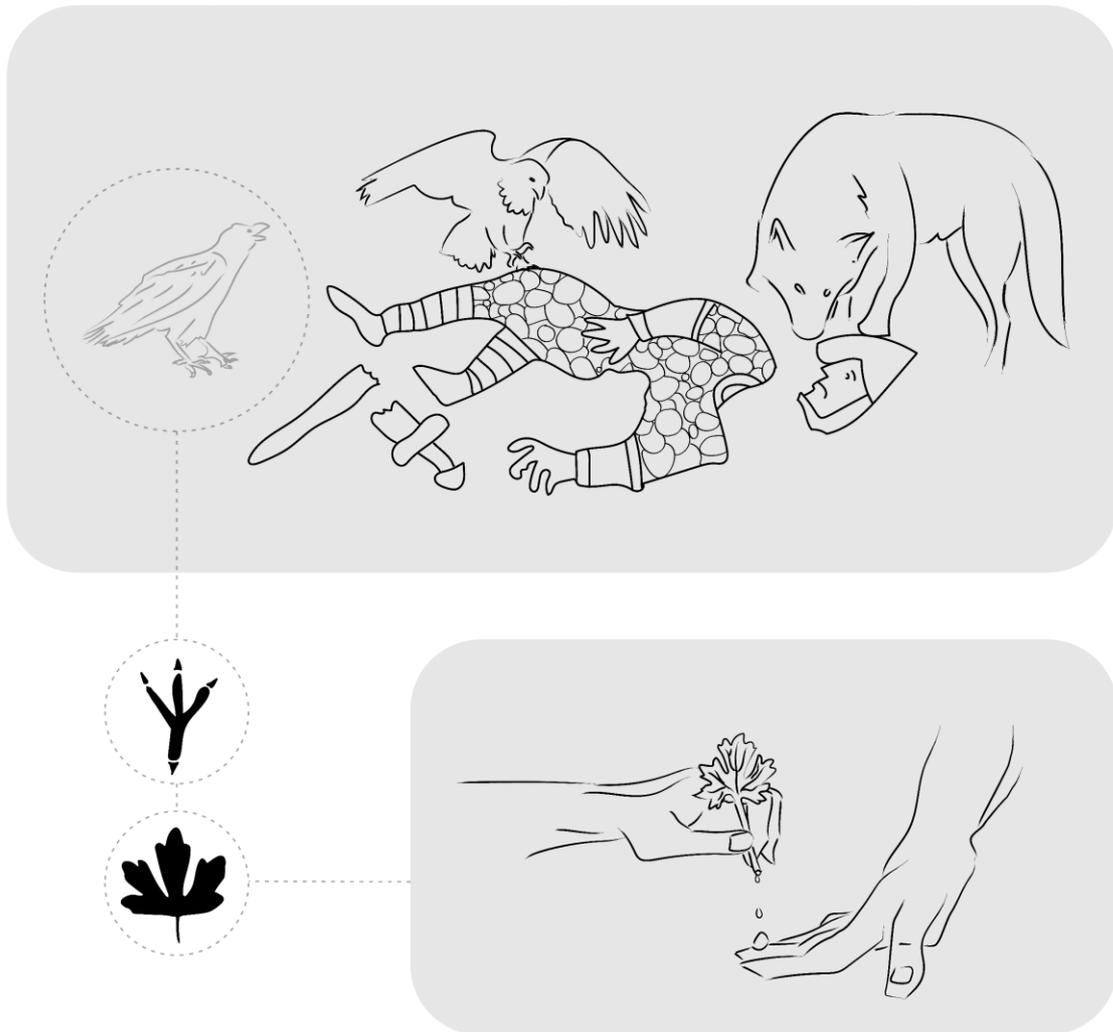


Figure 4 The merging of two flesh-eating processes in 'Against a Wen'. Above: a depiction of the Beasts of Battle, a common type-scene in Old English poetry that portrays wolves, eagles, and ravens as battlefield scavengers. 'Against a Wen' uses the motif and mentions the first two animals by referring to their feet. The wen will 'wither forever' underneath the wolf's paw and the eagle's claw. The poem breaks the expected pattern by omitting a reference to the raven's talons. Instead, the charm mentions a nondescript 'leaf' that will be placed on the wen's 'head'. Below: a traditional wart cure involving the dripping of crowfoot (here specifically *Ranunculus sceleratus*) juice onto the 'head' of a wart. In Old English, the same plant could be called *hræfnes fot*, 'raven's foot'. The warrior is based on a fallen soldier from the Bayeux Tapestry's depiction of the Battle of Hastings.

Belittling Similes, Biblical Allusions, and Dismembered Animals

The midsection of 'Against a Wen' departs from the introduction's battleground imagery and heads into the domestic realm with a series of rustic similes. These conjure up such around-the-farm images as fading embers in a hearth, decomposing dung, and a bucket of slowly evaporating water. Such descriptions are not uncommon in incantatory poetry. They specifically resemble the phraseology of several Scandinavian charms from later periods. One example, titled as a text against *vårtor*, 'warts', runs as follows:

Vissna, vassna
som kol i aska,
man i jord,
snö för sol!
Du ska bli så liten
som ett senapskorn,
sedan intet.⁷⁴⁴

Wither, *vassna*,
like coal into ashes,
a man in the ground,
snow before the sun!
You should become as small
as a grain of mustard,
then nothing.

⁷⁴⁴ No. 675 in Linderholm 1917-1940: 308.

This poem re-articulates the now established macabre link between unwanted skin protrusions and dead bodies. It again associates a tumorous growth with a rotting corpse.⁷⁴⁵ It also confirms that the poet of ‘Against a Wen’ sourced some of its comparative phrases from broader traditions. For instance, both charms liken an unwelcome cutaneous protrusion to fading ‘kol’.⁷⁴⁶ Meanwhile, the references these texts make to the consuming influence of fire and the evaporating and sublimating properties of water (‘weorne alswa weter on anbre’ vs. ‘Vissna [...] som [...] snö för sol’) also resemble the psalm-inspired curse which we find in ‘For Theft of Cattle’. Here, it is said about a thief that ‘Eall he weornige, swa syre wudu weornie’ (may he wither completely, as dry wood withers).⁷⁴⁷ In turn, the Old English translation of Psalm 82/83 asks God to pursue unbelievers ‘swa færingga fyr wudu byrneð’ (as sudden fire burns wood).⁷⁴⁸

If ‘Against a Wen’ presents a folkloric parallel to some psalmic statements, this is not its only connection to the Bible. Both the Scandinavian and the English charm command warty growths to become as small as specific seeds before becoming smaller than nothing. The Old English runs ‘Swa litel þu gewurpe alswa linsetcorn [...] and alswa litel þu gewurpe þet þu nawiht gewurpe’; the Swedish text says, ‘Du ska bli så liten | som ett senapskorn, | sedan intet’. This phraseological resemblance allows us to isolate a scriptural source for both statements that has not been noticed before in the English poem.⁷⁴⁹

In the Gospel of Matthew, a distraught father asks Jesus to cure his epileptic son. The man explains several disciples had already tried and failed to treat the symptoms. Jesus heals the child without difficulties: ‘et exiit ab eo daemonium et curatus est puer ex illa hora’ (and the demon

⁷⁴⁵ For similar examples of this motif, see Hampp 1961: 35–36.

⁷⁴⁶ Compare Winstanley and Rose 1928: 174–175.

⁷⁴⁷ Line 16 in Dobbie 1942: 125–126.

⁷⁴⁸ Line 36 in Krapp 1932a.

⁷⁴⁹ Christian influences in ‘Against a Wen’ have not been noted before. Compare Shaw 2019: 754. The influence of the gospel of Matthew on the Scandinavian poem has previously been identified. See Af Klintberg 1965: 117.

departed out of him and the child was cured from that very hour).⁷⁵⁰ Some disciples later ask why they failed. Jesus responds:

Propter incredulitatem vestram amen quippe dico vobis si habueritis fidem sicut granum sinapis dicetis monti huic transi hinc et transibit et nihil impossibile erit vobis.⁷⁵¹

Because of your unbelief. For, amen, I tell you that if you have faith even as small as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain: move from here to there, and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you.

‘Against a Wen’ and the Scandinavian charm against ‘vårtor’ make creative use of the just-cited passage from the Gospel of Matthew to lend authority to their closing statements. The formulas should expel the addressed ailments just as Christ expelled the demon from the afflicted child. More significantly, the targeted warty eruptions should become smaller than the smallest modicum of faith required to achieve the impossible, the size of a ‘granum sinapis’. In this manner, the charmer will himself become able to move mountains — both literally and figuratively — and say to the unwanted skin bump: ‘huic transi hinc’.⁷⁵²

In its penultimate line, ‘Against a Wen’ tells the shrivelled wen to become ‘much less than a handworm’s hipbone’.⁷⁵³ Julius Zupitza has pointed out that two Old English riddles use handworms to provide concrete imagery for nigh-unimaginable smallness. ‘Riddle 40’ (or 38) says: ‘Mara ic eom ond strengra þonne se micla hwæl | [...] ic eom on mægene minum læsse þonne se hondwyrn’ (I am larger and stronger than

⁷⁵⁰ Matt. 17:18.

⁷⁵¹ Matt. 17:20.

⁷⁵² This command is strengthened by the fact that in ‘Against a Wen’ the modifiers *nighan* and *hindan* are already attached to the names of the respective movable mountains.

⁷⁵³ Line 12.

the great whale; I am in my strength less than the handworm).⁷⁵⁴ ‘Riddle 66’ (or 64) offers a variation: ‘Ic eom mare þonne þes middangeard, læsse þonne hondwyrn’ (I am larger than this world; smaller than a handworm).⁷⁵⁵ Both texts paraphrase Aldhelm’s ‘De creatura’, which discusses the miracle of God’s creation through an extensive series of contrastive superlatives. The line that inspired the two quotations above runs: ‘Grandior in glaucis ballena fluctibus atra | Et minor exiguo, sulcat qui corpora, verme’ (I am larger than the black whale in the grey-green waves, and smaller than the thin worm which furrows bodies).⁷⁵⁶

The comparison between a wen and the pelvis of a parasite once again appears to be a creative adaptation of an existing metaphor. The line is specifically appropriate for several reasons. First, it presents yet another belittling simile. The just cited riddles use comparisons; the operative word in the charm’s final section is also ‘alswa’ (it appears six consecutive times). The wen, however, never becomes ‘mara’ or ‘strengra’ than a giant whale. It just becomes ‘læsse’ than increasingly minuscule objects.

In the final section of ‘Against the Wen’, only one thing becomes more accommodating: the verse form.⁷⁵⁷ The last lines of the composition are longer and assume a more prose-like but still ornamental quality.⁷⁵⁸ The metrical shift signals a parallel thematic change. The mundane and perceptible realm of water buckets, dung-stained walls, and glowing hearths turns into a microscopic and somewhat mysterious environment inhabited only by minuscule insects. The skin blemish here loses contact with reality; it becomes a hypothetical fragment of a creature that colonises the border zone of human perception. Line 12 assigns the wen no more than a toehold in God’s creation; line 13 severs its connection with

⁷⁵⁴ Lines 92–96a, edited in Krapp and Dobbie 1936.

⁷⁵⁵ Lines 1–2a.

⁷⁵⁶ Ehwald 1919: 148, ll. 65–66.

⁷⁵⁷ This has been pointed out before. See Batten 2021: 16, n. 36; Symons 2016: 135, n. 38.

⁷⁵⁸ The metre in this section has been described as defective. See Storms 1948: 156; Osborn 2013: 224. For a positive appraisal, see Batten 2021: 16.

existence altogether. It is now ‘nawiht’—not just ‘nothing’ but also ‘no creature’.

A slightly more intricate reason the charm conjures up a handworm’s hipbone may be related to the fact that the signified creature is probably not a ‘worm’ but a small parasitic arthropod. Modern biologists sometimes use the label *Sarcoptes scabiei* to describe it. Most non-specialists prefer itch mite.⁷⁵⁹ Like the unwelcome wen, such minute parasites make a nest out of the skin of their hosts. A Middle English medicine book explains: ‘Hande wormes ben smale bestes þat maken holowe waies and freten bytwene þe fleisshe and þe skyn’.⁷⁶⁰ In this manner, these ‘smale bestes’ cause a condition called scabies, an itchy, pimple-like rash. The charm hopes to cure a skin lump by personifying it into an uninvited guest and sending it away to an inhospitable mound with a similar name and shape. The composition completes its exorcism through a felicitous metaphoric statement that disassembles the skeleton of a parasite which behaves like the addressed ailment, lives in similar dwellings, and causes analogous skin problems.⁷⁶¹

The same comparison permits the poem to continue its custom of referring to animals by mentioning just their parts. All the animals in ‘Against a Wen’ have in one way or another been reduced or shrunken down: the ‘fledgling’ in the opening invocation functions as a diminutive; the wolf and eagle that appear a few lines later display just their paws, claws, and plumage; and the only body part we see of the wen before it is shrunken into oblivion is its raspberry-like head. That the handworm strictly gets to bare its hipbone is in line with the poem’s theme. Nevertheless, these images of disarticulated physiques do more than recall a traditional predilection for macabre metonyms. They also cohere with the poem’s overarching message: the text wishes to un-build an unwanted part on the body of the patient. It achieves this objective by taking apart and un-

⁷⁵⁹ *OED*, s.v. ‘Handworm, n.’. For additional literary parallels, see Keil 1957.

⁷⁶⁰ Quoted in Norri 2016. See the lemma ‘Siron’.

⁷⁶¹ Also see Osborn 2013: 228–229.

growing the bodies of both the ailments and animals with which this part is associated.

Conclusion

‘Against a Wen’ has not received the attention from scholars it deserves. In the nineteenth century, it mostly escaped the attention of specialists. In the twentieth, the charm became known as a humorous but ‘simple and straightforward’ composition. While most commentators have argued it is a modernised Old English text, its precise relationship with earlier literature remains controversial. Dobbie placed the charm at the back of his *Minor Poems* (1942) to signal its feeble connections to earlier writings. Francis Magoun omitted the composition from his *Beasts of Battle* catalogue. In criticism, the text consistently occupies border zones: ‘Against a Wen’ is sufficiently regular;⁷⁶² ‘marginally Old English’;⁷⁶³ ‘not-too-distant’ from other poetry.⁷⁶⁴ A recent commentator suggested the charm contained elements which it ‘perhaps unwittingly’ preserves: ‘black magic’ and shamanistic practices.⁷⁶⁵

This chapter argues such evaluations require revision. ‘Against a Wen’ is far from ‘simple and straightforward’. Instead, it is ingenious and elusive. The charm’s thirteen lines comprise a masterful verbal trap: each expression forces the addressed skin blemish into an even more corrosive, even more claustrophobic metaphor. It is clear that ‘Against a Wen’ means to achieve magical reduction through unfavourable analogies. What is not obvious and what has not been noticed before is that the charm’s comparisons draw power from word games and subtextual allusions. Behind innocuous descriptions of leaves and linseed grains lurk

⁷⁶² Dobbie 1942: cxx.

⁷⁶³ Weiskott 2019: 348.

⁷⁶⁴ Kossick 1969: 50; and Vaughan-Sterling 1983: 186, 200.

⁷⁶⁵ Osborn 2013: 238.

scavenging ravens, Christ's exorcistic abilities, and the mountain-moving force of religious faith. The charm's outwardly frank appellations are duplicitous: the wen is not a strong grownup but a helpless 'wen-hatchling'; not just an *ermig*, 'wretch', but an *ermigio*, 'raspberry'.

The argument presented above supplies new evidence for clarifying the charm's historical background. The text's Anglo-Latin puns and its references to biblical lore show it is not a pre-Christian relic. Furthermore, Skaldic analogues to the Beasts of Battle passage and correspondences to charms from nineteenth-century Scandinavia raise the spectre of some connection to Old Norse. Direct translation is improbable: 'Against a Wen' shows no unambiguous influence of Old Norse vocabulary and *ermigio* is a classical botanical term. Conceivably, 'Against a Wen' is a sophisticated and literary adaptation of a more widely disseminated text type or perhaps of a semi-established constellation of more widely distributed formulas. These seem to have circulated in continental Scandinavia and may also have circulated in the Danelaw.⁷⁶⁶ As for the age of the composition preserved in Royal 4. A. xiv: the charm's biblical wordplay, its (bilingual) magical nicknames, and its traditional poetic themes are characteristic of early English monastic learning. The thematic evidence supports the traditional premise that 'Against a Wen' is a linguistically modernised version of a composition that predates the twelfth century; contemporary and later analogues hint at some form of English-Scandinavian contact and reduce the likelihood that the charm acquired its current written form before the ninth.

⁷⁶⁶ See the comments on charm types and the impossibility of recovering Ur-texts in Smallwood 2004: 11–12; Roper 2004: 131.

6. ‘Against the hated late fetus’: Three Rites Against Miscarriage

Introduction

This chapter discusses three interdependent rituals (performances that incorporate actions and words) related to pregnancy. They appear as consecutive entries in the tenth- or eleventh-century manuscript *Lacnunga* (fols. 185^r–185^v). The following discussion refers to them consistently as ‘Ritual One’, ‘Ritual Two’, and ‘Ritual Three’. The first is the longest and consists of three separate acts:

Se wifman se hire cild afedan ne mæg: gange to gewitenes mannes
birgenne 7 stæppe þon(ne) þriwa ofer þa byrgenne, 7 cweþe
þon(ne) þriwa þas word:

‘Þis me to bote þære laþan lætbyrde;
þis me to bote þære swæran swærtbyrde;
þis me to bote þære laðan lambyrde’.

7 þon(ne) þ(æt) wif seo mid bearne 7 heo to hyre hlaforde on reste
ga, þon(ne) cweþe heo:

‘Up ic gonge, ofer þe stæppe
mid cwican cilde, nalæs mid cwel[[]]endum,
mid fulborenum, nalæs mid fægan’.

7 þo(ne) seo modor gefele þ(æt) þ(æt) bearn si cwic, ga þon(ne) to
cyrican, 7 þo(ne) heo toforan þan weofude cume cweþe þon(ne):

‘Criste, ic sæde, þis gecyþed’.⁷⁶⁷

The woman who cannot gestate her child: She should go to the
grave of a departed man, and she should step three times over the
grave, and say then three times these words:

‘This for me as a cure against the hated late fetus.’⁷⁶⁸

This for me as a cure against the heavy livid fetus.’⁷⁶⁹

This for me as a cure against the hated lame fetus’.

And when the woman is with child and goes to rest with her
husband, she should say:

‘Up I go, step over you,
with a living child, not with a dying one,
with a full-born child, not with a doomed one’.

And when the mother feels that the child is alive, she should go to
church. And when she comes before the altar she should say:

‘To Christ, I said, this [is] revealed’.

⁷⁶⁷ Pettit 2001a: 112.

⁷⁶⁸ For *byrde* as ‘fetus’, see footnotes 777–781 and the accompanying discussion.

⁷⁶⁹ Here, OE *sweart* is interpreted figuratively as ‘livid’. Because the adjective precedes a description of a ‘lame fetus’, it is perhaps relevant that one early English text glosses ‘spirituum deformium multitudo’ as ‘mænigeo sweartra gasta’. See Bosworth and Toller, s.v. ‘sweart *adj.*’

‘Ritual Two immediately follows ‘Ritual One’. It commences with a similar introductory phrase, and the custom it describes again requires the use of a grave. It is much shorter, however, and it only involves a single verbal performance:

Se wifmon se hyre bearn afedan ne mæge: genime heo sylf agenes
cildes gebyrgenne dæl, [w]ry æfter þon(ne) on blace wulle 7 bebicge
to cepemannu(m) 7 cweþe þon(ne):

‘Ic hit bebicge, ge hit bebicgan,
þas sweartan wulle 7 þysse sorge corn’.⁷⁷⁰

The woman who cannot gestate her child: she should take herself a part of her own child’s grave, wrap it afterwards in black wool, and sell it to a merchant, and say then:

‘I sell it; you sell it,
this black wool and this seed of sorrow’.

‘Ritual Three’ starts with yet another variation of the same introductory phrase. Like ‘Ritual One’, it only prescribes a single verbal performance. However, it does require the enactment of more elaborate non-verbal procedures:

Se man se [n]e mæge bearn afedan: nime þon(ne) anes bleos cu
meoluc on hyre handæ 7 gesupe þon(ne) mid hyre muþe, 7 gange
þon(ne) to yrnendu(m) wætere 7 spiwe þærin þa meolc, 7 hlade
þon(ne) mid þære ylcan hand þæs wæteres muð fulne 7
forswelge; cweþe þon(ne) þas word:

⁷⁷⁰ Pettit 2001a: 112.

‘Gehwer ferde ic me þone mæran maga þihtan
Mid bysse mæran mete þihtan,
þo(ne) ic me wille habban 7 ham gan’.

Þon(ne) heo to þan broce ga, þon(ne) ne beseo no, ne eft þon(ne)
heo þanan ga; 7 þon(ne) ga heo in oþer hus oþer heo ut eofode, 7
þær gebyrge metes.⁷⁷¹

The woman who cannot gestate her child: she should take the milk
of a cow of one colour in her hand and then sip [it] with her mouth,
and she should go to running water and spit therein the milk, and
scoop then with the same hand from the water a mouthful, and
swallow it. She should then say these words:

Everywhere I carried the proclaimed stomach (or womb)
burden / kinsman burden
— with this proclaimed food burden —
who I want to have/deliver and go home.

When she goes to the brook, she should not look back, nor when
she goes from there; and then she should go into a house other than
that from which she went out, and there she should eat food.

John Mitchell Kemble was the first modern scholar to publish these rituals.
He appended them to the first volume of his monograph *The Saxons in
England* in 1849.⁷⁷² Since then, they have gathered a significant number of
commentaries, and they have been re-edited and translated numerous

⁷⁷¹ Pettit 2001a: 114.

⁷⁷² Kemble 1849: 528–529.

times.⁷⁷³ Most recently, Edward Pettit published them as part of his edition of *Lacnunga*.⁷⁷⁴ The Old English versions of the texts presented above follow this publication.

Scholars have offered an array of diverse, often conflicting opinions about how the different rituals should be interpreted and to what extent they reflect the cultural context in which they were recorded. Before discussing the published arguments in more detail, it is helpful to point out that most have focused on clarifying some key issues. In summary, these are as follows:⁷⁷⁵

1. How do the different rituals relate to each other? The main question is whether or not they sustain intertextual relationships. Do they form a unified narrative, or are they three or more separate texts for the same or different purposes?
2. What obstetric problems do the rituals address? This query is closely related to the previous question, as subdivisions that distinguish one or three discrete texts most readily accommodate readings that envision one or three separate problems. The crucial objective here is determining the meaning of the verb *afedan*. It recurs in the nearly identical titles of the three sections, but the expression's significance is not self-evident. Does it mean 'carry to

⁷⁷³ Cockayne 1866: 66–68; Wülcker and Grein 1883: 326–328; Grendon 1909: 206–209; Dobbie 1942: 123–124; Storms 1948: 196–199; Singer and Grattan 1952: 188–190; Bonser 1963: 267; Sandmann 1975: 94–95; Griffiths 1996: 191–193; Rodrigues 1993: 146–147; Bjork 2014: 210–213.

⁷⁷⁴ Pettit 2001a: 112–114.

⁷⁷⁵ One issue that is not discussed here is the way in which the gendered context of the manuscript interacts with the gendered content of the charm. For more on this subject, see Weston 1995; Buck 2000. Christine Voth has kindly made available to me two unpublished chapters which deal with this subject. These will come out under the following titles: 'Women and 'Women's Medicine' in Anglo-Saxon England: from Text to Practice', in *Feminist Approaches to Anglo-Saxon Studies*, ed. R. Trilling, R. Norris and R. Stephenson, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies (Turnhout: Brepols); 'The Book of Nunnaminster and The Royal Prayerbook: Voices of Women from the Pages of Manuscripts in the Tenth Century', in *Æthelwæd, Lady of the Mercians, and Women in the Tenth Century*, ed. R. Hardie and D. Scragg, Publications of the Richard Rawlinson Centre (Berlin: De Gruyter).

term', 'suckle', 'nurture', or 'raise' consistently, or does it change its meaning depending on the context?

3. Do the rituals have any analogues? Some of the taboos in 'Ritual Three' have been linked to other texts. However, most of the ceremonial performances and incantatory formulas have not yet been compared to other sources.
4. How do the rituals align with contemporary religious mentalities? The texts recommend actions that are Christian (visiting a church altar and addressing Christ). Still, they also prescribe activities that are perhaps less pious (jumping over a grave and selling earth from the burial place of a deceased infant).

These questions have accumulated protracted scholarly debates over time. This chapter answers them separately, differing from previous studies in three key respects. First, it makes use of a new translation for the poetic passage of 'Ritual Three'. This passage is grammatically convoluted and contains two compound nouns that are not attested elsewhere, *magapiht* and *metepiht*. The first of these words is here translated as 'stomach (or womb) burden', 'powerful person burden', or 'kinsman burden'; the second as 'food burden'.⁷⁷⁶ In particular, the superior understanding of these translations provides new opportunities for advancing insights into problem 1 (intertextual relationships), 2 (potential obstetric issues), and 3 (analogues).

This chapter also uses a new translation for *byrd* in the compounds *lætbyrd*, *swærtbyrd*, and *lambyrd* ('Ritual One'). Earlier translators have interpreted this rare Old English expression as the equivalent of modern

⁷⁷⁶ Not all scholars agree these are compound nouns. Pettit suggested they are nouns with post-positional adjectives. This is grammatically unlikely. *Maga* should then have an accusative ending. See Pettit 2001b: 328–330.

English ‘birth’.⁷⁷⁷ Nevertheless, these terms are false friends. The modern word ‘birth’ was borrowed from Old Norse (*burðr*) around 1200.⁷⁷⁸ *Byrd* is Old English’s native cognate. It is most closely related to Middle English *birde*, Middle High German *burde*, and Old Frisian *berthe*.⁷⁷⁹ In obstetric contexts, these expressions often mean fetus. In the *Cursor Mundi* (c. 1325) Mary refers to the unborn baby Jesus as ‘He þat I bare, þat blisful bird’.⁷⁸⁰ This discussion uses the same meaning for the Old English term.⁷⁸¹

Translating *byrd* as ‘fetus’ instead of ‘birth’ is a slight adjustment. Nevertheless, the interpretative implications are substantial. ‘Ritual One’ uses tree compound expressions that use the term. These convey an essential part of the speaker’s message. The currently-accepted translations of *lætbyrd* and *lambyrd*, ‘slow birth’ and ‘crippling birth’, emphasise the potential plights of the mother. The renditions preferred here, ‘late fetus’ and ‘lame fetus’, primarily focus on possible conditions of the unborn baby. Reading *byrd* as ‘fetus’ also eliminates the need for a common emendation to the medieval text: a *swærtbyrd* can be a ‘livid’ or ‘dismal’ fetus; there is no need to correct to *swærbyrde* to permit ‘heavy labour’.⁷⁸²

In 1985, Marie Nelson regretted that ‘[w]e do not have much to compare “The Woman’s Charm” with’.⁷⁸³ In 2001, Edward Pettit — the rituals’ most recent editor — also noted that ‘no sources for, or telling analogues to, these charms have been adduced’.⁷⁸⁴ This chapter is the first critical discussion that contextualises the cited texts against a

⁷⁷⁷ See, for example, Grendon 1909: 207; Storms 1948: 197; Weston 1995: 288.

⁷⁷⁸ *OED*, s.v. ‘birth, n.1’.

⁷⁷⁹ See the etymological information in *OED*, s.v. ‘† birde, n.’.

⁷⁸⁰ See *MED*, s.v. 3b ‘bīrde n.(1)’.

⁷⁸¹ Note that if birth appears as the second element in English compounds it also commonly denotes a product of labour, instead of the act. See *OED*, s.v. ‘† forbirth, n.’; ‘afterbirth, n.’; ‘misbirth, n.’; ‘outbirth, n.’; ‘still-birth, n.’.

⁷⁸² See Bosworth and Toller. S.v. ‘swært, adj.’; *MED*, s.v. 1f ‘swart adj.’ (note esp. the remedy from c. 1200 ‘Wið þan sweartan dolh’); cf. Dobbie 1942: 214. Magoun suggested the term means ‘ein blausüchtiges Kind’. See Magoun 1937b: 33.

⁷⁸³ Nelson 1985: 6.

⁷⁸⁴ Pettit 2001b: 318.

background of similar sources (problem 3). It shows that *Lacnunga*'s charms bear a strong resemblance to longstanding traditions that concern the elimination of undesirable ailments. The provided analogues enable a more informed understanding of how these sources align with contemporary religious mentalities (problem 4). They also explain why 'Ritual One' and 'Two' recommend a pregnant woman to visit, touch, and pass over gravesites to secure the health of an unborn infant, even though numerous traditions associate precisely such behaviour with sterility and miscarriage.⁷⁸⁵

Structure, Integrity, and Purpose of *Lacnunga*'s Pregnancy Rituals

The subdivision of just-cited passage from *Lacnunga* has occupied scholars for a long time. Kemble, who first commented on the section, noticed three separate entries.⁷⁸⁶ The main reason for this was that three variations of the same phrase punctuate the passage:

Ritual One:	Se wifman se hire cild afedan ne mæg
Ritual Two:	Se wifmon se hyre bearn afedan ne mæge
Ritual Three:	Se man se [n]e mæge bearn afedan

Such phrases are typical of medieval works of law and medicine, which tend to contain long lists of similar brief entries. The cited sections from *Lacnunga* do not noticeably deviate from more widely established

⁷⁸⁵ See 'Grab' in Bächtold-Stäubli, Hoffmann-Krayer, and Lüdtkke 1930-31: 1079–1080. Also see 'Conception' in Simpson and Roud 2003. In addition, see Kellum 1974: 12; Henderson 1879a: 12–13.

⁷⁸⁶ Kemble 1849: 528–529.

conventions. The phrases each commence with a so-called *littera notabilior*, a 'more noticeable' letter.

Nevertheless, halfway through the twentieth century, scholarship started to depart from the view that *Lacnunga's* section on pregnancy consisted of discrete rituals.⁷⁸⁷ Instead, commentators began to favour the proposition that the whole passage described a single more extensive ceremony. Storms argued in 1948 that '[t]he text as it lies before us shows that the charm is composed of four or five different practices to be performed at different times'.⁷⁸⁸ In 1975, Gert Sandmann discerned a 'Gesamttext' which had 'eine sinnvolle Abfolge von magischen Ritualen'.⁷⁸⁹ In 1985, Marie Nelson professed: 'I will interpret the charm as a single poem'.⁷⁹⁰ Dobbie had already advertised a compromise in 1942: 'we have here three originally separate texts [...] which were combined into one by the scribe of the Harley manuscript'.⁷⁹¹

Some scholars have refuted the proposition that the passage is composed of separate entries on account of the fact that the Old English verb *afedan* is ambiguous. Depending on the context, it can mean 'feed', 'suckle', 'nurture', 'bring forth', 'bring up', 'educate', and 'gestate'.⁷⁹² The ambiguity of the expression makes it difficult to establish whether a charm that claims to be for 'Se wifman se hire cild afedan ne mæg' is meant to be performed before or after birth. The most recent and most commonly accepted view maintains that the verb changes its meaning each time it reappears. As Lisa Weston has suggested: 'The woman's inability to *afedan hire cild* may be variously translated "nourish her child in her womb," "bring her child to term," and "nurse her child" after its birth'.⁷⁹³ This chapter argues *afedan* most likely means 'gestate' consistently, even

⁷⁸⁷ After Kemble, Grendon proposed five. See Grendon 1909: 234.

⁷⁸⁸ Storms 1948: 198.

⁷⁸⁹ Sandmann 1975: 96.

⁷⁹⁰ Nelson 1985: 3.

⁷⁹¹ Dobbie 1942: cxxxvi.

⁷⁹² *DOE*, 'a-fēdan; vb., wk. 1'.

⁷⁹³ Weston 1995: 282.

though 'Ritual Three' envisions gestation as a process that resembles digestion.

To clarify the meaning of *afedan*, the sections below assess the various hints that the different entries provide about the precise condition of the female performer. Is she in the early stages of pregnancy, halfway through the gestation period, or caring for a new-born infant? These discussions occasionally use specialist terms to describe specific pregnancy experiences. This thesis concentrates on explicating Old English charms and does not assume familiarity with human embryology and the precise timings of various developments during the gestation period. The two diagrams on the following pages clarify relevant terminology. They also offer a hypothetical overview of some significant occurrences in the pregnancy of an early medieval woman.

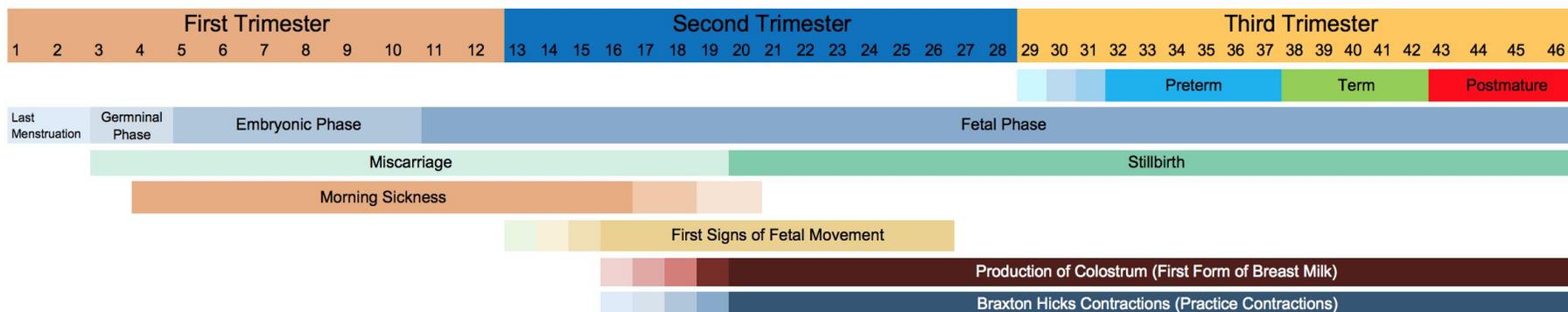
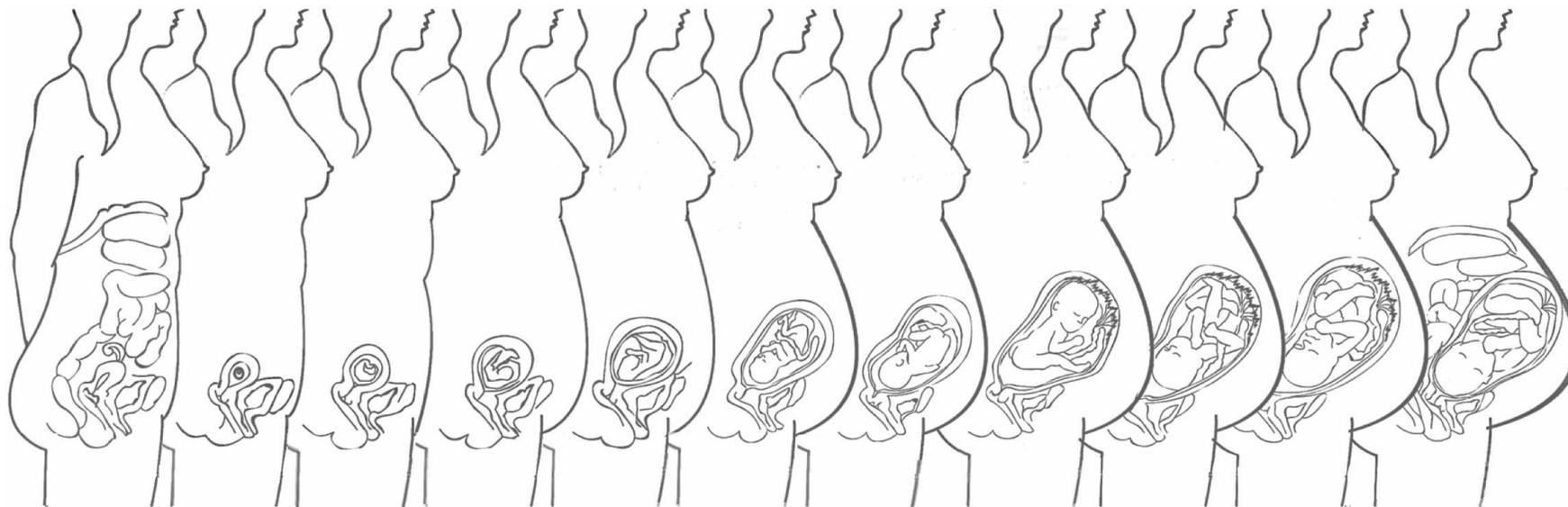


Figure 5 Stages of gestation. Time is given in weeks. The image has been reproduced from a diagram drawn by Bill McKonkey. It is not restricted under copyright law and can be accessed freely at <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/a7z2fhrh/items?canvas=1>. The diagram does not assume a time of birth (this is around 40 weeks on average), and it, therefore, does not indicate when real contractions start or when the production of regular breast milk begins (usually 2-3 days after birth).

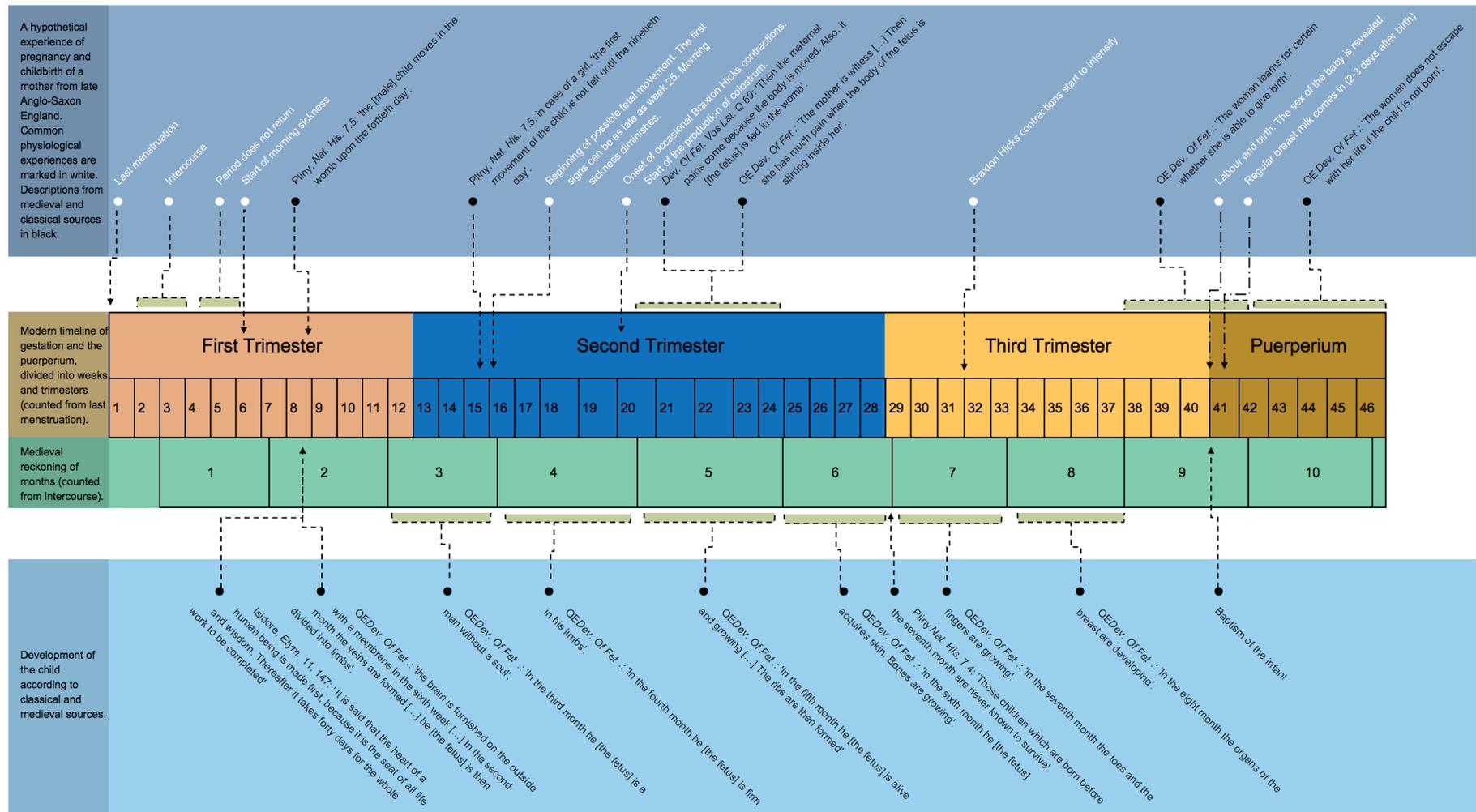


Figure 6 Classical and medieval statements about pregnancy and embryology. The texts have all been translated into English. For the original sources, see Chardonnens 2007 (OE Dev. of Fet.); Bremmer 2010 (Dev. of Fet. Voss.); Mayhof 1875-1906 (Pliny); Lindsay 1911 (Isidore).

Ritual One: Kicking Babies and Church Visits

Establishing the time frame of ‘Ritual One’ is straightforward. As mentioned earlier, it consists of three separate acts. The last of these demands a church visit just after the first signs of quickening: ‘þo(ne) seo modor gefele þ(æt) þ(æt) bearn si cwic, ga þon(ne) to cyrican’. A mother will start to notice fetal movement no earlier than week 16 and generally no later than week 25 in an average 40-week gestation period.⁷⁹⁴ The datable period for the signs of quickening suggests the woman who cannot *afedan* her child in ‘Ritual One’ is dealing with problems that concern conception and the early stages of gestation. This conclusion fits with some of the poetic statements included in the ceremony’s first and second act. These seek to prevent a ‘late fetus’ and express the hope for a ‘full-born’ child.

Ritual Two: Unconsecrated Burials and Morbid Seed

The timeframe of ‘Ritual Two’ is less obvious. The mother who cannot *afedan* her child should procure earth from the grave of a previously deceased infant, wrap it in black wool, and sell it to a merchant. Unlike ‘Ritual One’ and ‘Three’, ‘Ritual Two’ assumes the woman who cannot *afedan* her child in the present has already failed to do so at an unspecified moment in the past. The ritual means to prevent repetition. This raises the question of what caused the first child to pass away: was the mother unable to nourish or nurture it after the delivery, or did she have a stillbirth?

The text uses the expression *cildes byrgen* (child’s grave), which should draw our attention to a circumstance that is easily overlooked from a modern perspective. In early medieval England, fetuses and neonates were often given deviant burials. In the pre-Christian era, they were, unless

⁷⁹⁴ See ‘Figure 5’.

they were placed alongside their mothers, not commonly buried with grave goods. In a seventh-century burial site in Holborough, Kent — which otherwise contains exclusively west-east burials — a single infant was buried north-south. The only neonate found in the cemetery at Berinsfield, Oxfordshire, was recovered from a pit that also contained a sheep.⁷⁹⁵ The early archaeological evidence appears to indicate a disparity between early medieval and modern approaches to personhood and pregnancy loss. To compare: Linda Layne, an anthropologist who specialises in motherhood in contemporary America, has argued that ‘Through the buying, giving, and preserving of things, women and their social networks actively construct their babies-to-be and would-have-been babies as “real babies” and themselves as “real mothers”, worthy of the social recognition this role entails’.⁷⁹⁶

Differentiation between the graves of babies and adults persisted during the Christian era, when the deaths of stillbirths and neonates — tainted by original sin but not yet welcomed into the church through baptism — roused grief as well as fear. Burchard of Worms (c. 950/65–1025) forbade what ‘certain women’ were prone to do at the instigation of the devil:

*cum aliquis infans sine baptismo mortuus fuerit, tollunt cadaver parvuli, et ponunt in aliquo secreto loco, et palo corpusculum ejus transfigunt, dicentes, si sic non fecissent, quod infantulus surgeret et multos laedere posset.*⁷⁹⁷

When a child has died without baptism, they take the corpse of the little one and place it in some secret place and transfix its small

⁷⁹⁵ Dapling 2010: 151. On this subject, also see Sayer 2014.

⁷⁹⁶ Layne: 2003: 321.

⁷⁹⁷ Migne 1880: col. 974D. See footnotes 405–406 for further context about Burchard’s descriptions of women’s sins.

body with a stake, saying that if they did not, the infant would rise up and injure many.

Medieval women who delivered stillbirths or infants with visible congenital disabilities were sometimes suspected of burying them 'in aliquo secreto loco'. Having had such a child could provoke allegations of sexual misconduct or sterility.⁷⁹⁸ One post-medieval midwife oath ensures 'If any childe be dead-born, you yourselfe shall see it buried in such a secret place as neither hogg nor dogg [...] may come onto it, and in such sort done, as it may not be found [...]. And that you shall not suffer any such childe to be cast into the Jacques [privy]'.⁷⁹⁹ Later folkloric accounts echo Burchard's comments about unbaptised fetuses that can 'injure many' and associate the burial sites of unbaptised babies with hauntings and contagious diseases known as 'grave merels' or 'grave scab'.⁸⁰⁰

Deviant burial practices, pervasive fears about baptism and sterility, and folklore concerning the haunting and polluting qualities of unconsecrated graves do not provide us with an exact time frame. Nevertheless, they hint at the fact that the Old English text imagines the interred child as a late stillborn fetus or a neonate. Because the death and graves of unbaptised children inspired beliefs about negative influences on, especially, the mother, it is helpful to consider that the Old English text appears to pun on the multiple possible meanings of the expression *corn*. This Old English term can, depending on the context, mean 'kernel', 'origin', or 'seed'.

Francis Magoun suggested the expression 'sorge corn' was 'ganz und gar bedeutungslos[...]' (completely meaningless).⁸⁰¹ Nevertheless, the phrase can be explicated proficiently with reference to the physical object the mother should construct: a lump of grave earth, wrapped in black

⁷⁹⁸ Bates 2005: 142–143.

⁷⁹⁹ Appendix B in Evenden 2000. Also compare lines 571–572 in the *Clerk's Tale* and lines 569–573 in the *Prioress' Tale*.

⁸⁰⁰ Henderson 1879a: 12–13; O'Connor 1991: 37, 70, 98, 113.

⁸⁰¹ Magoun 1937b: 34.

wool.⁸⁰² In a more figurative sense, the expression symbolises the material counterparts to the mother's suffering — the grave of her child, as well as the deceased infant itself. For the last sense of the word, 'seed', the passage inverts traditional gender roles: ordinarily, a healthy fetus develops after a man's seed inseminates a woman's ovum. In the Old English ritual, the woman reverses this process, inseminating a *cepeman* with her lifeless 'sorrow seed'. The second ritual does not mention a datable event. But, its thematic preoccupation with the lingering negative influences of interred fetuses and its deployment of imagery related to germination affiliate it with the conceptual fields of conception and gestation.

Ritual Three: Burdened Stomachs, Gravid wombs, and Fetal Nourishment

Determining the time frame of 'Ritual Three' is most problematic. We have just suggested 'Ritual Two' should be performed during and not after the gestation period because its imagery concerns the exchange and the development of seed. 'Ritual Three' mentions a cow, milk, and running water. These images evoke a conceptual link to breastfeeding. Weston summarised a century-old consensus when she asserted in 1995 that the woman 'enacts the desire that milk will flow as abundantly as the stream' when she transfers the milk to the water.⁸⁰³

Nevertheless, the notion that 'Ritual Three' specifically cures lactation issues is probably incorrect. As demonstrated below, the passage's thematic link to breastfeeding is not as secure as it initially

⁸⁰² Colour symbolism is probably a factor here. For more on colour in folklore, see Richardson 1991; Hutchings 1991; Hutchings 2004. Also see Thompson 2012: 96.

⁸⁰³ Weston 1995: 290. For earlier propositions of the same argument, see Sandmann 1975: 106–107; Schlutter 1912: 69; Magoun 1937b: 33.

appears: it is more probable that like ‘Ritual One’ and ‘Two’, ‘Ritual Three’ seeks to prevent misfortunes that occur during the gestation period.

Why *Lacnunga* should label three entries for different problems with the same title is unclear. This is the currently accepted argument, but it is challenging to find an example of a medieval medicine book that presents information in this manner. Ordinarily, a repeated label indicates another remedy for the same purpose.⁸⁰⁴ That said, the ordering principles of early medieval medical texts are not always transparent or consistent. It is necessary to consider additional evidence.

We may begin by examining the three poetic lines at the centre of the third section. These have never been translated persuasively:

‘Gehwer ferde ic me þone mæran maga þightan.
Mid þysse mæran mete þihtan,
þo(ne) ic me wille habban 7 ham gan’.

Cockayne thought these phrases were simply ‘[g]ibberish’; he maintained ‘[j]ingling nonsense loses by translation’.⁸⁰⁵ Subsequent scholarship has shown this assessment is flawed: the passage, which the woman should utter after swallowing a ‘muð fulne’ of river water, instead combines intricate *double entendres* that capture specific pregnancy experiences.⁸⁰⁶ Translating these remains challenging. While Cockayne was too harsh in his assessment, most scholars have, to some extent, agreed with Bruce Mitchell. The eminent syntactician furnished his edition from 1995 with the concession that ‘[o]bviously something is seriously wrong’: ‘I am afraid that we too must give up’.⁸⁰⁷

The fundamental problem is that *maga* and *þiht* have several meanings. The established definitions of these words do not allow a

⁸⁰⁴ Weston 1995: 283.

⁸⁰⁵ Cockayne 1866: 69.

⁸⁰⁶ Pettit 2001b: 328–330.

⁸⁰⁷ Mitchell 1995: 304–305.

translation that agrees with conventional Old English syntax and morphology. *Maga* with a short vowel commonly means ‘stomach’; as an adjective, it can also mean ‘strong [person]’ or ‘powerful [person]’. *Māga*, with a long vowel, can signify ‘kinsman’, and ‘son’. *þiht* is harder to translate. Ferdinand Holthausen argued the word was corrupted and suggested *þyhtig*, which he questioningly rendered as ‘strong’.⁸⁰⁸ Dobbie noted the expression was ‘unexplained’; since it appears twice in close succession he proposed ‘the form may be genuine and [that] the corruption may lie somewhere else’.⁸⁰⁹ All recent commentators who have accepted the manuscript text without emendations have also endorsed Bosworth and Toller’s proposition that the troublesome word is an adjective and the earliest attestation of the Modern English expression ‘tight’.⁸¹⁰ While the earliest Middle English attestations of this term start to appear around 1300, cognates in other Indo-European languages suggest it must have been around before that time.⁸¹¹

Toller’s proposition is not unreasonable. However, it is necessary to emphasise that the meaning of the Old English expression *þiht* differs from its modern counterpart. Currently, the adjective ‘tight’ can describe taut ropes, close-fitting clothes, and narrow corners. It is also possible to run a ‘tight ship’ or to make something ‘water-tight’. None of these meanings is relevant for our translation of the Old English charm: ‘tight’ only became synonymous with ‘taut’ at the end of the Middle Ages.⁸¹²

One sense of the adjective that might be relevant is ‘dense’. Some late-medieval glossaries paraphrase ‘tight’ as ‘not brokyn’ or ‘not hool [hollow] wythe-in’, equating the term to Latin ‘solidus’ and ‘integro’.⁸¹³ As a modifier of a person’s physique, the expression probably meant ‘stocky’,

⁸⁰⁸ Holthausen 1920b: 119. Another early proposition that has not been taken up by subsequent scholarship is reading *þiht* as a noun that derives from *þeon*, ‘to thrive’. See Schlutter 1912: 68–70.

⁸⁰⁹ Dobbie 1942: 214.

⁸¹⁰ Bosworth and Toller, s.v. ‘þiht adj.’.

⁸¹¹ *OED*, s.v. ‘thight, adj.’.

⁸¹² See *OED*, s.v. 6 ‘tight, adj., adv., and n.2’.

⁸¹³ See *MED*, s.v. 2 ‘tight adj.’.

‘muscular’, or ‘sturdy’. Around 1300, a loose translation of Maximianus’ *First Elegy* (c. 6th cent.) — a Latin school text during the Middle Ages — incorporated the line: ‘Mi bodi þat wes so tuiȝt, So stip, and stod oprizt — Ich wes a modi mon’.⁸¹⁴ Other medieval evidence for this collocation is rare. Some analogues from modern sources do support that if this adjective was known in early medieval England, it was perhaps used to characterise healthy, young people. One nineteenth-century author from Frisia wrote about a bulky youth, ‘Sa tigt for tweintig jirren’. Another from around the same period described a short stocky man as ‘In ticht keardeltsje’.⁸¹⁵ Likewise, the Danish author Kirsten Holst published a detective novel in 1988 that featured ‘en tæt, bred fyr i læderjakke’.⁸¹⁶ Possible translations for the compound *magapiht* are thus ‘son-sturdy’ and ‘stomach-sturdy’; *metepiht* can be rendered as ‘food-sturdy’. The context of the poem would then imply the mother has carried around a ‘stomach-sturdy [one]’, a baby that has become bulky through the ingestion of food.⁸¹⁷

The translations described above are widely accepted. Nevertheless, they come with several problems. They are unwieldy, and other charms in Germanic languages do not include comparable expressions. Moreover, it is suspicious that the entire phrase relies on a specific sub-meaning of an adjective that is not well-attested for the early medieval period in any West Germanic language. Translations such as ‘proclaimed stomach-sturdy one’ or ‘proclaimed food-sturdy one’ may be tentatively supported by philological arguments, but it remains doubtful how intelligible such phrases would have been to an Old English audience.

⁸¹⁴ Lines 217–219 in Appendix E of Juster 2018: 100.

⁸¹⁵ Sense 3 in the lemma ‘ticht!’ in *Wurdboek fan de Fryske Taal (Online)*.

⁸¹⁶ ‘tæt¹ adjektiv’ in *Den Danske Ordbog*.

⁸¹⁷ Singer and Grattan 1952: 192; Stuart 1973: 623. Pettit has suggested *maga* and *mete* are accusative nouns instead and that the adjective ‘tight’ is used postpositionally. This proposition is undermined by the fact that such a word order (adjective – noun – adjective) is uncommon in Old English, even in poetry. Furthermore, *maga* does not have an accusative ending.

Another form of *tight*, which starts to appear in English sources from around 1350 onwards, presents a more probable solution to this longstanding interpretative problem. This now-obsolete term signified the weight of specific freights or the loading capacity of cargo ships. Often (but not always), it occurs in combination with the expression *tonne*. An unpublished charter from 1427, held by the Public Records Office, enquires about ‘cc shippes what tight or burthen than they were of’. In another diploma from around 1475, ‘The Kinge hathe it intytled [...] to have of every shippe from xx dol. [shares] tyght before the maste and behynd, to have ii dol. [shares] wyne; and soe of every shippe, tyll he come to the tyght of ccc dol. [shares]’.⁸¹⁸ In 1382, a contractor shipped ‘30 tunnetyth and 1 pipe of northern stone’; In 1448, the University of Cambridge purveyed ‘Ml Tonnetights of Ragge, hethstones, and Flints’ for architectural works; and in 1442, a chancery warrant mentioned ‘A balinger of xxiiij tonne tight called the Thomas of Barlynge’.⁸¹⁹

The *MED* implies the morphology of the expression ‘tonne-tight’ mirrors ‘mouthful’ or ‘spoonful’. These consist of two parts: a noun describing a container (‘mouth’ and ‘spoon’) and a suffixed form of the adjective ‘full’ that describes the extent to which this container is filled.⁸²⁰ This suggestion is unpersuasive, as ‘tight’ also occurs as a simplex. ‘Tonne-tight’ is a compound noun, not a noun-adjective compound. The second element of this expression is most likely an archaic Germanic term that means ‘weight’, ‘freight’, or ‘burden’, and it is probably related to Old Norse *þyngð*.

The phonological link between Old Norse *þyngð* and Middle English *tight* can be explained through common sound changes. Germanic languages frequently lose nasals before ‘ht’ consonant clusters. Compare modern English ‘think’ versus the preterite ‘thought’, both of which derive from Proto-Germanic **thankija-*. Modern English ‘tithe’ derives from Old

⁸¹⁸ Both quoted in *MED*, s.v. ‘tight n.(2)’.

⁸¹⁹ Quoted in *MED*, s.v. ‘tōnne-tight n.’.

⁸²⁰ *MED*.

English *teogopa*, which stems from Proto-Germanic **tegunthan*.⁸²¹ The development from initial *þ* in Old English *þiht* to initial *t* in Middle English *tihht* seems only to have been completed during the Middle English period. In one of the earliest Middle English sources, ‘tonnetight’ and ‘tonnethight’ occur together.⁸²²

Þyngð, which is still used in modern Icelandic, has two significances: it can denote actual encumbrances (primarily attested in contemporary usage) and corporeal and moral ones (primarily attested in medieval sources). In *Thómas saga Erkebyskups*, an Old Icelandic saga from the fourteenth century that details the life of Thomas Becket, the holy protagonist suffers under ‘þyngd likamans’ (a burden of the body [that is, a sickness]) before passing away.⁸²³ A seventeenth-century glossary equates *þyngd* to ‘gravitas’; a nineteenth-century schoolbook says about Newton’s gravitational law that ‘Þessi kraptur náttúrunnar [...] er nefndur þyngd’ (this force of nature is called gravity).⁸²⁴ In contemporary Icelandic, *þyngd* often just means ‘weight’: ‘þyngd farangurins er 10 kíló’ (the weight of the luggage is 10 kilos).⁸²⁵ Like Middle English *tonne-tight*, Icelandic *þungatonn* can mean tonnage.

Old English *þiht* is probably the first attestation of Middle English *tight* and should subsequently be interpreted as a noun that denotes some sort of burden. A good argument for this proposition is that nouns and verbs that are associated with encumbrance are frequently applicable to pregnancy as well. In Modern English, it is possible to carry, bear, and deliver cargo *and* children. While impregnated wombs are gravid, weights are pulled down by gravity. Medieval languages show similar overlaps. German speakers could talk about ‘einen swæren stein’ (a heavy stone), but also about ‘ein swêre wîb’ (a pregnant woman).⁸²⁶ One Middle Dutch

⁸²¹ Also see Bammesberger 1984: 44.

⁸²² See *OED*, s.v. ‘tight, adj., adv., and n.2’.

⁸²³ See *The Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* 1989-2020, s.v. ‘þyngð sb. f. [-ar]’.

⁸²⁴ *Ritmálssafn Orðabókar Háskólans*, s.v. ‘þyngd’.

⁸²⁵ *ISLEX*, s.v. ‘þyngd no kvk’.

⁸²⁶ Müller and Benecke 1854-1866, s.v. 1, 2e ‘swære adj.’.

decree mandates ‘Dat men gheenen harinc en verlade vanden eenen waghene up den andren’ (that people do not overload haring from one cart onto another); another source in the same language discusses ‘vrouwen die met kinde sijn verladen’ (women who are pregnant with child).⁸²⁷ Thomas Hoccleve (1368–1426) wrote about ‘The birthe of Cryst’;⁸²⁸ in 1497, *The Register of the Privy Seal of Schotland* issued a statement about ships with a carrying capacity of 80 tons, ‘or schippis nocht excedand that byrth’.⁸²⁹ The *Cursor Mundi* (c. 1300) mentions ‘camels þat gret birpin [...] bar’, yet a contemporary remedy book prescribes a ‘Balme’ which ‘bryngiþ oute þe laste burpen of a woman when she haþe borne childe’.⁸³⁰ As far as Old Norse term *þyngð* is concerned, several words with closely related etymologies also describe pregnancy. In *Gregors saga biskups* (manuscript c. 1530–40), a certain ‘kongs dottur’ (king’s daughter) should not suffer ‘fra sinvm þvnga’ (from her pregnancy).⁸³¹ In *Flóamanna saga* (c. 1290–1385), a character called Þórey is ‘mjök þunguð’ (very pregnant).⁸³²

A key argument for the idea the Old English expression *þiht* means ‘burden’ and connotes pregnancy is that the alternative term which *Lacnunga* uses to describe a fetus, *byrd*, in other contexts also denotes heavy loads. Waerferth of Worcester’s (died c. 915) translation of Pope Gregory’s *Dialogues* recounts an anecdote about how a certain Martinus lost his old foot chain — an instrument he had initially intended for enforcing a self-isolation regime. A local brotherhood of thirsty monks was in desperate need of a strong cable, because the rope that lifted the bucket in their water well continued to snap. Marcius’s chain ‘hæfde on him swa myccle strengðe’ (had so much strength) that it could unproblematically ‘adreoganne þa byrde’ (carry the load).⁸³³

⁸²⁷ *Middelnederlandsch Woordenboek Online* 2018, s.v. 1–2 ‘verladen’.

⁸²⁸ *MED*, s.v. 2 ‘birth(e n.’).

⁸²⁹ *OED*, s.v. ‘† birth, n.2’.

⁸³⁰ *MED*, s.v. ‘birthen n.’.

⁸³¹ *The Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* 1989–2020, ‘þungi, þyngi sb. m. [-a; -ar]’.

⁸³² Perkins 1971: 36 (vol. 2).

⁸³³ Hecht 1900: 214–215.

If *piht* means burden, we still need to contextualise the meaning of the compounds *magapiht* and *metepiht*. Notably, medieval terms for internal organs are less precise than those used today. *Womb* could mean ‘uterus’ and ‘belly’; *innop* could mean ‘innards’, ‘belly’, ‘stomach’, and ‘womb’; and *maga*, ‘stomach’, could signify ‘uterus’.⁸³⁴ *Magapiht* thus means ‘stomach-burden’ and ‘womb-burden’.

As explained before, *maga* is a homograph and the same letter sequence also signifies the concepts ‘son’ and ‘kinsman’. In written form (without accounting for vowel length) the entire phrase arrives twice at almost the same meaning: a woman who is carrying a womb-burden is carrying around a new member of her family, a ‘son-burden’. If we interpret *maga* as an adjective, we may read ‘powerful (person) burden’ — still an appropriate designation for a well-fed fetus. *Magapiht*’s parallelism with *metepiht* reconfirms its link to nutrition. A *maga* is the body’s storage place for food; *metepiht* means ‘food burden’. Both compound nouns connote satiation and (over)eating and, again, overlap in meaning: in most circumstances, a stomach burden constitutes a food burden.

If we relate our lexicographical discoveries to our initial query — estimating when ‘Ritual Three’ should be performed and how it uses *afedan* — we stumble on an unexpected difficulty: deciding whether the verb means ‘suckle’ or ‘gestate’ is difficult because the literary context is *deliberately* vague. The text articulates a densely-layered, literary roundtrip that conflates gestation and digestion.⁸³⁵ It superimposes the image of an encumbering relative onto that of a gravid womb and highlights the nurturing capacity of the womb itself by describing it as a burdened stomach, filled with food. This fits with the ceremonial activities in ‘Ritual Three’: the female performer is preoccupied with acts of eating and

⁸³⁴ ‘Figure 8’. Even if Bosworth and Toller’s *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* does not record this usage, a short Old English treatise on embryology called the ‘Development of the Fetus’ explains that a ‘bearn’ (child) resides ‘in þam magan’ (in the womb). See Chardonnes 2007: 229. Some Middle English sources also use the word as a synonym for uterus. See *MED*, s.v. 2.d ‘maue n.’.

⁸³⁵ See ‘Figure 7’.

drinking. She spits milk, drinks water, and eats dinner at someone else's house.

Until now, we have been working from the traditional assumption that interpreting *afedan* as 'suckle' or 'feed' would only be appropriate within the context of a breastfeeding ritual. Our increased understanding of the wordplay in 'Ritual Three' enables us to see this view is misguided. The text envisions the development of a fetus as a process that is closely associated with the consumption of food: a *maga* takes in *mete*, a *maga* carries a *piht*, and a *piht* thus develops into a child that can be taken 'ham'.

Incidentally, 'Ritual Three' is not the only medieval text that conflates digestion and gestation. A tenth-century Latin treatise on the development of the fetus relates that in the fifth month, 'veniunt dolores matri q(uo)d mouet(ur) corp(us). Id(em) pastus in utero' (the pains of the mother arrive because the body [of the fetus] moves; likewise, it is fed in the womb).⁸³⁶ Meanwhile, medical texts from antiquity and the Middle Ages assert pregnant women do not have periods because fetuses feed on blood.⁸³⁷ Pregnancy cravings were often explained as unborn babies expressing their appetite.⁸³⁸ A parallel tradition of medieval obstetric lore also envisions the stomach as analogous to an incubation chamber: Saint Margaret owed her reputation as a patroness to women in labour to the fact she had experienced a miraculous rebirth from the belly of a monstrous dragon.⁸³⁹

⁸³⁶ Bremmer 2010: 34.

⁸³⁷ See § 66 in Craigie Robertson 2012: 226. Also see Powell 2012: 807.

⁸³⁸ Weiser-Aall 1969: 102.

⁸³⁹ The patronage of St. Margaret for medieval parturient women is an extensive subject. See Ásdís 2002; Dendle 2003; Dresvina 2016; Carole Hill 2012; Hill 2005.

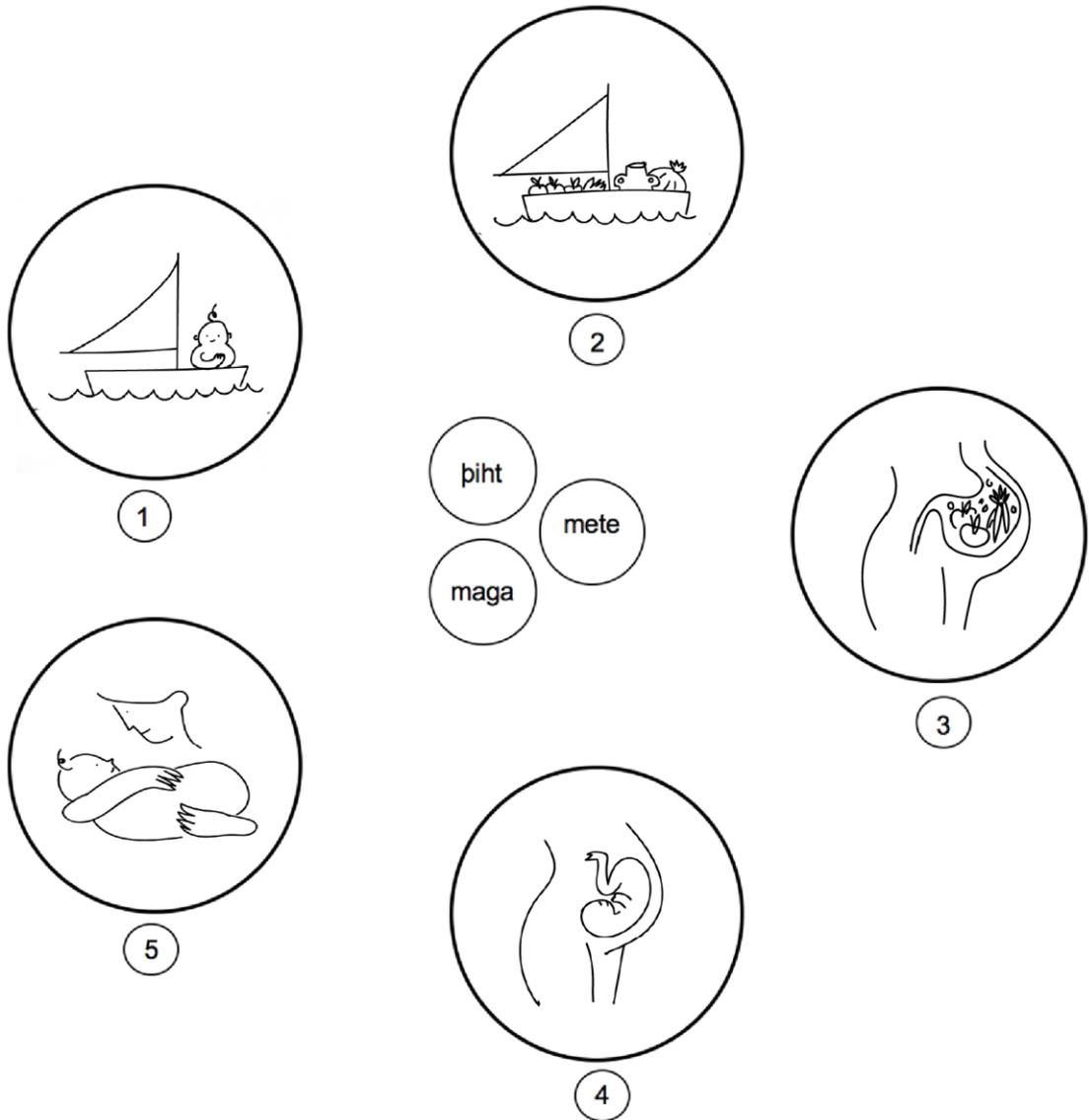


Figure 7 A semantic diagram for the Old English compounds *magapiht* and *metepiht*. 1: a *māga* as *piht*. 2: *mete* as *piht*. 3: *mete* in a *maga*; a *magapiht* and a *metepiht*. 4: a *maga/māga* gestating in a *maga*; a *magapiht* and a *māgapiht*. 5: a *māga/maga* gestated on *mete*. Drawings by Maria Fraaije.

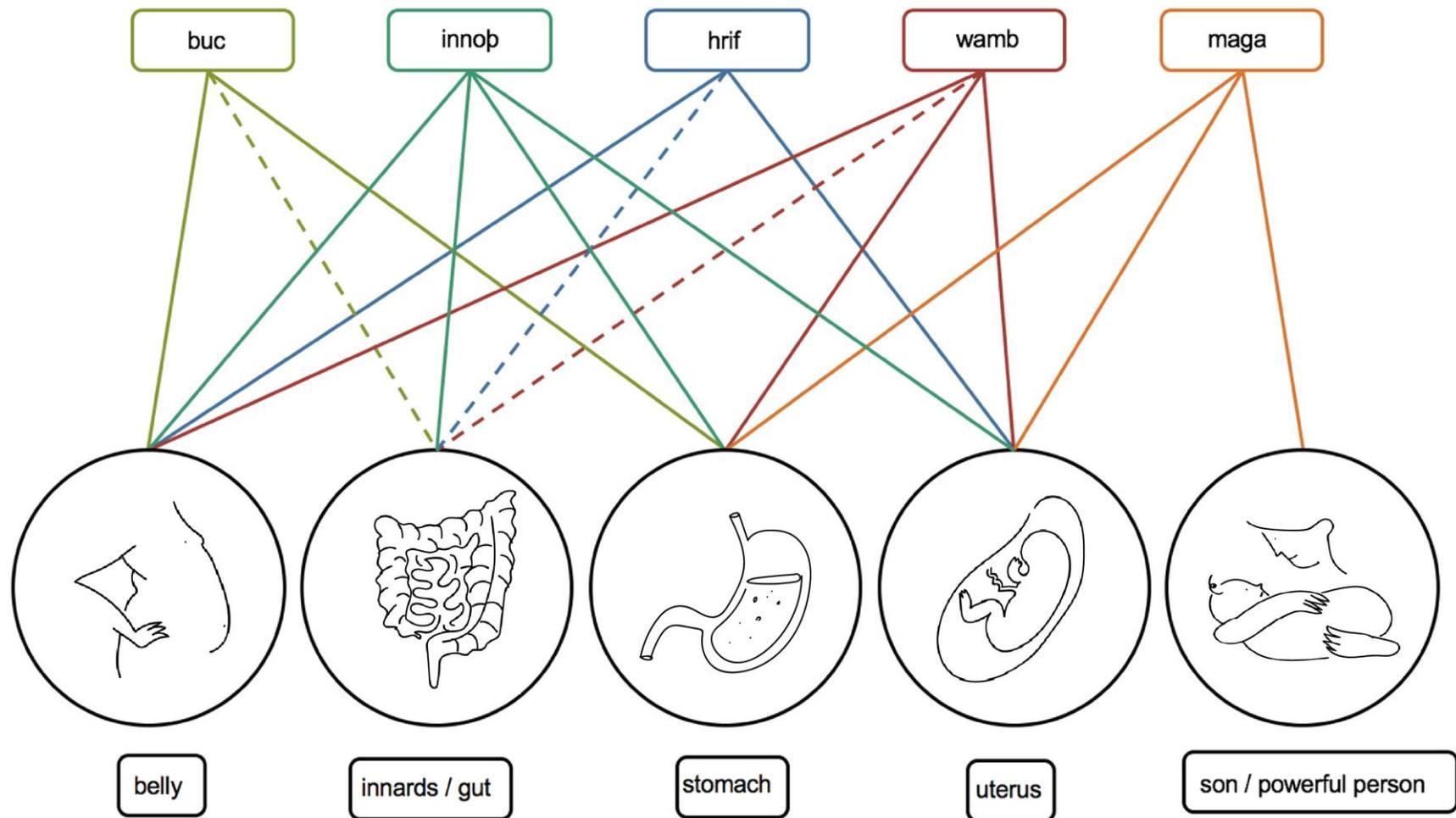


Figure 8 Semantic overlaps in Old English words for belly, gut, stomach, and uterus. *Māga* can mean 'son'; *maga* can mean 'stomach', 'uterus', and 'powerful person'. The semantic connections were established using *A Thesaurus of Old English*. Drawings by Maria Fraaije.

‘You take the disease’: Pregnancy and The Principle of Transference

Lacnunga’s pregnancy rituals make use of several magical techniques. Clear examples are the recitation of poetic phrases and the observation of taboos. This discussion examines a third technique that features in all three, albeit in an outwardly different form: magical transference rituals. These enable individuals to confer undesirable conditions onto something or someone else. A famous example of such a practice appears in the Gospel of St Mark. Here, Jesus exorcises demons from a man into a herd of swine. The pigs, over a thousand in number, rush into the sea and drown.⁸⁴⁰ Less prophetic solutions occur in several Old English medical remedies. One transfers an illness into a hazelwood stick; another hopes to hand over stomach pain to a *tordwifel* (a dung beetle).⁸⁴¹

Pregnancy ceremonies do not typically implement transference techniques; we find them more often in remedies for infectious conditions such as warts, fevers, and various venereal diseases.⁸⁴² In these cases, they operate through a form of reverse logic: if it is possible to contract a disease *from* someone, it should also be possible to give it away *to* someone. *Lacnunga*’s rituals are, therefore, unusual.⁸⁴³ The fact that they implement transference techniques raises some intriguing questions about how they perceive pregnancy and congenital disorders.

‘Ritual One’, ‘Two’, and ‘Three’ each incorporate and modify a single, more widespread transference method. Reduced to their essence, these are as follows:

⁸⁴⁰ The Gospel of Luke and Matthew slightly change the account. The Gospel of John does not record it. See Mark 5:1–20, Matthew 8:28–34, and Luke 8:26–39.

⁸⁴¹ Storms 1948: 262.

⁸⁴² Hand 1965: 84. Also see Anderson 1968; Hatfield 2004.

⁸⁴³ Hand 1965: 84–85. Also see Grendon 1909: 131.

- Ritual One: Bestowing an unwanted condition onto a dead person. Corpses are insensate and destined to decay. Diseases that trouble living people can thus be conferred safely onto cadavers. They will not suffer from them and neutralise them as they decompose.
- Ritual Two: Selling away adversity. This custom borrows an idea related to the transference of property — that ownership is an outcome of commercial transactions — and applies it to ailments. If one can acquire a disease, one can lose it by selling it to someone else.
- Ritual Three: Visiting a river and bringing an undesirable condition into contact with running water. The stream will carry the disease away, alleviating the host.

This summary provides a brief insight into principles that form the core of each entry and illustrates the mode of thinking that connects them. The previous section of this chapter presents evidence for the idea that ‘Ritual One’, ‘Two’, and ‘Three’ seek to achieve variants of the same objective (fetal and maternal wellbeing). This discussion substantiates they apply a similar form of magical reasoning to accomplish their aims. The following subsections describe how *Lacnunga*’s pregnancy charms implement pre-existing transference techniques, providing analogues for each of the summarised customs.

Ritual One: Jumping over Graves, Corpses, and Husbands

Rites that transfer illnesses to corpses appear in folk collections from various regions. This thesis' discussion of 'Against a Wen' discusses a parallel tradition: the longstanding practice of rubbing wens with the hands of corpses.⁸⁴⁴ An alternative strategy is to visit burial sites and to transmit the undesirable condition to entombed bodies. 'Ritual One' instructs the female performer to enact such a ceremony: 'stæppe þon(ne) þriwa ofer þa byrgenne' (step three times over the grave).

Close analogues to the idea that treading on graves can be 'me to bote' appear in various nineteenth and twentieth-century folklore collections.⁸⁴⁵ William Henry Paynter (1901–1976) — a prolific collector of Cornish folklore during the 1930s — recorded the knowledge of a 'wise woman near Launceston who was famed far and wide for her curative powers': an infected hand should be stroked three times from the head to the foot of the grave of the last young woman buried in the churchyard.⁸⁴⁶ This should happen on the first day of the month. Paynter also knew about a patient from Devon, who had received instructions to go to the churchyard at night and to crawl three times over and walk six times around the grave of a person interred on the previous day.⁸⁴⁷ That some individuals truly practised such macabre customs is confirmed by an article in *The Times*, dated May 9, 1855:

At an early hour on the morning of the 1st of May, a woman, respectably attired, and accompanied by an elderly gentleman, applied for admittance to the cemetery at Plymouth. On being allowed to enter, they proceeded to the grave of the last man interred; and the woman, who had a large wen on her throat, rubbed

⁸⁴⁴ See footnotes 686–688.

⁸⁴⁵ In addition to the sources cited in this section, see 'Grave cures' in Opie and Tatem 1989.

⁸⁴⁶ Paynter 2016: 50.

⁸⁴⁷ Paynter 2016: 50.

her neck three times each way on each side of the grave, departing before sunrise.⁸⁴⁸

These analogues match the first section of 'Ritual One', but the entire ceremony is more complicated. The Old English text also incorporates a second act, which stipulates the woman should jump over her husband upon coming home and a third, which says she should visit a church.

The first two performances combine into a so-called *katabasis* motif. In stories that implement this narrative device, a figure descends into the underworld (that is, the world of the deceased). He or she receives knowledge from the dead and then returns to the world of the living, often after experiencing a personal transformation. Standard examples are Orpheus' descent into Hades, Odysseus' necromantic conjuration of Tiresias, and Christ's harrowing of Hell.⁸⁴⁹ The Old English ritual rehearses this 'heroic' narrative structure in the domestic domain: a woman descends to the grave of a departed person to communicate her defiance of death. She then climbs into her new life — the one she hopes to share with her husband and living child — by staging her ascent at home: 'Up ic gonge, ofer þe stæppe' (Up I go, step over you).⁸⁵⁰

Lacnunga's second act constitutes an almost perfect inversion of the first. The woman jumps over a living instead of a dead person; she is inside instead of outside; she treads over a bed instead of on a grave; and she performs the custom together instead of alone. Similarly, the ceremony should be performed before her assistant falls asleep rather than after he dies. Whereas the woman first hoped to prevent adverse effects — a 'postmature baby', a 'livid fetus', or an infant with congenital malformations — she now makes positive requests: 'mid cwican cilde, nalæs mid cwel[[]]endum' (with a living child, not with a dying one).

⁸⁴⁸ 'Superstition in the West' 1855: 11.

⁸⁴⁹ On *katabasis* in general, see Clark 1979; Martínez 2000. *Katabasis* rites pertaining to death and rebirth are discussed in Eliade 1975.

⁸⁵⁰ For a folkloric belief about the necessity of carrying children up before carrying them down, see Thiselton-Dyer 1881: 8.

In the past, *Lacnunga*'s second act has been explained with reference to Freudian psychoanalysis and Frazerian anthropology. Géza Róheim argued in 1922 that European folklore preserved countless rites whereby the act of stepping over people 'manifestly signif[ies] intercourse'.⁸⁵¹ The second act of 'Ritual One' does conjure up sexual connotations. A couple should perform it together in the bedroom, and the woman's aim is not only to 'step over' her husband but also to 'step into' the proverbial 'family way'. Nevertheless, the idea that the text preserves an ancient fertility ceremony is highly speculative. None of the rites that Róheim mentions to support his claim (most of them from faraway places such as Uganda, Hungary, and Russia) can be traced to early medieval England. It is safer to assume that the *katabasis* motif here focuses on progressing from one life phase into another: its prime concern is contrasting refutation and affirmation.

Incidentally, this helps to shed light on the relationship between acts one and two and act three, which stipulates a church visit. The alignment of the first two acts has led scholars to wonder whether the third was appended afterwards. Felix Grendon proposed in 1909 that it '[l]ooks like a later interpolation'; Gert Sandmann reinterpreted the entire section in 1975 as a covert reference to a heathen shrine; and Sarah Laratt Keefer argued it was a truncated monastic inclusion.⁸⁵²

Perhaps act three *is* appropriate here and not an afterthought. It is a public confirmation of the rite's successful completion: 'Criste, ic sæde, þis gecyþed'. Even though Old English medical remedies that mandate the use of an altar are common, the church visit in 'Ritual One' is fitting because it serves as a precursor for an important ceremony that would ordinarily occur after pregnancy: the child's baptism. Like the miscarriage rite in *Lacnunga*, this functioned to 'make manifest' the introduction of

⁸⁵¹ Róheim 1922: 322, 325.

⁸⁵² Grendon 1909: 234; Sandmann 1975: 110; Keefer 1990: 78.

infants into the Christian faith and the introduction of mothers to parenthood.⁸⁵³

Ritual Two: Selling away Misfortune

If transferring undesirable conditions to graves and rotting corpses is one way of getting rid of them, setting up a magical transaction with someone or something is another.⁸⁵⁴ The woman in ‘Ritual Two’ sells her ‘sorge corn’ to a *cepeman* using the phrase ‘Ic hit bebicge, ge hit bebicgan’ (I sell it; you sell it). Remedies for skin conditions provide close parallels. In 1579, Thomas Lupton affirmed individuals could ‘buy warts of them that have them’.⁸⁵⁵ In 1648, the poet Robert Herrick talked about ‘Those warts, which we to others, from ourselves, sell’.⁸⁵⁶ Frans Haver recorded a nineteenth-century Dutch transaction whereby the patient sold two warts, ‘beide voor twee centen’ (both for two cents).⁸⁵⁷

Some customs seem to interpret selling an illness as a *Scheinhandlung* — a fictitious operation meant to confuse evil spirits.⁸⁵⁸ In 1988, a 68-year-old woman from East London recalled that her mother had at one time sold her to a neighbour. When she had returned to good health, her mother had repurchased her. The asking price: one penny.⁸⁵⁹ ‘Æcerbot’, another Metrical Charm, also implements a performative transaction that is more symbolic than literal: ‘þonne nime man uncuþ sæd æt ælmesmannum and selle him twa swylc, swylce man æt him nime’

⁸⁵³ Also see Keefer 1990: 74; Meaney 1989: 24. Weston has suggested a ritual nod to the rite of churching, but there is little evidence that this tradition—which was based on Leviticus 12:4–6 and popularly performed in the late Middle Ages as a means for women to be welcomed back into the church after giving birth—was also practiced in early medieval England. See Weston 1995: 289; compare Pierce 1999; Becky R. Lee 1998.

⁸⁵⁴ On this topic more generally, see Bächtold-Stäubli, Hoffmann-Krayer, and Lüdtké 1931–32: 1182; Lammert 1869: 32–33.

⁸⁵⁵ Lupton 1795: 72.

⁸⁵⁶ Nott 1810: 126.

⁸⁵⁷ No. 540 in Haver 1964: 202.

⁸⁵⁸ Bächtold-Stäubli, Hoffmann-Krayer, and Lüdtké 1936: 1026–1027.

⁸⁵⁹ See the lemma ‘selling cures various ills’ in Opie and Tatem 1989.

(then one should take unknown seed to beggars and give them two times as much as one takes from them).⁸⁶⁰ In this specific instance, the implication is that performing a charitable seed exchange before ploughing and sowing will have a beneficial influence on eventual crop returns.⁸⁶¹

The grieving mother in ‘Ritual Two’ seems to be less altruistic than the unnamed neighbour from 1910s London and the performers of ‘Æcerbot’. She does not sell the *cepeman* ‘*twa swylc, swylce man æt him nime*’. Instead, she disguises her macabre merchandise — the earth of her child’s grave — in black wool and presumably hopes to saddle him with a pig in a poke. It is hard to imagine where the *cepeman* would find a new, interested customer for a ‘seed of sorrow’.

Transactions that mean to transfer illnesses are, however, not always effected with the best intentions. Rites for similar exchanges, whereby unwanted or disease-carrying objects are disguised as something else, appear in remedy books from a broad range of periods.⁸⁶² The targeted ailments are, again, predominantly warts and other nodular growths. An early example appears in Marcellus’ work on medicine from fourth-century Gaul:

Lapillum quemlibet inuolutum hederæ folio ad uerrucam admoueto ita, ut eam tangat lapillus, atque ita celebri loco abiecto, ut ab aliquo inuentus colligatur; miro modo ad illum, qui collegerit, uerrucæ transferuntur.⁸⁶³

Move any stone, wrapped in an ivy leaf, to the wart, in such a manner that the stone touches them, and then cast it away in a well-frequented place so that it will be found and picked up by somebody.

⁸⁶⁰ Edited in Dobbie 1942: 116–118.

⁸⁶¹ See footnote 1206.

⁸⁶² For examples, see Hand 1965: 87–89.

⁸⁶³ XXXVIII, 102 in Niedermann and Liechtenhan 1968: 584.

Miraculously, the warts will be transferred to the person who picks up the stone.

Marcellus remedy advises the construction of a similar 'sorge corn' as 'Ritual Two'. The former wraps a pebble in green ivy; the latter wraps a lump of earth in black wool. The intended outcomes are also comparable: whoever comes to possess these corns of sorrow will become the new proprietor of the sufferer's undesirable condition.

Ritual Three: Washing away Ailments in Rivers or Running Water

Earlier, it was explained scholars have commonly assumed that the instructions of 'Ritual Three' to spit milk into a running river and to replace it with water outline a ritual for promoting breast milk.⁸⁶⁴ The analogues presented below problematise this view. Rivers and brooks are common in folkloric traditions from a broad range of places and periods. However, they do not ordinarily function as locations that can enhance lactation. Just like symbolic illness transactions and treading on graves, they permit individuals to achieve purification and decontamination.⁸⁶⁵

Fluvial transference rituals can be traced back to antiquity.⁸⁶⁶ In the Old English text, the pregnant woman should not look over her shoulder before or after visiting the river.⁸⁶⁷ Vergil (70 BCE–19 CE) already describes a related practice in his eighth *Eclogue*. In the relevant passage, a woman enlists a sorceress and her helper, Amaryllis, in the hope of rekindling an unfaithful lover's waning desire. The enchantress completes

⁸⁶⁴ See footnote 803.

⁸⁶⁵ For some examples from post-medieval England, see 'Water, running: cures' in Opie and Tatem 1989.

⁸⁶⁶ For numerous analogues from Scottish sources, see Dalyell 1835: 85–90.

⁸⁶⁷ For references related to the taboo of looking over one's shoulder, see Bächtold-Stäubli, Hoffmann-Krayer, and Lüdtkke 1936-37: 1346–1350.

her ritual — which involves burning magical herbs — with the following command: ‘Fer cineres, Amarylli, foras, rivoque fluenti transque caput iace, nec respexeris’ (Carry the cinders away, Amaryllis, and throw them over your head into a running stream; and do not look back).⁸⁶⁸

In early medieval England, running water rituals once again appear predominantly in remedies for undesirable skin conditions.⁸⁶⁹ One recipe against wens advises visiting a stream: ‘gehlade ane cuppan fulle forð mid ðam streame’ (draw up a cupful with the direction of the current).⁸⁷⁰ Cures that involved collecting water from creeks and rivers appear to have been common, as Burchard of Worms advised against such superstitions in his *Corrector* (c. 1023). He wrote, ‘stultae mulieres [...] currunt ad aquam’ (stupid women run to the water) and ‘adducunt tacite vas cum aqua’ (silently bring back a jar): ‘hoc faciunt pro quadam sanitate’ (this they do as some sort of cure).⁸⁷¹

One remedy in *Bald’s Leechbook* against *blæce*, an itching skin disease, demonstrates a close thematic link to *Lacnunga’s* third ritual. In similar manner to the pregnant woman, who should ‘ga to yrnendu(m) wætere 7 spiwe þærin þa meolc’ (go to running water, and spit therein the milk), the person suffering from *blæce* should proceed as follows: ‘S[c]earpa þone sweoran ofer sunnan setlgange, geot swigende þæt blod on yrnende wæter, spiw þriwa after’ (scarify the neck after sunset, pour the blood into running water without speaking, spit three times after [it]).⁸⁷² The performer should also proceed both ways ‘swigende’ and travel ‘on clænne weg to huse’ (home on a new [that is, ‘different’] road). These instructions

⁸⁶⁸ An even earlier example of a ritual that involves casting an object into water and not looking back appears in Homer’s *Odyssey*. In book 5, ll. 340–350, Odysseus is instructed to toss the veil of Ino back into the sea and not look back. For additional examples from classical literature, see footnote 146 in Wisniewski 2015: 72. Also see Gessler 1948: 195–196. The text is edited in Volk 2008.

⁸⁶⁹ There are many exceptions. The act of exorcising illnesses into running water, for instance, also appears in remedies for diarrhoea. Such remedies acknowledge the implications of analogy and etymology: in Old English, to suffer from loose stools was known as ‘ut yrnan’ (to drain). See, for examples, Storms 1948: 74–76.

⁸⁷⁰ CLXXVI in Pettit 2001a: 120.

⁸⁷¹ Migne 1880: 964D–965A.

⁸⁷² No. 6 in Storms 1948: 164. Also see Storms 1948: 61–62.

resemble the prescriptions of 'Ritual Three': 'Ʒon(ne) heo to Ʒan broce ga, Ʒon(ne) ne beseo no, ne eft Ʒon(ne) heo Ʒanan ga; 7 Ʒon(ne) ga heo in oƷer hus oƷer heo ut eofode' (When she goes to the brook, she should not look back, nor when she goes from there; and then she should go into a house other than that from which she went out). Nevertheless, the remedy in *Bald's Leechbook* differs from *Lacnunga's* in one important way: it tells the performer to verbalise an objective which the latter only implies. Standing on the bank of the river, the patient suffering from *blæce* should exclaim: 'hafa Ʒu Ʒas unhæle, and gewit aweg mid!' (you have the disease, and depart with it!).⁸⁷³

Religious Conformity: 'unlawful praiers' or Popular Beliefs?

Scholars have debated the religious background of the pregnancy rituals in *Lacnunga* for a long time. The main problem is their advocacy of corpse magic *and* Christian practices. Over the years, scholarship has completely changed its stance on how to reconcile these traditions. In 1844, John Kemble argued the 'spells are of utmost value, as bearing unmistakable marks of Anglosaxon paganism'.⁸⁷⁴ A century later, Grattan and Singer even named the rituals as 'Pagan Rites for Miscarriage'.⁸⁷⁵ In 2002, Victoria Thompson took a different approach. She argued none of the texts 'contains anything incompatible with Christianity'; that they are 'informed by Christian ritual activities'; and that 'attest to a culture of unregulated and quasi- or non-liturgical activities around the grave'.⁸⁷⁶

⁸⁷³ No. 6 in Storms 1948: 164.

⁸⁷⁴ Kemble 1849: 528.

⁸⁷⁵ Singer and Grattan 1952: 191. Storms proposed the rituals were originally devoted to Freyr, the Germanic god of fertility. See Storms 1948: 200.

⁸⁷⁶ Thompson 2012: 96. See also Arthur 2014a: 21.

Academic progress and the rise and fall in popularity of broader theoretical approaches to medieval sources explain some of the differences in opinion. John Kemble, a friend of Jacob Grimm (1785–1863), was a prominent figure in the scholarly tradition currently classed as Romantic philology. His definition of paganism seems to have embraced folk customs and practices, and his research aim was to recover such practices by reconstructing them from later sources.⁸⁷⁷ Meanwhile, Victoria Thompson disagreed with previous scholars not only about the syncretic nature of early medieval rituals but also about the definition of Christianity itself. Her argument echoes late-twentieth-century advances regarding the concept of ‘popular religion’. This incorporates uncodified practices and beliefs that self-identifying Christians practise in good faith despite their deviation from canonical sources.⁸⁷⁸

Nevertheless, scholars have not only disagreed about the religious background of the rituals in *Lacnunga* because of differences between historical perspectives and theoretical frameworks. Ultimately, the available sources are not univocal. Early medieval penitential writings, for example, contain stark condemnations of practices that are comparable to those advocated by the *Lacnunga* rituals. Regino of Prüm (died c. 915) exhorts ‘laici’ (laymen) to attend funerals ‘cum timore et tremore’. No one should presume to sing ‘diabolica carmina’ or make ‘ioca et saltationes quae pagani diabolo docente adinvenerunt’ (jests and dances which pagans have invented by the devil’s teaching).⁸⁷⁹ Sometime before the conversion of early medieval England, two Burgundian codes had already made it possible for a man to divorce his wife if he could prove she was a witch or a desecrator of gravesites.⁸⁸⁰ The Old English penitential *Scriftboc* (10th

⁸⁷⁷ Note, for example, the tone and themes in the (strongly worded) letter Kemble sent to Grimm on Aug. 1 1837; Kemble included the *Lacnunga* rituals as an attachment. See Wiley 1971: 151–154.

⁸⁷⁸ On popular religion in early medieval England, see Jolly 1996; Watkins 2004; Hutton 2011. For a recent study on sin and penitence in early medieval England, see Hamilton 2005.

⁸⁷⁹ See no. CCCXCVIII in *Wasserschleben* 1840: 180–181.

⁸⁸⁰ See footnote 101 and the accompanying interpretation in Jones 2009: 307–308.

cent.) includes restrictions for '[g]ýf wif drýcræft· & galdorgræft· & unlibban wýrce' (if a woman practices magic and incantations and sorcery), while Wulfstan's *Canons of Edgar* (11th cent.) condemns 'licwigelunga' (corpse-divination).⁸⁸¹

Late medieval trial records, sermons, and official clerical communications equally suggest *Lacnunga's* rituals were not aligned seamlessly with Christian doctrine. In 1481, Agnes Marshall, a midwife, was prosecuted for quackery and using incantations.⁸⁸² A few decades earlier, the Dominican preacher Johann Herolt (c. 1390–1468) issued warnings against parturient women, who, as they lay dying, turned to superstitious charms as a last resort: 'hoc ei proculdubio noceret in anima'.⁸⁸³ Episcopal visitation records often include questions about the potentially deviant practices of midwives, as well as insinuations that the existential fears of women in labour encouraged injudicious vows. In 1584, a certain Mr. John Tomkys — delegate of the Bishop of Lichfield — asked the churchwardens of St Mary's in Shropshire

Whether any mydwife within your parishe in tyme of weomen's travill be knowne or suspected to use sorcerie, witchcrafte, charmes, unlockynge of chests and dores, [...] or to saye unlawful praiers or superstitious invocations?⁸⁸⁴

In 1538, Bishop Nicholas Shaxton (ironically condemned for heresy a year later) wrote down a list of injunctions which urged 'every Curat' (here: 'ministers with pastoral responsibility') to instruct parishioners properly. After deliberating the reprehensibility of 'Sorcere' and 'Witchcrafte' alongside that of 'Swering', 'Blasphemy', 'Bakbiting', 'Sloundering', and

⁸⁸¹ X14.05.01 in Frantzen 2014. Fowler 1972: 5.

⁸⁸² Forbes 1964: 239.

⁸⁸³ Herolt 1622: 200.

⁸⁸⁴ Art. 43, quoted in Owen and Brickdale Blakeway 1825: 364. Also given in Kittredge 1929a: 115.

‘Skoldinge’, he offered some advice that concerned the behaviour of ‘especially the Midwives’:⁸⁸⁵

Beware that they cause not the Woman, being in Travaile, to make any folishe Vowe, to go in Pilgrimage to this Ymage, or that Ymage, after her Deliveraunce, but only to call on God for Helpe. Nor to use any Girdels, Purses, Mesures of our Lady, or such other Superstitious Things, to be occupied about the Woman while She laboureth, to make her beleve to have the better Spede by it.⁸⁸⁶

John Tomkyns’s visitation enquiries and Nicholas Shaxton’s injunctions are not from early medieval England. Nevertheless, most of the practices these clergymen mention — ‘charmes’, ‘girdels’, ‘purses’, ‘mesures of our lady’, ‘to go in Pilgrimage to this Ymage, or that Ymage’, and the ‘unlocknyng of chests and dores’ — can be traced back to earlier periods. Mesopotamian clay tablets already mention charms to liberate ‘chained’ babies and ‘locked’ women;⁸⁸⁷ Ovid refers to women who pray to Lucina and ceremonially untie their hair before labour;⁸⁸⁸ and *Lacnunga* preserves a charm for ‘Gif wif ne mæge bearn beran’ (if a woman cannot deliver a child) that invokes Peter’s ability to undo ‘catenis’ (*sic.*), thereby appealing to the apostle’s signature reputation as a key-carrying gatekeeper.⁸⁸⁹ *Bald’s Leechbook* preserves a reference to so-called birth girdles: ‘gif hio cennan ne maege, do on hire gyrdels þas gebedo swa on þisum laecebocum segb’ (if she cannot give birth, put the prayers on her girdle as explained in these leechbooks).⁸⁹⁰

The similarity between older and newer practices in obstetric magic can give the wrong impression that the official ecclesiastical guidelines are

⁸⁸⁵ Burnet 1753: 490.

⁸⁸⁶ Burnet 1753: 490.

⁸⁸⁷ Couto-Ferreira 2014: 310; Van Dijk, Goetze, and Hussey 1985: no. 86.

⁸⁸⁸ Dolansky 2011: 195.

⁸⁸⁹ Brown 1987: 45.

⁸⁹⁰ Cockayne 1865: 172. For more information on birth girdles, see Gwara and Morse 2012; Morse 2014; Dilling 1912-1914; Skemer 2006.

well-defined: pregnancy charms are ‘unlawful praieres or superstitious invocations’ and the desecration of gravesites is a punishable crime. A significant problem with this view is that none of the just-cited documents records the opinions of the people involved. Instead, they preserve the moral judgements of influential male figures who had a range of other concerns and objectives alongside understanding the predicaments of a woman ‘while She laboureth’.⁸⁹¹ Another factor that should not be overlooked is that the evidence from later periods was composed when officers of the church started to experience increased anxiety about the potential malpractices of midwives, a profession that only re-emerged in urban locations in the thirteenth century.⁸⁹²

Our understanding of the orthodoxy of *Lacnunga*’s texts changes when we consider additional evidence to compensate for the one-sidedness of the medieval sources. ‘Ritual One’, ‘Two’, and ‘Three’ all implement transference rites. Such rites have many analogues from numerous periods and places. Their efficacy has often been questioned, but their traditional nature and commonality in everyday life have also frequently exempted them from religious persecution.⁸⁹³ As Wayland Hand wrote in 1970, ‘It is one of the ironies of folk medical practice’: ‘things that

⁸⁹¹ See further the discussion of ‘episcopal bias’ in early English penitentials in Hamilton 2005: 90–93.

⁸⁹² For discussions about the re-emergence of midwifery after the classical period, see Green 2005: 15–17; 2008, 2006; Taglia 2001; Harris-Stoertz 2014. Scholarship on the potentially deviant practices of medieval midwives has made a complete U-turn following the advent of feminism in medieval studies in the 1970s. In 1962 and 1964, Thomas Forbes still defended the validity of medieval condemnations of the profession. Such views are currently rejected and scholars tend to support the idea that medieval sources which associate midwifery with illicit magic should be read against a culture of strict taboos relating to the birthing chamber, an increased late-medieval concern for female witchcraft, as well as the fact that midwives encroached on priestly responsibilities (they could perform emergency baptisms). Meanwhile, even though male imaginations and widespread misogyny are a factor in midwife accusations, the pervasiveness and condemnatory tone of allegations seem to have led to fewer actual trials than initially assumed. On this extensive subject, see Forbes 1962; Harley 1990; Greilsammer 1991; Vann Sprecher and Mazo Karras 2011; Smoak 2012; Forbes 1964; Horsley and Horsley 1987; Marland 1993; Taglia 2001; Giladi 2010; Ehrenreich and English 2010; Green 2006.

⁸⁹³ Even Sir Francis Bacon (1561–1626), philosopher and statesman, pondered the efficacy of transference magic. In his case, his warts magically disappeared after a helpful diplomat’s wife transferred them, appropriately, to a sun-dried ‘peece of lard’. See Hardy 1878: 217.

would normally be shunned are, by some mental quirk, especially sought out for curative practices'.⁸⁹⁴

Differences between some modern societies and their respective approaches to pregnancy traditions provide another interesting perspective. In 2011, Danish researchers surveyed 'practices of existential meaning-making through prayer and/or meditation among first time mothers'.⁸⁹⁵ 913 women filled out the study's questionnaire. Nevertheless, the researchers found no statistically significant difference between the numbers of times that full-term and preterm mothers resorted to prayer or meditation.⁸⁹⁶

Adina Hulubaş published different results in her article on childbirth beliefs in present-day Romania. She characterised pregnancy as a time when traditional customs and religion take on increased importance, even if the two appear discordant to outsiders:

Christian beliefs [...] are combined with archaic convictions in a harmonious mixture. Romanians know how to make peace with God and pagan divinities at the same time. Even priests and high-ranking members of priestly hierarchies have learned to respect and treasure cultural heritage. During the course of pregnancy right up to the days before birth, the woman follows a historical pattern of similitude and contagion.⁸⁹⁷

Hulubaş' results are remarkable when compared with those of her Danish colleagues because of the underlying societal differences. Denmark is an urbanised, medically advanced country where religion and its associated traditions have lost much of their former stature. In a recent poll, eighty per cent of Danish people said religion was unimportant in their daily lives.⁸⁹⁸

⁸⁹⁴ Hand 1980: 69–70.

⁸⁹⁵ Prinds et al. 2016: 1.

⁸⁹⁶ Prinds, et al. 2016: 1.

⁸⁹⁷ Hulubaş 2011: 279.

⁸⁹⁸ Crabtree 2010.

The WHO has recorded a negligible level of maternal deaths in the country's recent past.⁸⁹⁹ Romania still houses rural communities with limited access to modern health care. It is also one of the most religious countries in Europe, and the number of maternal deaths has only recently started to decrease, from about 493 per 100 000 live births in 1985 to 17 in 2016.⁹⁰⁰ To compare: in the Democratic Republic of Congo, a country with one of the highest current maternal mortality rates, around 473 women died per 100 000 live births in 2017.⁹⁰¹

Early medieval England was unlike contemporary Denmark or Romania in many ways. Nevertheless, it seems plausible that early medieval pregnant women faced issues that still affected some Romanian women thirty years ago. Childbirth remains a life-threatening event without advanced medical care or the option to have a caesarean.⁹⁰² For mothers that have to give birth in such conditions, as well as for those closest to them, the nine months leading up to parturition cause worry, uncertainty, and existential anxiety.⁹⁰³ Both traditional customs and religion can serve as a source of comfort, working together to offer a tried and tested action plan in a time of heightened need. This is one reason why some Romanian women 'follow a historical pattern', a pattern that borrows equally from cultural heritage and religious beliefs. Even though tradition is not always in concord with the sometimes-strict official regulations of the Church, the seriousness of the circumstances and the cultural authority of long-standing routines cause that in practice both are tolerated and even supported by clergy members and devout worshippers.

Lacnunga's rituals may present evidence of an inconsistency in the historical record. They seem to impart a historical circumstance whereby the regulations of official religion and popular culture practices were not immediately in harmony. Numerous ecclesiastical rulebooks have survived.

⁸⁹⁹ 'Denmark' 2019.

⁹⁰⁰ 'Romania' 2019; Crabtree 2010.

⁹⁰¹ 'Democratic Republic of Congo' 2019.

⁹⁰² Courtemanche and Bednarski 2011.

⁹⁰³ Hanlon et al. 2010.

However, these stipulate guidelines to which only a fraction of the population had direct access. The individuals who composed the legislation were not always concerned with the specific plights of those meant to follow them. Popular traditions may have been just as respected and authoritative. Just like Wayland Hand's folk customs from America and Hulubaş' pregnancy traditions from Romania, the rituals in *Lacnunga* may have taken advantage of a 'mental quirk', a semi-condoned loophole in official church guidelines: religious hardliners may have considered them improper, unlawful, and superstitious, but it is conceivable that devout women (and men) still practised them without considering them incompatible with their personal approaches to devotion.

Conclusion

This chapter offers a discussion of three entries in *Lacnunga* (here referred to as 'Ritual One', 'Two', and 'Three') that combine words and ceremonial actions to resolve problems related to pregnancy. Some recent commentators have regarded the entries as constituting one 'charm'. Nevertheless, this chapter argues against such an interpretation. The discussion presented above analyses each entry individually to determine the meaning of an ambiguous term that recurs in their titles: *afedan*. The verb can describe processes before and after parturition. The chapter identifies specific moments in the gestation process in 'Ritual One' and 'Two' that indicate these need to be performed during the pregnancy.

The interpretation of 'Ritual Three' is more complex because its verbal formula contains two additional cruces: *magapiht* and *metepiht*. These expressions have frequently led scholars to assume the text is corrupt. The second element of these compound expressions has been tentatively identified as the adjective 'tight'. The earliest meanings of this word, which is not attested in the Old English period, are 'dense' and 'solid'. This discussion presents a broad range of analogues to support a

different view: *piht* is an Old English attestation of the Middle English noun *tight* and means 'burden'.

The new translation is informative because it reveals the moment 'Ritual Three' needs to be performed: *magapiht* and *metepiht* are compound expressions that pun on the fact that the speaker hopes to *afedan*, 'nourish', a *maga*, 'son' or 'relative', on *mete*, 'food', in a *maga*, 'womb'. 'Ritual Three' mentions milk, and for this reason, it has been interpreted as a remedy for lactation issues. This chapter problematises such readings by indicating that breast milk only comes in after the delivery of a child. 'Ritual Three' should be performed when the expected *maga*, 'son' or 'relative', is still a *piht*, 'burden', in the woman's *maga*, 'womb'.

The chapter connects each of *Lacnunga*'s pregnancy entries to so-called 'transference' rituals. The woman in 'Ritual One' hopes to avert miscarriage by stepping over a grave. The performer of 'Ritual Two' seeks to prevent an unsuccessful pregnancy by selling away earth from the grave of a previously deceased child. 'Ritual Three' involves spitting milk into running water. The argument again presents analogues to show that similar rites appear in various folk cures. However, the *Lacnunga* rites differ from these in that they apply the principle of transference to pregnancy. Transference magic is much more common in treatments for fevers and skin diseases.

The last section of the chapter discusses the religious implications of *Lacnunga*'s pregnancy rituals. Early medieval law codes appear to forbid the type of corpse magic that 'Ritual One' and 'Two' advise. Furthermore, late medieval sources indicate that authoritative ecclesiastical figures considered charms and amulets for a safe delivery to be incompatible with Christian doctrine. Nevertheless, 'Ritual One' stipulates a visit to a church and an invocation of Christ. The chapter argues that a consideration of anthropological evidence can perhaps reconcile the disparity. Modern societies in which religion plays an essential role in daily life and in which access to advanced medical care is limited also show a higher tolerance for traditional pregnancy rituals. This circumstance implies that *Lacnunga*'s

entries are not indications of prolonged pagan practices, as has been suggested, but exemplifications of the heterogeneity of early medieval Christianity. While they contain elements that experts of doctrinal orthodoxy would probably reject, they may have been compatible with the religious beliefs of those who performed them.

7. Protection on the Path of Life: The Old English ‘Journey Charm’

Introduction

The Old English ‘Journey Charm’ is an excellent example of a medieval text with a misleading modern title.⁹⁰⁴ As we will discover over the course of this chapter, both its classification as a charm and its designation as an incantatory travel aid are problematic. The argument presented below follows recent discussions in proposing the Old English text resembles an Old Irish or Hiberno-Latin *Lorica*. It offers a new solution for the notorious crux in the text’s first line (*gyrd*) and contextualises the composition’s practical applications, specifically with reference to the traditional overlap between descriptions of physical and metaphorical wayfaring.

This eleventh-century text survives in the margins of CCC 41 (pp. 350–353), a manuscript that also preserves the *swarm charm* and some of the Old English theft charms discussed elsewhere in this thesis. The composition runs as follows:

Ic me on þisse gyrde beluce and on godes helde bebeode⁹⁰⁵
wið þane sara stice, wið þane sara slege,

⁹⁰⁴ Even though the text calls itself a *gealdor*, it is more similar to *lorica* prayers. Whether it is *about* travel or *for* travel are two different questions with potentially different answers. A more descriptive title would be ‘Old English poetic prayer against harmful influences’.

⁹⁰⁵ A comparable opening appears in an Old Icelandic *lorica*: ‘Eg befala mig í dag og hvern annan í vald föður og sonar og heilags anda’. See Benati 2018a: 158.

wið þane grymma gryre,
 wið ðane micela egða þe bið eghwam lað,
 5 and wið eal þæt lað þe in to land fare.
 Sygegealdor ic begale, sigegyrd ic me wege,
 wordsige and worcsige. Se me dege;
 ne me mere ne gemyrre, ne me maga ne geswence,
 ne me næfre minum feore forht ne gewurþe,
 10 ac gehæle me ælmihtig and sunu and frofre gast,
 ealles wuldres wyrðig dryhten,
 swa swa ic gehyrde heofna scyppende.
 Abrame and Isace
 and swilce men, Moyses and Iacob,
 15 and Daut and Iosep
 and Evan and Annan and Elizabet,
 Saharie and ec Marie, modur Cristes,
 and eac þæ gebroþru, Petrus and Paulus,
 and eac þusend þinra engla⁹⁰⁶
 20 clipige ic me to are wið eallum feondum.
 Hi me ferion and friþion and mine fore nerion,
 eal me gehealdon, me gewealdon,
 worces stirende; si me wuldres hyht,
 hand ofer heafod, haligra rof,
 25 sigerofra sceolu, soðfæstra engla.
 Biddu ealle bliðu mode
 þæt me beo Matheus helm, Marcus byrne,
 leoht, lifes rof, Lucos min swurd,
 scearp and scirecg, scyld Iohannes,
 30 wuldre gewlitegod wega Serafhin.⁹⁰⁷

⁹⁰⁶ Compare from the 'Lorica of Laidcenn' lines 11–13: 'Ut me illi praecedant in acie | caelestis exercitus militiae: | cheruphin et seraphin cum milibus'. The complete lorica is edited and translated in Herren 1987. For more analogues for the same line, see Bischoff 1984a: 160.

⁹⁰⁷ Dobbie emends *wega* to *wælgar*.

Forð ic gefare, frind ic gemete,
 eall engla blæd, eadiges lare.
 Bidde ic nu sigeres god godes miltse,
 siðfæt godne, smylte and lihte
 35 wind on waroþum.⁹⁰⁸ Windas gefran,
 circinde⁹⁰⁹ wæter simble gehælede
 wið eallum feondum. Freond ic gemete wið,
 þæt ic on þæs ælmihtgian frið wunian mote,⁹¹⁰
 belocun wið þam lapan, se me lyfes eht,
 40 on engla blæd gestapelod,
 and inna halre hand heofna rices,
 þa hwile þe ic on þis life wunian mote.
 Amen.⁹¹¹

I enclose myself within this girth / protective prayer and commend
 myself to God's guardianship.
 Against the sore stitch, against the sore strike,
 against the grim terror,
 against the great dread that is loathsome to everyone,
 5 and against every evil that enters the land.

⁹⁰⁸ Dobbie emends to *windas*.

⁹⁰⁹ A hapax. Similar words draw on sound symbolism and often have many slightly different variants. Thus, Chaucer's summoner's tale contains a line where a 'frere [...] chirketh as a sparwe with his lippes'. Spelling variants in other manuscripts are 'chirteth', 'chircheth', 'chirppith', and 'chitereth'. In the same way, the *Promptorium Parvulorum*, a late-medieval English-Latin dictionary, translates *strideo* as 'Cherkyn or chorkyn or frachyn, as newe cartys or plowys'. For these and other examples, see *MED*, s.v. 'chirke[n] v.'

⁹¹⁰ Compare: 'hiute muoze er in deme heiligen fride sîn, dâ got inne wâre, dô er in daz paradise chame'. See no. ix in Grimm 1878: 494.

⁹¹¹ This chapter uses as an edition Dobbie 1942: 126–8. Adaptations have been highlighted in the preceding footnotes. Other translations and editions can be found in Wanley 1705: 115; Grimm 1878: 493; Etmüller 1850: 303–304; Cockayne 1864: 388–391; Wülcker and Grein 1883: 328–330; Schlutter Otto 1908: 59–62; Grendon 1909: 176–9; Holthausen 1929: 88–90; Storms 1948: 216–223; Stuart 1973: 452–468; Neville 1999: 100; Bjork 2014: 222–225.

A victory chant I sing; a victory girth I wear.
 May word-victory and work-victory benefit me.
 May no mare harm me, nor a powerful person harass me,
 may I never fear for my life.
 10 But may the Almighty and the Son and the Holy Ghost save me,
 the Lord, worthy of all glory,
 Who, as I heard, is the creator of heaven.⁹¹²
 Abraham and Isaac,
 and such men, Moses and Jacob,
 15 and David and Joseph,
 and Eve and Anne and Elizabeth,
 Zacharias and also Mary, the mother of Christ,
 and also the brothers, Peter and Paul,
 and also a thousand of your angels,
 20 I call to my benefit against all enemies.
 They lead me and defend me and save my life,⁹¹³
 they keep me and govern me,
 steering my actions; be to me a hope of glory,
 a hand over my head, the holy troop,
 25 the victory-stout shoal, the righteous angels.
 I pray to all with glad mind
 that Matthew will be to me a helmet, Mark a mail coat,
 light, a shelter of life,⁹¹⁴ Luke my sword,
 sharp and bright-edged, John a shield,
 30 adorned in splendour, the roads' seraph.⁹¹⁵

⁹¹² On this passage specifically, see Stuart 1981: 259–260; Hill 1981.

⁹¹³ Reading *fore* as a variant of *feorh*.

⁹¹⁴ Translating *rof* as *hrof*.

⁹¹⁵ The meaning of the phrase is unclear. St. John had a special role as protector on journeys in German tradition:

dat vns got vnt dy gûde sunte Johannes mûte begheghenen
 wor wir varen, rîden oder ghên,
 lieghen, sitten oder steyn,

I travel forth; I meet with a friend,⁹¹⁶
 all the glory of angels, the blessed one's instructions.
 I pray now good favour from the God of victory,
 a good journey, mild and light
 35 wind on the shores. I heard winds,
 roiling water; ever secure
 against all enemies. I meet with a friend,
 so that I may reside in the peace of the Almighty,
 enclosed against the foe, who pursues my life,
 40 established in the glory of the angels,
 and within the holy hand of the kingdom of heaven,
 for as long as I may dwell in this life.
 Amen.

In the past, scholars have assumed this document intends to protect travellers on physical journeys. In 1975, Gert Sandmann proposed it was a

welker hande vns ghewerf sî,
 dat got vnt dy gûde sunte Johannes by vns sy.

Meanwhile, *Elene* connotes seraphs with *sige*: 'Syndon tu on þam, sigorcynn on swegle, þe man seraphin be naman hateð' (There are two among them in heaven, a victorious kind, we call by the name seraph). An Old English homily explains: 'Men ða leofestan, us gedafeneð þæt we forhiggen þisne middaneard þæt we magon filigan Christe urum alysende fram hellewitum. And uton warnian þæt we ne forspillon þæt ece lif for þyses middaneardes idelan wuldre, ac uton symle herian urne ecan drihten þone þe sitt and ofersyhþ þa eadigan engla werodu on heofonum þe genamode synt cherubin and seraphim'. (Most beloved men, it is beneficial for us that we remember in this earth that we must follow Christ our saviour from the punishments of hell. And from the outset take care that we do not spoil the eternal life for the idle glory of this earth, but continuously praise our eternal Lord who is seated and oversees the blessed troop of angels in heaven, who are called cherubs and seraphs). These two statements match with the poem's thematic interest in following a victorious life course and summoning troops of 'victory-stout' angels. For the German text, see Benati 2018a: 143. For the Old English sources, see Krapp 1932b: 87, line 753; Cross 1987: 195.

⁹¹⁶ Compare the following section from 'A Charm for Travellers' (Ms. Ashmole 1378):

Here I ame and fourthe I mouste,
 & in Iesus Criste is all my trust,
 no wicked thing do me no dare,
 nother here nor Elles whare.

The full text is edited as no. 64 in Robbins 1952: 60.

Christianised remnant of ancient Germanic ‘Reiseschutzzauber’ (journey-protection magic).⁹¹⁷ Storms had made a similar suggestion in 1948: ‘The charm is sung against various dangers that may befall a traveller’.⁹¹⁸ Combinations of apotropaic formulae and images related to wayfaring appear throughout the text (‘I pray now good favour from the God of victory, | a good journey, mild and light | wind on the shores’) and some of the dangers the poem seeks to prevent — demonic visitations, painful injuries, and powerful opponents — are typically encountered on the road. Nevertheless, the following paragraphs provide evidence to suggest that the notion that the Old English text looks back to an ancient Germanic tradition is probably inaccurate.

Dividing verbal formulas into different genres is theoretically comparatively straightforward (though practically still highly complicated) if these mean to improve specific circumstances in the present moment.⁹¹⁹ Swarm charms are for retrieving escaping bees; blood staunching charms are for staunching blood; theft charms mean to solve and redress theft. Outlining incantatory genres that avert undesirable situations in the future is much more challenging. Protective charms, apotropaic prayers, and blessings only work if they are as inclusive as possible. The genre boundaries of these documents are porous and unstable. As Monica Schulz admitted in 2003, ‘Von den Schutzsegen eigentlich nicht zu trennen sind die sog. *Ausfahrtsegen*’ (blessings for personal protection cannot truly be separated from so-called *Ausfahrtsegen* [travel blessings]).⁹²⁰ More recently, Chiara Benati affirmed that ‘[i]n some cases, journey blessings are hardly distinguishable from [...] weapon blessings (German *Waffensegen*), judicial blessings (German *Gerichtssegen*), and morning prayers (German *Morgensegen*)’.⁹²¹

⁹¹⁷ Sandmann 1975: 20. Also see Dobbie 1942: cxxxvii.

⁹¹⁸ Storms 1948: 221.

⁹¹⁹ See further Roper 2004.

⁹²⁰ Schulz 2003a: 165. Also see Moser 1961: 72–73.

⁹²¹ Benati 2018a: 121.

A second reason the Old English ‘Journey Charm’ is probably not a reflex of an ancient Germanic genre is that its association with other Germanic texts that pray for providential journeys has been misunderstood. In 1948, Storms included in the 13 theses of his PhD defence the proposition that ‘De tekst van de Oud Engelse toverformule voor een goede reis vertoont Oud Saksische invloeden’ (The text of the Old English magic formula for a good journey shows Old Saxon influences).⁹²² In 1961, Hugo Moser contended that the Old English document contained ‘heimische, zum Teil in vorchristliche Zeit zurückreichende Wendungen’ (native expressions that reach back in part to a pre-Christian period).

Such propositions stem from the fact that the Old English document resembles Middle High German compositions that are traditionally called *Reisesegen*.⁹²³ The same argument has given the text its modern title: Humphrey Wanley called the Old English poem an ‘exorcismus’ in 1705.⁹²⁴ Jacob Grimm called it a ‘Segnung’ in 1844;⁹²⁵ Ernst Ettmüller preferred ‘Gealdorcvide’ in 1850;⁹²⁶ and Oswald Cockayne, who edited the poem in 1864, headed the document with the equivocal title ‘a charm or prayer’.⁹²⁷ Richard Wülcker, however, called the text a *Reisesegen* in his *Bibliothek der angelsächsischen Poesie*, published in 1883, and all English editions have used translations of the same label since.⁹²⁸ In 1909, Felix Grendon called it ‘a Journey Spell’; in 1942, Dobbie revised this to ‘Journey Charm’.⁹²⁹

⁹²² Godfried Storms’ *stellingen* are attached to the online copy of his PhD thesis *Anglo-Saxon Magic*, available online via the portal of the Radboud University. They appear on the last, unnumbered page in the file.

⁹²³ ‘In OHG. and OS. we find a number of journey-charms that are fully Christian in wording and atmosphere and, if it had not been for this one, we might be inclined to suppose that this sort of charm was a Christian invention’. See Storms 1948: 220.

⁹²⁴ Wanley 1705: 115.

⁹²⁵ Grimm 1878: 493.

⁹²⁶ Ettmüller 1850: 303.

⁹²⁷ Cockayne 1864: 389.

⁹²⁸ Wülcker and Grein 1883: 328.

⁹²⁹ Grendon 1909: 176; Dobbie 1942: 126.

Wülcker used the word *Reisesege*n in a different way from most modern German speakers. He did not intend to liken the Old English poem to an *Irisher Segenswunsch* (Irish blessing) or a pilgrim benediction, both of which can be designated with the same label.⁹³⁰ Instead, he meant to compare it to a specific genre of Middle High German prayer-charms. Many of these seek to protect users by recollecting the providential travels of Tobiah as described in Tobit 4–5. For that reason, they are also called *Tobiassege*n.⁹³¹

To understand better how these German blessings relate to the Old English poem, it is helpful to focus on the section in which the speaker affirms his hope for a providential future:

Freond ic gemete wið,
þæt ic on þæs ælmihtgian frið wunian mote,
belocun wið þam laþan, se me lyfes eht,
on engla blæd gestapelod,
and inna halre hand heofna rices,
þa hwile þe ic on þis life wunian mote.⁹³²

I meet with a friend,
so that I may reside in the peace of the Almighty,
enclosed against the foe, who pursues my life,
established in the glory of the angels,
and within the holy hand of the kingdom of heaven,
for as long as I may live in this life.

⁹³⁰ For more information on both these genres, see Multhaupt and Aavitsland 1996; Multhaupt 1993; Bärsch 2009; Petke 2006.

⁹³¹ Some German priests still refer to these books to instruct individuals about how to pray before going on holiday. The advised prayers are often *Irische Segenswünsche*, which are themselves informed by lorica motifs. See Mattes 2008; Schulz 1989.

⁹³² Lines 38–42.

A somewhat similar motif appears in the ‘Tobiassegen’ from cod. 2817, housed in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek:

rain vnd kuesch si dir din lib
holt si dir man unde wip.
Guot rat muezz din werden
vnd geches todes nit ersterben:
vor got muest du saelec sin.⁹³³

May your body be clean and pure,
may you be protected man and woman.
May you beget good council
and may you not die a sudden death:
for God you must be blessed.

The Old English ‘Journey Charm’ and the just-cited ‘Tobiassegen’ were written down in different centuries and composed in different languages. Nevertheless, they are similar on a thematic level. Both ask for spiritual and bodily security (‘belocun wið þam laþan’ versus ‘rain vnd kuesch si dir din lib’), benevolent company (‘Freond ic gemete wið’ versus ‘guot rat muezz din werden’), and divine protection (‘þæt ic on þæs ælmihtgian frið wunian mote’ versus ‘vor got muest du saelec sin’). The thematic interrelation between these documents is corroborated further by the fact that they refer to a similar group of biblical characters. The ‘Journey Charm’ goes on to summon figures such as ‘Abrame and Isace’, ‘Moyses and Iacob’, ‘Dauit and Iosep’, ‘Saharie and ec Marie, modur Cristes’. The ‘Tobiassegen’ at some point petitions favours from ‘Abraham’, ‘Iacob’, ‘David’, ‘Ysayas’, ‘Ioseph’, and ‘Marien der maget’.⁹³⁴

⁹³³ Lines 77–81; edition in Stuart 1980a: 99.

⁹³⁴ For the ‘Journey Charm’, see lines 13–17; for the ‘Tobiassegen’, see lines 101–125. Notably, the re-occurrence of precisely these figures is not unexpected, as they are all biblical archetypes for providential wayfarers. Compare: ‘In the “Tobiassegen”, the angelic

Despite their similarities, however, it is improbable that the Old English and the Middle High German text have a shared origin in a pre-Christian Germanic tradition. Instead, it is more likely that both recycle imagery commonly found in a specific type of early medieval apotropaic prayers called *loricae* (lit.: ‘breastplates’). Such texts are often associated with Irish monasticism and typically invoke Christian figures and spiritual armour to deter harmful influences.⁹³⁵ The Old Irish ‘Klosterneuburger Lorica’ (13th century) summons, among other items, the ‘brut Muire’ (cloak of Mary), the ‘cris Éoïn’ (girdle of John), and the ‘chochlán Mu Bí’ (cowl of Mo Bí) to deflect various dangers and ill-willed characters.⁹³⁶ In the same way, *loricae* often contain lists of hazards that need to be averted, as well as catalogues of body parts that need to be safeguarded. To provide a cursory illustration of how such texts might relate to the two passages quoted above: the speaker in the ‘Lorica of St Brendan’ asks that ‘omnes Sanctae virtutes plantentur in me’ (compare: ‘on engla blæd gestapelod’); that he or she is liberated ‘a subitanea et improvisa morte’ (compare: ‘vnd geches todes nit ersterben’); and that he or she is granted ‘vitam et sanitatem in hoc saeculo et post transitum animarum’ (compare: and ‘þæt ic on þæs ælmihtgian frið wunian mote [...] þa hwile þe ic on þis life wunian mote’ and ‘rain vnd kuesch si dir din lib’).

The relationship between the Old English ‘Journey Charm’ and *loricae* is well-defined and has been pointed out numerous times before.⁹³⁷ A synopsis of the argument is as follows: several Latin breastplates survive from early medieval England. The ‘Lorica of Laidcenn’ (alternatively known as the ‘Lorica of Gildas’) appears in six different recensions, two of which

host, the twelve apostles, the four evangelists, St. Mary, St. Stephen, Abraham, David, etc., are invoked for the same purposes, and with much the same expressions as in our spell’. Grendon 1909: 221.

⁹³⁵ In his article on Celtic *loricae* and ancient magical charms, Pierre-Yves Lambert gives the following typological description: ‘their most salient features are: 1. an enumeration of the powers invoked; 2. an enumeration of the body-parts to be protected; and 3. an enumeration of the dangers, enemies or obstacles to be avoided or overcome’. See Lambert 2010: 629.

⁹³⁶ Stifter 2007: 514.

⁹³⁷ Hill 1981: 266; Amies 1983: 452.

have Old English glosses.⁹³⁸ CCCC 41, the manuscript that includes the Old English ‘Journey Charm’, contains texts derived from insular literary traditions. Its margins preserve Irish invocations of Paul, John, and St Patrick and three stanzas and the antiphon of the Hiberno-Latin ‘Hymnus S. Secundini in Laudem S. Patricii’.⁹³⁹ The scribe who wrote down the ‘Journey Charm’ lived and worked at a time when Hiberno-Latin *loricae* were being translated into Old English. He also appears to have cultivated an active interest in collecting insular religious texts with apotropaic qualities.⁹⁴⁰

Many *Reisesege*n, *Morgensege*n, *Ausfahrtsege*n, and *Schutzsege*n seem to echo the writings of early medieval Irish monks rather than the teachings of ancient Germanic oral poets.⁹⁴¹ The similarities between the ‘Lorica of St Brendan’ and the ‘Tobiassegen’ from cod. 2817 have already been pointed out. Another persuasive argument in favour of Irish influence is that several German texts combine in their opening lines a reference to rising in the morning with an image related to girding or encircling. One fourteenth-century specimen (at one point extracted from a prison beam in Basel) begins as follows:

+ Ich wil hilt vf stan
Ich wil in gotes namen hinnan gan
Ich wil mich begvrten
mit den gocz worten
mit den sige rinen.⁹⁴²

I want to get up today.
I want to go forth in God’s name.

⁹³⁸ Singer 1928b, 1919.

⁹³⁹ Grant 1979: 5–12. In addition, the manuscript’s homiletic sections about Doomsday and St Michael feature insular motifs. See Johnson 1998; Volmering 2014.

⁹⁴⁰ Also see Grant 1979.

⁹⁴¹ Also see Stuart 1980b: 69.

⁹⁴² Wackernagel 1843: 42. For more recent publications which include but do not re-edit the same text, see Cianci 2004; Holzmann 2001.

I want to gird myself
with God's words,
with the victory rings.

Scholars have struggled to differentiate *Reisesegen*, *Ausfahrtsegen*, *Schutzsegen*, and *Morgensegen*. The cited German text demonstrates why: it opens with the speaker's wish to 'get up', resembling a *Morgensegen*. Nevertheless, the speaker's ensuing action, 'hinnan gan', equally characterises the document as an *Ausfahrtsegen* or a *Reisesegen*. The speaker also mentions his protective 'victory rings'. Documents that provide personal protection can be called *Schutzsegen*.

We will revisit the intricate relationship between travel charms and protective prayers in this chapter's section on the 'Pragmatics of the "Journey of Life"'. In this instance, the taxonomic difficulties can probably be traced back to the homophony of two Irish verbs: *adruig*, 'to arise', and *adrig*, 'to bind'. Medieval German translators appear to have struggled to convey the double meaning of the expression and seem to have produced a composite motif that conveyed both: 'Ich wil hivt vf stan' and 'Ich wil mich begvrten'.⁹⁴³ Modern English translations of the 'Lorica of St Patrick' convey a related form of confusion: in 1872, Whitley Stokes translated the opening phrase 'Atomriug indíu niurt trén' as 'I bind myself today to a strong virtue'; in 1961, Colm Ó Lochlainn preferred 'I arise today in power and might'.⁹⁴⁴

⁹⁴³ Irish monks contributed substantially to Germany's conversion to Christianity and Irish charms and loricae survive in German manuscripts. The 'Klosterneuburger Lorica' cited earlier is one example.

⁹⁴⁴ Greene and O'Connor 1967: 27; Binchy 1966: 232–234; Stokes 1872: 151–152.

Walking Canes and Protective Girdles: *gyrd* and *sigegyrd*

As the preceding section demonstrates, medieval Germans and English-speaking academics have occasionally struggled to interpret the Old Irish words *adruig* and *adrig*. The confusion these verbs have caused is minor compared to that inspired by some expressions in the ‘Journey Charm’. The entire text is notoriously idiosyncratic: in 1929, Holthausen proposed 66 revisions to improve the poem’s 42 lines.⁹⁴⁵ Most commentators have opted for a less invasive approach and focused their attention instead on two phrases. These are ‘Ic me on þisse gyrde beluce and on godes helde bebeode’, and ‘Sygegealdor ic begale, sigegyrd ic me wege’.⁹⁴⁶ A recent scholar explained that both lines, and especially the word *gyrd* mentioned in them, have caused ‘quite a headache’.⁹⁴⁷

The most significant problem with the charm’s confusing expressions is that the standard definition of the word *gyrd* does not seem to fit the poem’s context. Usually, the term denotes some sort of stick, twig, or staff.⁹⁴⁸ In his ‘Letter to Sigeward’, for example, Ælfric of Eynsham (c. 955–1010) explains that after the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt, ‘Moyses þa sloh þa sæ mid his girde’ (Moses then struck the sea with his staff).⁹⁴⁹ Nevertheless, translating the word as such in the ‘Journey Charm’ is problematised by the preceding verb, *belucan*, ‘to lock up’. The translation ‘I lock up myself in this staff’ raises questions about the type of stick to which the speaker is referring. Over the last one-and-a-half century, scholars have proposed a range of different and often highly specific

⁹⁴⁵ Holthausen 1929: 87–88. The emendations were first counted in Storms 1948: 219.

⁹⁴⁶ Line 1 and 6.

⁹⁴⁷ Benati 2018a: 124.

⁹⁴⁸ See *DOE*, s.v. ‘gyrd’. See also *OED*, s.v. ‘yard, n.2’.

⁹⁴⁹ Crawford 1922: 30.

explanations. A chronological overview of proposed definitions offers the clearest introduction to the history of the argument:

1864	Cockayne	'Probably a holy rood'. ⁹⁵⁰
1892	Brooke	An 'ancient rune-stick'. ⁹⁵¹
1908	Schlutter	'Kreuzstab'. ⁹⁵²
1909	Grendon	'A cross?'. ⁹⁵³
1929	Klaeber	'Der genaue Sinn von <i>gyrd</i> [...] ist nicht sicher. Wie aus Bosworth–Toller leicht zu ersehen ist, kann es Stab [...], Gerte, Rute, Zweig bedeuten'. ⁹⁵⁴
1929–30	Holthausen	'Wohl der Wanderstab'. ⁹⁵⁵
1942	Dobbie	'It seems best to translate the word simply as "staff"'. ⁹⁵⁶
1948	Storms	'The charm is sung against various dangers that may befall a traveller [...] The defence against these dangers was the rod or staff by which the charmer

⁹⁵⁰ Cockayne 1864: 389.

⁹⁵¹ Brooke 1892: 341.

⁹⁵² Schlutter 1908: 60. 'Cross-staff'.

⁹⁵³ Grendon 1909: 177.

⁹⁵⁴ Klaeber 1929: 283. 'The exact meaning of *gyrd* [...] is not certain. As can easily be seen from Bosworth-Toller, it can mean staff [...], switch, rod, twig'.

⁹⁵⁵ Holthausen 1929: 89; 1930: 255. 'Probably the walking stick'.

⁹⁵⁶ Dobbie 1942: 215.

protects himself and the charm he sings'.⁹⁵⁷

- 1975 Sandmann '[E]ine grüne, vielleicht noch teilweise belaubte Gerte, die eigens zu deisem Zweck frisch geschnitten wurde'.⁹⁵⁸
- 1978 Stuart 'In the Old English *Journey Charm*, the image of a 'protective circle' has been fused with a stick or staff: 'Ich umgebe mich in (?) diesem Stab'.⁹⁵⁹
- 1981 Stuart 1: 'From the context constructed by the repetition of *on* [...] one may argue that its use [...] is not primarily instrumental but locative. That is, the suppliant, by bearing the *gyrd* as an amulet, figuratively encloses himself in a sphere of protection'.⁹⁶⁰
- 2: 'A palm twig'.⁹⁶¹
- 1983 Amies The poem's *gyrd* is conceptually related to the 'gepalmtwigoda' Pater Noster from *Solomon and Saturn I*, mentioned in the same manuscript. Both are Christian symbols of victory.⁹⁶²

⁹⁵⁷ Storms 1948: 221.

⁹⁵⁸ Sandmann 1975: 24. 'A green, perhaps still partly leafy twig that was freshly cut especially for this purpose'.

⁹⁵⁹ Stuart 1978: 11. 'I surround myself (?) in this staff'.

⁹⁶⁰ Stuart 1981: 264.

⁹⁶¹ Stuart 1981: 272.

⁹⁶² Amies 1983: 454–455.

2008	Rupp	<i>Gyrd</i> is a ‘metaphor for the copyist's writing tool’. ‘Like the speaker of <i>Journey Charm</i> , who is about to set out on a journey, the scribe is also about to “travel” over the parchment with his staff/pen’. ⁹⁶³
2012	Hill	‘[T]he <i>gyrd</i> to which the poet refers in line one is not the Cross, nor is it the axis of a magic circle of protection. The line can be translated more literally than commentators and editors have supposed; when Jesus sent his disciples on a journey to preach the gospel, he commanded them to carry with them not the <i>uirga</i> of power, the <i>uirga</i> with which Moses subdued the Egyptians and parted the Red Sea, but rather the <i>gyrd</i> or <i>uirga</i> of the protection of God’. ⁹⁶⁴
2019	<i>DOE</i>	A term ‘used in medical recipes / charms’. ⁹⁶⁵

The overview presented above shows scholars have supplied a significant number of potential interpretations and translations of the mysterious *gyrd* in the ‘Journey Charm’. As will be argued below, none of the provided translations is entirely suitable: in the poem's context, the word *gyrd* probably does not denote a staff or a stick but a ‘girdle’ or ‘girth’. The following discussion will provide evidence for the proposition that the term

⁹⁶³ Rupp 2008: 257–258.

⁹⁶⁴ Thomas D. Hill 2012: 153.

⁹⁶⁵ See *DOE*, s.v. 1b.iii ‘gyrd Noun, f., cl. 2’.

is analogous to the word *lorica*: the *gyrd* describes a spiritual form of armour and functions as a metaphor for the poem itself.⁹⁶⁶

It is not uncommon for *loricae* to summon magico-religious cinctures as protective armour in their opening phrases. The first three strophes of the 'Klosterneuburger Lorica' (13th cent.) run as follows:

Cris Finnáin dum imdegail
imum imacúairt,
náram-t[h]airthea inn sét⁹⁶⁷
timchellas in túaith.

Ram-thí lám in dúleman
[d'imdegail] mu brond.
Lúrech Dé dum imdegail
ótá m'ind com bond.

Cris Finneain mu chris
ar galar, ar ches,
ar upt[h]aib ban mb[á]eth
a[r] fráech adamles.⁹⁶⁸

Finnáns girdle as my protection
around me,
so the road may not catch up with me,
which surrounds the people.

⁹⁶⁶ For the ambiguity of the word *lorica*, see Stifter 2007: 508.

⁹⁶⁷ The expression 'inn sét' is perhaps corrupt. Compare the opening phrase of 'Cétnad nAise': 'Núall Fir Fíó for sét, sénsum fom chúairt i mmag áesa' (The cry of the Fer Fíó on the road, may it bless me on my roundtrip through the plane of life). See Stifter 2007: 516.

⁹⁶⁸ Stifter 2007: 514.

The hand of the creator may descend on me
for the protection of my body.
The armour of God as my protection,
from my tip to my toe.

My girdle is the girdle of Finnian
against disease, against frailty,
against the magic of corrupt women,
against the fury of great disaster.⁹⁶⁹

These stanzas bear comparison with the opening section of the ‘Journey Charm’. The two texts use a similar structure: in their opening lines, a speaker summons a powerful cincture that can protect from various evils. These harmful influences are then listed using repetitive prepositional clauses. In the ‘Klosterneuburger Lorica’, the ‘Girdle of Finian’ protects ‘Against disease, against frailty, | Against the magic of corrupt women, | Against the fury of great disaster’. The Old English ‘Journey Charm’ conjures up a *gyrd* to protect ‘against the sore stitch, against the sore bite, | against the fierce horror, | against the mighty dread that is hateful to everybody’.⁹⁷⁰

Furthermore, both poems refer to divine protection through the imagery of a protective hand gesture: the English speaker requests ‘a hand over my head’; the Irish speaker hopes that ‘The hand of the creator may descend on me | For the protection of my body’. The thematic resemblance is not coincidental. A lorica that some manuscripts ascribe to Columcille asks: ‘Romsnāidhi mo Rí romain in gach ré | robeo ar gach ngādh ar sgāth dernonn Dē’ (May my King protect me: may He guard me at all times; | may I be against every need under the shadow of God’s palm).⁹⁷¹ The motif of calling for a safeguarding *cris* also appears frequently in

⁹⁶⁹ Translation based on Stifter 2007: 515.

⁹⁷⁰ On this theme, also see Gougaud 1911-1912: 101–108; Borsje 2013: 200-202.

⁹⁷¹ No. 18 in O’Kelleher 1910: 238–239.

nineteenth-century collections of Irish and Gaelic prayers. In *The Religious Songs of Connacht* (1906), some compositions contain phrases such as ‘Nár Lardead leis an olc a’r nár Lardid an to-olc liom, Crios Brigde faoi mo lár’ (That I may not lie with the Evil, and the the Evil may not lie with me, the girdle of Brigit around my middle).⁹⁷²

Another argument in favour of the view that *gyrd* means ‘buckle’, ‘girdle’, or even ‘loincloth’ requires acknowledging that in early medieval England and Ireland the incantatory motif of wearing protective clothing or summoning a protective sphere — which predates medieval literature⁹⁷³ — was often articulated using relevant imagery from the Bible.⁹⁷⁴ Ephesians 6:11–18 tells Christians to behave as follows:

Induite vos armaturam Dei, ut possitis stare adversus insidias diaboli: quoniam non est nobis colluctatio adversus carnem et sanguinem, sed adversus principes, et potestates, adversus mundi rectores tenebrarum harum, contra spiritualia nequitiæ, in caelestibus. Propterea accipite armaturam Dei, ut possitis resistere in die malo, et in omnibus perfecti stare. State ergo succincti lumbos vestros in veritate, et induti lorica[m] justitiæ, et calceati pedes in praeparatione Evangelii pacis, in omnibus sumentes scutum fidei, in quo possitis omnia tela nequissimi ignea extinguere: et galeam salutis assumite, et gladium spiritus (quod est verbum Dei), per omnem orationem et obsecrationem orantes omni tempore in spiritu: et in ipso vigilantes in omni instantia et obsecratione pro omnibus sanctis.⁹⁷⁵

⁹⁷² Douglas 1906: 26–31, 396–397. It should be noted that the Irish and English parallelism in this edition is suspicious. The work was written out of nostalgia. The cited text appears on pp. 28–29. Examples of texts mentioning girdles appear on pp. 26–31.

⁹⁷³ Ernst 2011a: 303. See further Schulz 1989; Stuart 1978; Bächtold-Stäubli, Hoffmann-Krayer, and Lüdtké 1932–33: 468–472.

⁹⁷⁴ For more elaborate quotations from the Bible and their relation to lorica and protective girdle imagery, see Reid 2002; Stifter 2007; Schopphoff 2009: 90–104.

⁹⁷⁵ Also see Isaiah 59: 17; 1 Thessalonians 5: 8.

Put you on the armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the deceits of the devil. For our wrestling is not against flesh and blood; but against principalities and power, against the rulers of the world of this darkness, against the spirits of wickedness in the high places. Therefore take unto you the armour of God, that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and to stand in all things perfect. Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of justice, And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace: In all things taking the shield of faith, wherewith you may be able to extinguish all the fiery darts of the most wicked one. And take unto you the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit (which is the word of God). By all prayer and supplication praying at all times in the spirit; and in the same watching with all instance and supplication for all the saints

In response to this passage, the ‘Lorica of Laidcenn’ asks the Christian lord to act as a *forti lurica*, (powerful breastplate), a *galea salutis*, (helmet of safety), and a *pelta* (shield).⁹⁷⁶ This is to make sure ‘me [...] *salus sepiat*’ (well-being encircles me).⁹⁷⁷ German *Reisesegen* summon similar armour: the ‘Engelberger Segen’, for example, prays that ‘Herre scē Michahêl hiute wistu N sîn schilt und sîn sper. Mîn frouwa scā Maria sî sîn halsperge’ (Lord Saint Michael, may you be the shield and the spear of [here a name needs to be provided] today. My lady Saint Mary, may you be his breastplate).⁹⁷⁸

The ‘Journey Charm’ uses the same motif as the ‘Lorica of Laidcenn’ and the ‘Engelberger Segen’, incorporating the word *gyrd* into it. A short excerpt from one of Ælfric’s sermons for Midlent Sunday, which

⁹⁷⁶ Lines 32, 40, 55 in Herren 1987: 80–82.

⁹⁷⁷ Line 25 in Herren 1987: 78.

⁹⁷⁸ Quoted in Stuart 1978: 5. The same study presents several other examples. Note the following in relation to the ‘Journey Charm’: ‘Es fällt ferner auf, daß, während die Bitte und die Rüstungsmetapher weitgehend Übereinstimmung zeigen, der angerufene Helfer wechseln kann’.

also discusses the spiritual armour mentioned in Ephesians, helps to clarify the background of some of the Old English terminology found in the 'Journey Charm' (key words in bold):

Cristene men sceolon gastlice feohtan ongear leahtrum. swa swa Paulus ðeoda lareow, us tæhte ðisum wordum; Ymbscrydað eow mid Godes wæpnunge. þæt ge magon standan ongear deofles syrwingum. for ðan ðe us nis nán gecamp ongear flæsc and blód. ac togearnes deofellicum ealdrum. and gastlicum yfelnyssum; Standað eornostlice mid **begyrdum** lendum on soðfæstnysse. and ymbcrydde mid rihtwisnysse **byrnan**. and nymað þæs geleafan **scyld**. and ðæs hihtes **helm**. and þæs halgan gastes **swurd**. **þæt is Godes word**; Mid þisum gastlicum wæpnum we sceolon ongear ðam awyrgedum gastum ðurh godes mihte stranglice feohtan. gif we willað **sigefæste** to ðam behátenan earde heofenan rices becuman.⁹⁷⁹

Christian individuals shall fight in spirit against sin, just as Paul, the teacher of the gentiles, taught us with these words, 'Arm yourselves with God's armour, that you may stand against the Devil's schemes. Because, for us, it is not a battle against flesh and blood, but against devilish princes and spiritual vices. Stand earnestly with loins **girded** in truthfulness and dressed in a **breastplate** of righteousness, and we take the **shield** of faith and the **helmet** of hope, and **the Holy Ghost's sword, which is the word of God**'. With these spiritual armaments, we will, through God's might, go on to fight arduously against the evil spirits; If we will come **sure of victory** to the promised country of the heavenly kingdom.

⁹⁷⁹ Godden 1979: 123.

With the vocabulary and themes of this passage in mind, we can return to the Old English ‘Journey Charm’. The following quotation (which skips lines for enhanced clarity) highlights the linguistic resemblances between the English poem and the Biblical imagery of the Old English sermon:

Ic me on þisse **gyrde** beluce and on godes helde bebeode

[...]

Sygegealdor ic begale, **sigegyrd** ic me wege,

wordsigne and **worcsigne**. Se me dege;

[...]

Biddu ealle bliðu mode

þæt me beo Matheus **helm**, Marcus **byrne**,

leoht, lifes rof, Lucos min **swurd**,

scearp and scirecg, **scyld** lohannes,

wuldre gewlitegod.⁹⁸⁰

I enclose myself within this **girth** / **protective prayer** and offer myself up to God’s guardianship

[...]

A **victory song** I chant; a **victory-girth** / **victory-prayer** I carry about me

[...]

I pray to all with glad mind

that Matthew may be a **helmet** to me, Mark a **breastplate**,

light, shelter of life, Luke my **sword**,

sharp and bright-edged, John a **shield**,

adorned in splendour.

The ‘Journey Charm’ uses similar words as the homily: both mention a *helm*, a *byrne*, a *swurd*, and a *scyld*. The latter text also helps explain how

⁹⁸⁰ Lines 1, 6–7, 26–30a.

a 'sigegealdor' can be like a 'sigegyrd' and how 'wordsigē' can equal 'worcsigē'.⁹⁸¹ The sermonist relates that spiritual armaments are metaphors for 'godes word'. They allow individuals to prevail against sin and to advance 'sigefæste to ðam behatenan earde heofenan rices'.

The above fits with how the speaker in the 'Journey Charm' juxtaposes words and actions: he or she sings a 'victorious chant' (a form of *wordsigē*) and wears a 'victorious girth' (a form of *worcsigē*), 'þæt ic on þæs ælmihtgian frið wunian mote' (so that I may reside in the almighty's peace). The homily mentions one item of protective clothing that scholars have not yet recognised in the 'Journey Charm': a girdling loincloth ('Standað eornostlice mid begyrdum lendenum'). Given the clear thematic and linguistic relationships between both texts, it is probable that the former's mysterious *gyrd* means to recall the same apotropaic image.

Reinforcing the argument above requires resolving several lexicographical discrepancies. The first and foremost is that at the time of writing the *DOE* does not endorse translating *gyrd* as 'girth'.⁹⁸² It was explained earlier that the term's conventional meaning is 'stick' or 'staff'. It is impossible that the scribe of the charm has miscopied the more common Old English word *gyrde*. The latter is a masculine noun in Old English and requires the determiner *þissum* in a dative context. The charm's first line understands *gyrd* as a feminine noun and says 'þisse gyrdē'.⁹⁸³ Another clear indication that the term's orthography is not accidental is that the same word recurs in the compound *sigegyrd*.

Gyrd and *sigegyrd* are not corrupted forms. Instead, they are attestations of English's native alternative to the Old Norse loanword 'girth'. Otherwise, this term only occurs in technical compounds for specific girth-apparel. One glossary explains *subligar* — a Roman loincloth — as *þearmgýrd* (lit.: 'entrail-girth'). Another glosses *antela* — a type of band

⁹⁸¹ Conversely, the coastguard in *Beowulf* maintains that 'se þe wel þenceð' should know better than conflate the two: 'æghwæþres sceal scearp scyldwiga gescad witan | worda ond worca'. Lines 287b–289 in Klaeber, et al. 2008. Also see Bammesberger 2005.

⁹⁸² See *DOE*, s.v. 'gyrd, noun, f., cl. 2'.

⁹⁸³ Lines 6–7.

that crosses in between a horse's front legs — as *forðgyrde* (lit.: 'fore-girth').⁹⁸⁴ Similar expressions are also attested in Middle Dutch and Old High German wordlists but in these the compounds' second elements alternate between cognates of *gyrd* and *gyrdel*. A Middle Dutch manuscript translates 'cingula' as 'daremgarde'; an Old High German glossary prefers 'darmgurtilla'.⁹⁸⁵

Medieval attestations in West Germanic languages of *gyrd* as a simplex are rare but not unprecedented. In a glossary from ninth-century Bavaria, the term *cinge* is glossed as *curti* and a handful of later German texts also use the word in isolation (both in masculine and feminine forms).⁹⁸⁶ Martin Luther (1483–1546) translated a section from Isaiah (11:5) that thematically echoes the passage from Ephesians discussed earlier as follows: 'Gerechtigkeit wird die gurt seiner Lenden sein | vnd der Glaube die gurt seiner Nieren' (justice shall be the girdle of his loins, and faith the girdle of his kidneys).⁹⁸⁷ The fifteenth-century Middle-English version of *Partonope of Blois* (a translation of an Old French Romance written c. 1200) features a king who 'vndyde þe gyrd of his shelde'.⁹⁸⁸

Parallels from different languages and periods for the term *sigegyrd* provide additional evidence that *gyrd* in the 'Journey Charm' denotes a cincture and further suggest that in this specific context the word can be taken as a metaphor for the poem itself. For instance, victorious girdling rings also appear in a fourteenth-century German benediction already quoted in this chapter's discussion of *Reisesegen*. Here, the speaker declares 'Ich wil mich begvrten [...] mit den sige rinen' (I wish to gird myself with the victory rings).⁹⁸⁹ These 'sige rinen' are defined earlier as 'gocz

⁹⁸⁴ Bosworth and Toller, s.v. 'pearm-gyrd' and 'forþ-gyrd/fór-gyrd, es; m'.

⁹⁸⁵ *Middelnederlandsch Woordenboek Online* 2018, s.v. 'darmgerde'. Also see 'darmgurtilla' and 'darmgarta' in Köbler 1993; Splett 1993.

⁹⁸⁶ Steinmeyer and Sievers 1895: 10.

⁹⁸⁷ Luther, Volz, and Blanke 1972.

⁹⁸⁸ See line 4280 of the Rawl. MS. in Böttker 1912: 154.

⁹⁸⁹ Wackernagel 1843: 42.

worten'.⁹⁹⁰ A related German blessing does not describe victorious but pacifying clothing: it refers to 'daz heilige himelchint' (the holy heaven's child [i.e. Jesus Christ]) as 'min frideschilt' (my peace-shield) and 'sant Marien lichemedede' (the body-shirt of Saint Mary) as 'min fridhemede' (my peace-shirt).⁹⁹¹ Finally, Elin from Lönneåla (southern Sweden) recited a related formula to the court of Ronnerby during her witchcraft trial in 1679: 'Jagh gyrder migh medh fredssens giordh | Gudh freedde migh både himmell och jordh' (I gird myself with the girdle of peace. God protect me [in] both heaven and earth).⁹⁹² Despite its placating message, this incantation was of no use to its user: Elin was condemned and banished

⁹⁹⁰ It appears some German users later reinterpreted the phrase 'sige ringen' as 'sieben ringen'. After blessings which contained this corruption were translated into English by Pennsylvania Dutch settlers, the 'seven rings' trope became popular in English morning prayers that should be 'spoken before starting on a Journey':

I [...] will go on a journey to-day;
I will walk upon God's way,
and walk where God himself did walk,
and our dear Lord Jesus Christ,
and our dearest Virgin with her dear little babe,
with her seven rings and her true things.

For the full text, see Hohman 1850: 34. For a German text which still juxtaposes 'sigeringen' with 'allen guten dingen', see no. xx in Grimm 1878: 499.

⁹⁹¹ No. x in Grimm 1878: 495. The text is often called the 'Münchner Ausfahrtsegen'. It dates to the thirteenth century.

⁹⁹² Elin also knew a protective incantation that summoned a victorious caul instead of a peace-bringing girdle. It begins as follows:

I dagh skoer jagh min högre footh
medh een segerhufwe,
medh een ståhfooth.

Today, I line my right foot
With a caul (lit.: a 'victory-veil')
With a steel foot.

Just like the American 'morning prayer' in footnote 990, this text re-interprets the concept of summoning or wearing a 'victorious' item and adapts it to a new context. Here, the poem is not concerned with the victorious journey of Christians into heaven as related in Ephesians. Rather, it makes use of a serendipitous etymological circumstance (*seger* means 'victory' but *segerhufwa* is an unconventional term for 'caul') and applies this to an extensive folk tradition around cauls as travel charms. These were specifically believed to be helpful against drowning at sea. For the incantation, see no. 334a in Linderholm 1917-1940: 169. On magical cauls, see Forbes 1953: 502–503; Newman and Newman 1939: 184; Hole 1967: 186.

from the Kingdom of Sweden later that same year.⁹⁹³

Journey Charms, Loricæ, and the Pragmatics of the ‘Journey of Life’

The previous sections contextualise the genre of the Old English ‘Journey Charm’, identifying some of its scriptural sources. It is now beneficial to ask a modified version of this chapter’s opening question: is the ‘Journey Charm’ a protective prayer that envisions life itself as an open road, or is it a composition that draws on religious imagery to increase the comforts of travel? The fact that the ‘Journey Charm’ uses imagery from Ephesians — a text that conflates physical exertion and spoken words and that envisions the life course of Christians as a victorious journey with a heavenly destination — suggests the latter proposition is more accurate.⁹⁹⁴ Jennifer Neville, however, made a sharp observation when she conceded that ‘although it is possible to read the poem entirely in terms of protection from the temptations of the devil, [...] [i]ts language is physical; its concern is with the speaker’s life [...] [T]he literal context of the poem is of someone stepping out into the natural world and journeying through it’.⁹⁹⁵

Even if it was not intended for this purpose, Neville’s observation accurately describes the ambivalent natural imagery in most loricæ. In 1912, Louis Gougaud envisioned the ‘[é]numération des forces et des beautés de la nature’ as one of eight foundational motifs of the genre.⁹⁹⁶ Nevertheless, most recent commentators argue the travel imagery these texts employ is meant metaphorically and rooted in Christian literature.

⁹⁹³ Af Klintberg 2016: 93.

⁹⁹⁴ For the metaphorical use of journeying vocabulary in Old English poetry, see Stuart 1981: 261; McBrine 2014.

⁹⁹⁵ Neville 1999: 100.

⁹⁹⁶ Gougaud 1911-1912: 34.

‘[T]he *Lorica of Gildas* does not refer to a literal journey’, Marion Amies wrote in 1983. Instead, it ‘gives protection for the journey of this life and for the flight of the soul to heaven’.⁹⁹⁷

Assertions such as these are not without foundation. The ‘Cétnad nAíse’, a possibly eighth-century Irish poem that hopes to grant its speaker ‘long life’ opens with the phrase: ‘Núall Fir Fío for sét, sénsuim fom chúairt i mmag áesa’ (may ‘The Cry of Fer Fío’⁹⁹⁸ protect me upon the road, as I make my roundtrip through the plain of life). We may recollect here the Old English speaker’s request that he or she may have a ‘siðfæt godne’, as well as be ‘belocun wið þam laþan [...] þa hwile þe ic on þis life wunian mote’. Likewise, one medieval manuscript’s preface to the ‘Lorica of Laidcenn’ explains that ‘Hanc luricam Lodgen in anno periculoso constituit, et alii dicunt quod magna sit virtus eius, si ter in die cantatur’ (Laidcenn made this lorica in a dangerous year, and some say that its power is greatest if it is sung three times per day).⁹⁹⁹

If the inclusive aims of apotropaic magic blur the distinctions between German *Morgensegen*, *Waffensegen*, *Schutzsegen*, *Ausfahrtsegen*, they also blur the distinctions between journey charms and daily prayers. The ‘Cétnad nAíse’, which helps to guide its speaker through the plain of existence, mentions as one of its numerous requests: ‘ním-thi bás for fecht’ (may death not come to me on a journey).¹⁰⁰⁰ Furthermore, several medieval sources recount instances of loricae being used either at the start or during actual expeditions: The hagiography of Mo Ling (c. 12th cent.) includes an episode in which its saintly protagonist ‘ipse incepit sanctum carmen scotica lingua’ (himself began a sacred song in the Celtic language) after he told his companions ‘ut uelocius viam irent’ (that they should speedily be on their way).¹⁰⁰¹ The manuscript which contains the

⁹⁹⁷ Amies 1983: 452.

⁹⁹⁸ Presumably an eight-century abbot from Conry, County Meath. See Tonsing 2012: 20–21.

⁹⁹⁹ Herren 1987: 43.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Carey 1998: 137.

¹⁰⁰¹ Plummer 1910: 199.

‘Lorica of St Brendan’ prefaces it with the statement that ‘Quicumque istam cantaverit sive dixerit pro se vel pro amico suo’ will be saved from the punishment of Hell. The same codex also explains St Brendan recited the text on his famous expedition to the ‘Island of the Blessed’: ‘Beatus Brendanus, monachus, quaerens insulem repromissionis per septem annos continuos orationem istam [...] fecit quando transfretavit septem maria’ (St Brendan, monk, seeking the promised island for seven continuous years, said this prayer when he traversed the seven seas).¹⁰⁰²

The above leads to the following proposition. If Sandmann and Storms inaccurately assumed that the imagery of the ‘Journey Charm’ describes actual travel, other scholars might have been injudicious in rejecting the text’s practical applications. The Old English speaker probably describes a spiritual quest, an earnest Christian endeavour to reside in the protection of God. The poem’s continuous references to victory, its conflation of words and deeds, and its summoning of spiritual armour concern the struggle of its speaker to reach the kingdom of heaven. Nevertheless, the language of the composition features concrete descriptions of the natural world and *loricae* appear to have been used to offer a form of spiritual protection during actual wayfaring. Perhaps a compromise in this instance is most suitable: even if the Old English ‘Journey Charm’ is not *about* a physical journey, its apotropaic statements would make it ideal *for* such a journey.

Conclusion

This chapter begins with retracing the Old English ‘Journey Charm’s’ interpretative history and proposes the text has a misleading modern title. The notion that it is a charm to secure protection on voyages appears to derive from a concealed and inaccurate English translation of a German

¹⁰⁰² Moran 1872: 27.

genre label. In the nineteenth century, Wülcker described the text using the label *Reisesegen*. In medieval scholarship, this term primarily designates a group of benedictions that are also called *Tobiassegen*. However, Grendon interpreted *Reisesegen* as ‘Journey Spell’, inspiring the widespread assumption that the charm is a late attestation of an ancient Germanic genre for safe wayfaring.

The argument presented above contends that lorica phraseology informs both the Old English ‘Journey Charm’ and the Middle High German *Reisesegen* with which it has been compared. Loricae are an early medieval genre of protective prayers that are closely associated with Irish monasticism. Several forms of evidence support that such texts informed the Old English poem. Significantly, the only surviving copy of the Metrical Charm seems to have been produced by a scribe who was interested in collecting insular apotropaic texts. Furthermore, German *Reisesegen* include motifs that appear to have been translated from Irish. Most importantly, the ‘Journey Charm’ incorporates expressions and themes that also appear in, for example, the ‘Lorica of St Brendan’, the ‘Lorica of Laidcenn’, and the ‘Klosterneuburger Lorica’.

The notion that the ‘Journey Charm’ resembles insular apotropaic prayers sheds new light on a notorious crux in the text’s first line. The text begins with a speaker stating he wishes to ‘lock’ himself inside a *gyrd*. Most previous commentators have interpreted this word as a reference to some type of (amuletic) stick, cross, or staff. Loricae are spoken ‘breastplates’ and often summon verbal counterparts to physical armour (frequently armour based on scripture). Significantly, some also invoke girdles in their opening lines for the performer to ‘wear’ as a form of protection. The *gyrd* in the ‘Journey Charm’ probably articulates an Old English conflation of both themes. Glosses and analogues show that *gyrd* was a rare west Germanic cognate to the Old Norse loanword ‘girth’. In the ‘Journey Charm’, the word appears to complete a description of the ‘armaturam Dei’ from Ephesians 6:11–18.

8. Old English Charms Against Cattle Theft

Introduction

This chapter discusses eight early English charms against cattle theft.¹⁰⁰³ These texts come in three varieties:¹⁰⁰⁴

1. One poem called 'For Theft of Cattle'. This is a marginal inscription in CCC 41 (p. 206) and comprises twenty-one lines.¹⁰⁰⁵ The text begins with a biblical simile: 'Ne forstolen ne forholen nanuht, þæs ðe ic age, þe ma ðe mihte Herod urne drihten' (May nothing I possess be stolen or hidden any more than Herod could (steal or hide) our Lord).¹⁰⁰⁶ Next, the speaker commemorates Christ and St Helena (who re-discovered Christ's cross in the fourth century) and explains the relevance of these recollections to the present moment:

Ic gepohte sancte ead Elenan¹⁰⁰⁷
and ic gepohte Crist on rode ahangen;
swa ic þence þis feoh to findanne, næs to oðfeorrganne,
and to witanne, næs to oðwyrceanne,

¹⁰⁰³ For magical diagrams against (cattle) theft, see nos. 85 and 86 in Storms 1948: 309–311. For a herbal amulet against bandits, see entry lxxiv^a in Cockayne 1864: 176–177.

¹⁰⁰⁴ See 'Figure 9'.

¹⁰⁰⁵ Edited in Dobbie 1942: 125–126. This chapter presents the text using different line divisions. Line references are to Dobbie's edition.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Line 1.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Dobbie reads 'Eadelenan'.

and to lufianne, næs to oðlædanne.¹⁰⁰⁸

I reflected on blessed St Helena¹⁰⁰⁹

and I reflected on Christ, hanging on the cross.

So I imagine to find these cattle, by no means to drive [them] away;

and to know [them], by no means to have [them] harmed;

and to care for [them], by no means to lead [them] away.

The charm then proceeds to petition an enigmatic character named 'Garmund'.¹⁰¹⁰ This figure is ordered to 'find þæt feoh and fere þæt feoh | and hafa þæt feoh and heald þæt feoh | and fere ham þæt feoh' (find the cattle, and drive the cattle, and have the cattle, and hold the cattle, and drive the cattle home).¹⁰¹¹

The composition's closing lines pre-emptively curse anyone who would consider stealing the charmer's assets: 'Eall he weornige, swa syre wudu weornie, | swa breðel seo swa þystel' (may he wither completely, as dry wood withers, may he be as brittle as a thistle).¹⁰¹²

2. Two nearly identical Metrical Charms called 'For Loss of Cattle I' and 'II'.¹⁰¹³ The first appears in *Lacnunga* (fols. 180^v–181^r), the second in CCC 41 (p. 206). Both are formed of a prose

¹⁰⁰⁸ Lines 1–3.

¹⁰⁰⁹ The syntax is unconventional. The charm uses the adjective *ead* as an infix between 'sancte' and 'Elenan'. The translation re-orders the words so that they make sense in Modern English. Also see the references to 'sente Alleenen' in footnote 1067, 'beata Helena' in footnote 1073, 'Sankt Hellmann' in footnote 1081.

¹⁰¹⁰ See this chapter's section on the 'Garmund Conundrum'.

¹⁰¹¹ Lines 9–11.

¹⁰¹² Lines 16–17.

¹⁰¹³ Edited in Dobbie 1942: 123, 126. 'For Loss of Cattle I' and 'II' differ in that they occasionally use synonyms, or alternative spellings and word-orders. For example, the former calls Bethlehem the town 'ðe crist on geboren wes' (in which Christ was born); the latter designates it as the place 'þe crist on acænned wæs' (in which Christ was delivered). For the sake of consistency, this chapter uses Dobbie's edition for 'For Loss of Cattle I' to describe both texts.

introduction and several poetic formulas. Like ‘For Theft of Cattle’, they begin with a biblical simile that recollects the events surrounding Christ’s birth:

þonne þe mon ærest secge þæt þin ceap sy losod, þonne
cweð þu ærest, ær þu elles hwæt cweþe:

Bæðleem hatte seo buruh þe Crist on acænned wæs,
seo is gemærsod geond ealne middangeard;
swa þyos dæd for monnum mære gewurpe
þurh þa haligan Cristes rode! Amen.¹⁰¹⁴

As soon as someone tells you your property is lost, then you say before you say anything else:

Bethlehem is the name of the city in which Christ was born.

It is famous throughout the entire world.

May this incident become famous to people in the same way, through the holy cross of Christ. Amen.

The charms then further emphasise the power of Christ’s cross — which was also ‘hidden and found’ — in retrieving lost property. The speaker in ‘For Theft of Cattle’ channelled the positive influence of this object by recollecting St Helena and Christ’s passion; ‘For Loss of Cattle I’ and ‘II’ recommend a performative ceremony:

Gebide þe þonne þriwa east and cweþ þonne þriwa: Crux
Christi ab oriente reducað. Gebide þe þonne þriwa west and
cweð þonne þriwa: Crux Christi ab occidente reducat. Gebide

¹⁰¹⁴ Lines 1–6.

þe þonne þriwa suð and cweþ þriwa: Crux Christi ab austro
reducat. Gebide þonne þriwa norð and cweð þriwa: Crux
Christi ab aquilone reducað, crux Christi abscondita est et
inuenta est.¹⁰¹⁵

First pray three times to the east and say three times: ‘may
the Cross of Christ bring it back from the east’. Then pray
three times to the west and say three times: ‘may the Cross
of Christ bring it back from the west’. Then pray three times to
the south and say three times: ‘may the Cross of Christ bring
it back from the south. Then pray three times to the north and
say three times: ‘may the Cross of Christ bring it back from
the north’. The Cross of Christ was hidden and found.

The last sections of ‘For Loss of Cattle I’ and ‘II’ again reprise
themes and phrases from ‘For Theft of Cattle’. The latter begins with
a biblical simile that highlights the unlikelihood anyone will be able
to hide the stolen property. The former end with such a statement:

ludeas Crist ahengon, dydon dæda þa wyrrestan, hælon þæt
hy forhelan ne mihtan. Swa þeos dæd nænige þinga forholen
ne wurþe þurh þa haligan Cristes rode. Amen.¹⁰¹⁶

The Jews hanged Christ; they did the worst of deeds; they hid
what they were not able to conceal. So may this deed not be
concealed in any way through Christ’s holy cross. Amen.

3. Five ‘macaronic’ incantations.¹⁰¹⁷ These provide performative

¹⁰¹⁵ Lines 7–15.

¹⁰¹⁶ Lines 16–19.

¹⁰¹⁷ See ‘Figure 9’. For editions of these texts, see Storms 1948; Grant 1979: 5–6; Olsan 1999: 413–417; Dendle 2006: 525–529.

instructions in English and incantatory passages in Latin and English. Unlike 'For Theft of Cattle' and 'For Loss of Cattle I' and 'II', the macaronic charms show a specific concern for enchanting objects: sprinkling hoof prints with candlewax will bring to light missing cows, goats, pigs, and sheep; singing on left-behind halters and empty stable walls will help to recover horses. The verbal sections of the macaronic charms are, once again, formulaic. Their conclusions echo the closing statements from 'For Loss of Cattle I' and 'II':

Judeas xri Crist ahengon, ðæt him com to wite swa strangum.
Gedydon heom dæda þa wyrstan, hi þaet drofe forguldon.
Hælon hit him to hearme miclum, and heo hit na forhelan ne
mihton.¹⁰¹⁸

The Jews hanged Christ so that a great punishment came to them.

They did to him the worst of deeds; they recompensed for that grievously. They hid it, to their own great harm, [since] they were not able to conceal it.

Previous taxonomists of these texts — Grendon, Storms, Grant, Sandmann, Hollis, and Dendle (see 'Figure 9') — have agreed the cattle theft charms from early medieval England profit from being discussed collectively: 'These [...] charms have so much in common that it is convenient, and to a certain extent obligatory, to analyse them together'.¹⁰¹⁹ Manuscript context provides another compelling argument: 'For Theft of Cattle' survives on page 206 of CCC 41, following 'For Loss of Cattle II' and preceding a macaronic incantation. The latter spans pages

¹⁰¹⁸ See no. 11b in Storms 1948: 204.

¹⁰¹⁹ Storms 1948: 210. Also see Grendon 1909; Hollis 1997; Grant 1979; Dendle 2006; Sandmann 1975.

206–208. Previous scholars have argued this is because it belongs to a distinctive transmission group.¹⁰²⁰ It is more likely the macaronic charm in CCCC 41 incorporates additional material because of a copying mistake (see ‘Figure 10’).¹⁰²¹

The argument presented below consists of two sections. The first examines specific passages and cruces in discrete branches of theft charms and specifically highlights connections to motifs from folklore, hagiography, and scripture. The second section analyses the relationship between early English theft charms and contemporary legal writings. Citing a broad range of English, Frisian, and Middle High German legal documents, the chapter problematises previous lines of argumentation that either characterise the Old English theft charms as imprinted by pre-Christian beliefs or that interpret them as ‘official’ law texts. Instead, the discussion argues that early English theft charms resemble law texts because they purposefully formulate their objectives (preventing theft, retrieving stolen goods, and punishing thieves) in a legal register.

¹⁰²⁰ Grant 1979: 8.

¹⁰²¹ See Hollis 1997: 146–147.

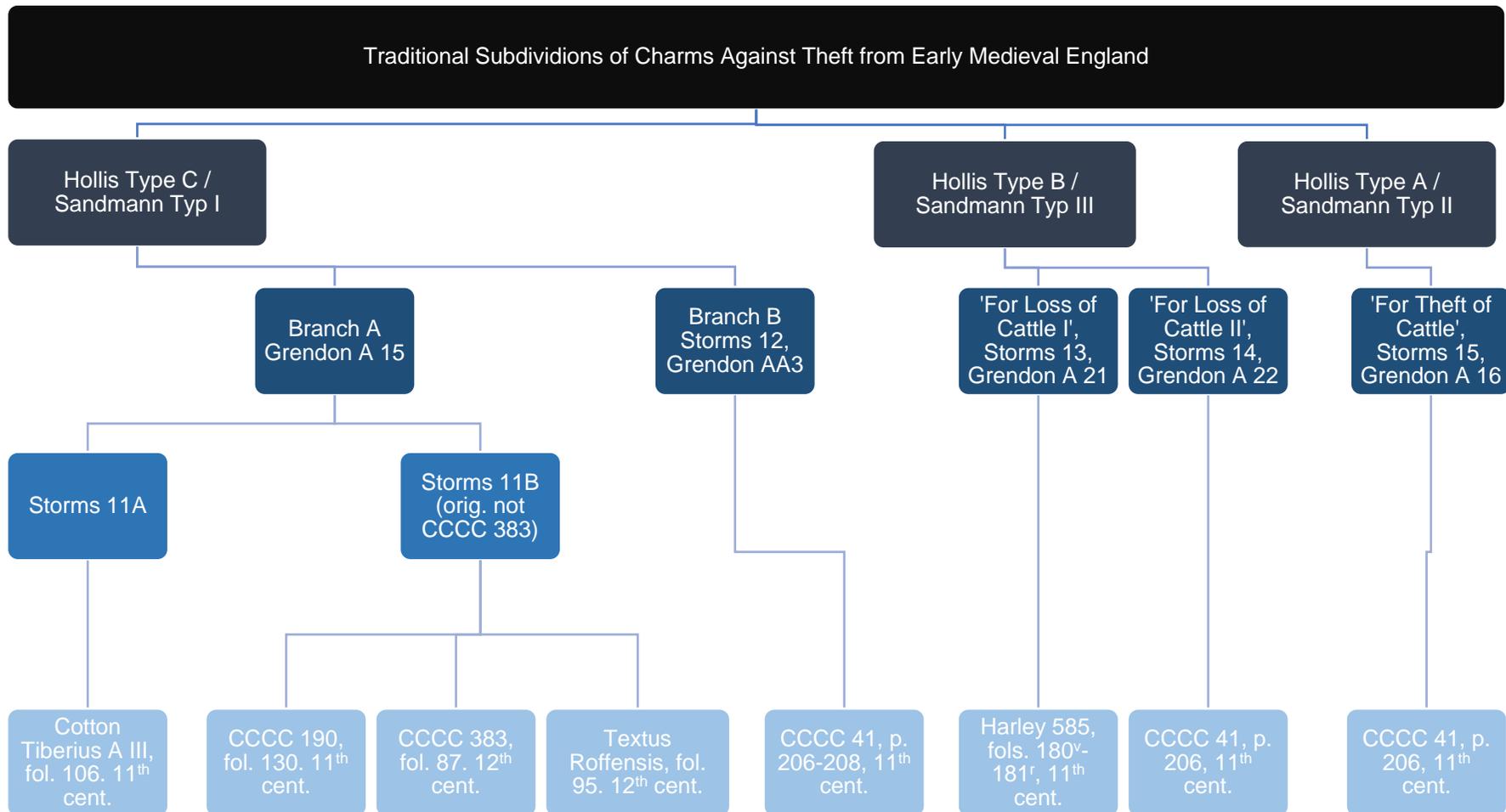


Figure 9 Traditional subdivisions of cattle-theft charms from early medieval England.

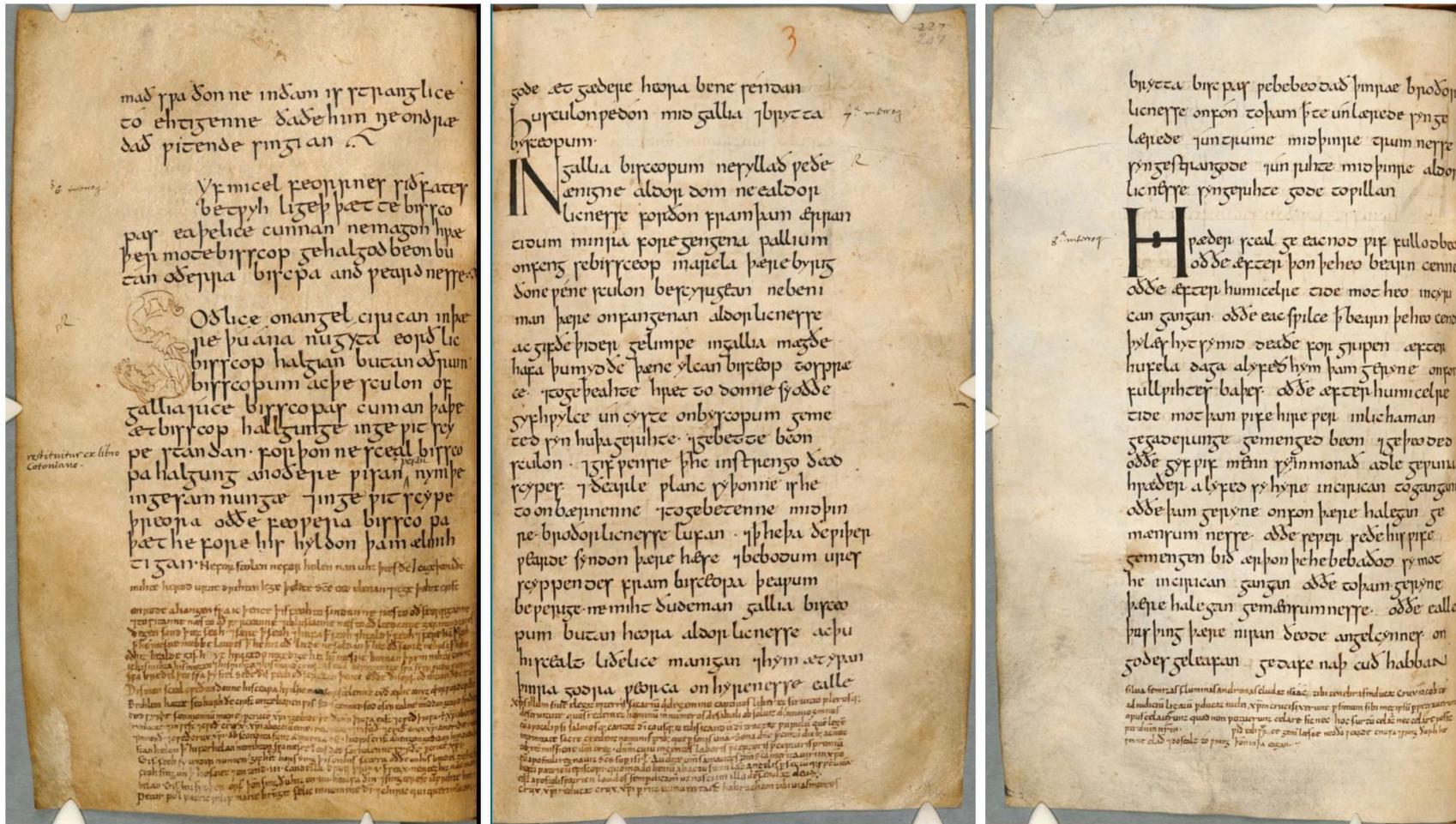


Figure 10 CCCC 41, pages 206–208. The marginal annotations include three Old English theft charms, ‘For Theft of Cattle’, ‘For Loss of Cattle II’, and a macaronic incantation. The last of these is interrupted by an interpolation at the end of page 206. This is an acephalous section of a Hiberno-Latin prayer charm for finding lost objects: ‘7 Petur, Pol, Patric, Pilip, Marie, Brigit, Felic, | In nomine dī, 7 Chiric. | Qui queri inuenit’. Page 207 documents four stanzas and an antiphon of the seventh-century(?) acrostic long poem called ‘Hymnus S. Secundini in Laudem S. Patricii’. The Old English incantation resumes on page 208. Most likely, the scribe initially failed to copy the second part of the English incantation (perhaps because of a faulty exemplar) and only realised his mistake after having already recorded the additional Hiberno-Latin material. See Grant 1979: 5–6; Hollis 1997: 146–147.

Folklore and Religion in Theft Charms from Early Medieval England

'For Theft of Cattle': The Garmund Conundrum

In 1865, a Victorian periodical printed a translation of 'For Theft of Cattle'. The accompanying discussion maintained that '[i]n these days of [...] quackery and humbug', the composition provided an excellent example of the beliefs of our 'our simple, honest forefathers'.¹⁰²² The publication had only one small question about the charm: 'Perhaps some reader can throw light upon the name, "Garmund", mentioned therein, and inform us who he was, and why [he is] mentioned in connection with the lost cattle?'¹⁰²³

Subsequent scholarship has had only limited success responding to this deceptively simple request. Storms asserted in 1948, almost a century later, that about this character, 'nothing is known'.¹⁰²⁴ Most alternative suggestions have appeared in cursory remarks or hesitant footnotes.¹⁰²⁵ In 1909, Felix Grendon proposed Garmund was a 'mythological spirit or personage' from a pre-Christian narrative.¹⁰²⁶ In 1937, Francis Magoun submitted he might have been a local Christian priest.¹⁰²⁷ Before that time,

¹⁰²² 'A Very Old "Docter's Book": "The Læce Boc"' 1865: 38.

¹⁰²³ 'A Very Old "Docter's Book": "The Læce Boc"' 1865: 38.

¹⁰²⁴ Storms 1948: 215.

¹⁰²⁵ Schneider's study from 1961 about the 'heidnisch-religiösen Elemente der ae. Zauberspruchgruppe "wið þeofðe"' presents an exception. It devotes three pages to the identity of Garmund and explicates him as a pagan Germanic God, equivalent to Freyr. See Schneider 1961: 41–42. Most subsequent scholars have taken issue with Schneider's methods and conclusions. As Abernethy wrote in 1983, 'Despite Schneider's excursus into the realms of comparative IE mythology to attempt to justify his position, few will be convinced that his basic premise is valid'. See Abernethy 1983: 163.

¹⁰²⁶ Grendon 1909: 112. For other studies that offer a similar conclusion, see Wyatt 1959: 256; Kellermann 1960; Schneider 1961: 41–42; Harris 1975: 29; Foley 1980: 82–83; Vaughan-Sterling 1983: 190; Braekman 1997: 320; Hollis 1997: 143; Tornaghi 2010: 451. Benati and Abernethy summarise some previous arguments but provide no novel propositions. See Benati 2017: 172; Abernethy 1983: 162–163.

¹⁰²⁷ Magoun 1937b: 26.

Oswald Cockayne had offered an alternative proposition in the ‘Index of Proper Names’ included in his *Leechdoms* (1865). He suggested Garmund was ‘[p]erhaps Germanus, bishop of Auxerre’.¹⁰²⁸

Most recent scholars have overlooked Cockayne’s suggestion. Garmund is still typically described as ‘mythic’ and ‘mysterious’.¹⁰²⁹ In 1983 (more than a century later), Judith Vaughan-Sterling asserted he was ‘possibly unidentifiable’.¹⁰³⁰ The discussion below provides several arguments that reduce the persistent obscurity around this name, bolstering Cockayne’s original proposition.

It is probable Garmund is a Christian figure. The charm’s invocation begins ‘Garmund, godes thegn’.¹⁰³¹ Karl Schneider adduced Greek *τέκνον*, ‘child’, to translate *þegn* as ‘Kind’ (supposedly, Garmund was a youthful god of Indo-European origin); Tornaghi construed Garmund’s title as a military term that constituted a ‘typical element [...] of a warrior culture’.¹⁰³² Nevertheless, Old English literature almost exclusively uses the title ‘Godes ðegn’ to describe pious worshippers. The label often parallels the Latin expression ‘famulus dei’, a common title for holy figures.¹⁰³³ Ælfric of Eynsham (c. 955–c. 1010), for example, described the Seven Sleepers from Ephesus as ‘ða seofan godes ðegenas’.¹⁰³⁴

Despite Germanus’ French origins, he is a suitable patron saint for English victims of theft. Constantius of Lyon’s version of his hagiography (c. 480) was known in early medieval England and informed Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*.¹⁰³⁵ The narrative includes two episodes that authenticate the saint’s proficiency at retrieving stolen items and arresting

¹⁰²⁸ Cockayne 1865: 415. Also see Singer and Grattan 1952: 67; Sims-Williams 1990: 301; Pettit 1996: 822–823.

¹⁰²⁹ Vaughan-Sterling 1983: 190; Rabin 2010: 188; Tornaghi 2010: 454.

¹⁰³⁰ Vaughan-Sterling 1983: 190.

¹⁰³¹ Line 6.

¹⁰³² Schneider 1961: 41; Tornaghi 2010: 454. Note that a figure named ‘Garmund’ (lit. spear-hand) appears in *Beowulf* (l. 1962) and in some Old English royal genealogies as an ancestor of the Mercian royal house. See Leneghan 2009: 549–550.

¹⁰³³ Also see Magoun 1937b: 26.

¹⁰³⁴ Godden 1979: 247.

¹⁰³⁵ This is the main text in the manuscript that preserves ‘For Theft of Cattle’. Also see Bezzone 2013: 193–195.

thieves. The first concerns the recovery of a tax collector's missing purse. Germanus tells the victim to have patience and interrogates a suspect in secret. The wrongdoer initially denies the crime but confesses after the saint exorcises his spirit 'cum uoce maxima'.¹⁰³⁶

The second episode relates an instance of cattle theft. On a journey to Arles, Germanus travels with a group of inattentive monks ('innocentes occupatosque custodes, qui Deo, non animalibus vigilabant'). One day, a thief enters the camp and steals the saint's mule. The monks are embarrassed, yet the holy man shows no signs of concern:

Dumque iter agitur, circumiecti comites intuentur beatum uirum extra morem conceptam laetitiam uultus obumbratione uelantem. Quod cum ab omnibus uideretur, unus ex reliquis, auctoritate concepta, causam laetitiae percunctatur. At ille inquiens: 'Paulolum commoremur quia infelicis illius labor et inridendus est et dolendus quem mox uidebitis aestuantem'. Cumque delapsi animalibus substitissent, paulo post eminus intuentur peditem, post se manu captum animal deducentem. Qui breui adiungitur; dum ille accelerat, hi morantur, statimque uestigiis prouolutus, crimen quod commiserat confitetur et ita totius noctis spatium inretitum esse se retulit, ut longius prodire non posset nec euadendi viam aliam repperisset, nisi ut abductum animal reformaret.¹⁰³⁷

As they were travelling, his surrounding companions notice the blessed man was hiding some amusement in his face, contrary to his usual custom. And when all see this, one among them, mustering up the courage, inquires after the reason for his amusement. So he says: 'let us stop for a short while, because the labour of the unhappy individual who you will soon see in distress, is

¹⁰³⁶ Chapter 2.7 in Borius 1965: 134.

¹⁰³⁷ Chapter 4.20 in Borius 1965: 162.

at once amusing and painful'. Shortly after having halted and dismounted their animals, they notice in the distance a man on foot leading the stolen animal by hand. He hastily comes closer and, as he speeds up, the group delays. He immediately prostrates himself at their feet and confesses the committed crime. He felt entangled, for the entire night, as if imprisoned in a net, in such a way he could not move further; neither to find a way to escape except to give back the stolen animal.¹⁰³⁸

This miraculous episode from Germanus' *vita* draws on a widespread motif related to binding spells. Pliny (23/24–79 CE) already recorded that Vestal Virgins could immobilise runaway slaves with a *praecantatio*.¹⁰³⁹ A nineteenth-century anecdote pokes fun at the same theme and describes a cunning farmer who employs an actor to stand in his orchard. The performer pretends he has been immobilised by a curse and so dissuades the superstitious (and guilty) locals from stealing more apples.¹⁰⁴⁰

Germanus' *vita* describes a thief 'being entangled, for the entire night, as if imprisoned in a net'. Medieval theft charms often express their intentions in precisely this manner. Cambridge, University Library, MS Addit. 5943 contains a formula that includes the following statement:

yf here come eny fon
me to robbe, other me to sclon;
they stond as style as eny ston,
they haue no powere away to gon.¹⁰⁴¹

Some theft charms approximate the phrasing of Germanus' hagiography even more closely. These combine a 'stand still' motif with the invocation of

¹⁰³⁸ Translation based on Bezzone 2013: 212–213.

¹⁰³⁹ 28.13 in Mayhoff 1875-1906.

¹⁰⁴⁰ See Kögler 1898: 145–147.

¹⁰⁴¹ Lines 11–14 of no. 62 in Robbins 1952: 58.

a saint and the declaration that thieves should remain trapped in the same place overnight. An English example that mentions St Bartholomew exclaims:

y^t you theeves be bounde all so sore
as St. Bartholomewe bounde the devell wth y^e heare of his heade so
hore.
Theeves, theeves, theeves, stande you still & here remain
till to morowe y^t I come agayne.¹⁰⁴²

If Constantius' hagiography explains why an Old English charm would summon Germanus to redress cattle theft, it does not explain why 'For Theft of Cattle' writes the saint's name as 'Garmund'. Perhaps it is merely a corrupted or misspelt form of his vernacular appellation: Germanus' Welsh name is *Garmon*, and he was sometimes called *German* in Old Irish.¹⁰⁴³ As will be argued below, it is more likely that *Garmund* is a poetic circumlocution that fits the saint's English and Latin names and emphasises the figure's protective abilities.

Mund is a poetic Old English synonym for 'hand'. As Beowulf relates, 'Ic [...] gefeng | [...] mid mundum mægenbyrðenne' (I took with [my] hands a mighty burden).¹⁰⁴⁴ The Latin term *manus* is a close translation.¹⁰⁴⁵ *Gar-mund* in English thus mirrors *Gar-manus* in Latin. Importantly, *mund* can also signify 'custodian'.¹⁰⁴⁶ A nobleman named Wulfric declared in his testament that he wished his brother Ælfhelm and the archbishop Ælfric to become 'mund and freond' of his monastery.¹⁰⁴⁷ Both meanings of *mund* are relevant in the context of the charm. 'St.

¹⁰⁴² McBryde 1907: 170. McBryde's manuscript is from the seventeenth century; the charm is medieval. See no. 63 in Robbins 1952: 59; Gray 1974: 67; Sheldon 1978: 132.

¹⁰⁴³ For more on Germanus' name in Welsh and Cornish, see Olson and Padel 1986: 55–56. For Germanus in Manx, see endnote 127 in Shaw 1973: 136. For Germanus in Old Irish, see *eDIL*, s.v. 2 'Germán'.

¹⁰⁴⁴ Lines 3090b–3091, edited in Klaeber, et al. 2008.

¹⁰⁴⁵ Thanks to Winfried Rudolf for bringing this to my attention.

¹⁰⁴⁶ For a discussion of *mund* and patronage, see Hough 1999.

¹⁰⁴⁷ Thorpe 1865: 547–548.

Bartholomewe' has 'heare of his heade so hore' to bind thieves 'all so sore'; Germanus possesses a pair of custodial hands.¹⁰⁴⁸

The text's preference for *Gar-* instead of *Ger-* may be related to the regional dialect of the copyist or composer. 'For Theft of Cattle' was recorded in the south-west of England, in a manuscript with demonstrable ties to Insular literary traditions.¹⁰⁴⁹ More specifically, the charm seems to have been written down in a region of Britain where Brythonic languages were spoken (Welsh or, more probably, Cornish). Bishop Leofric bequeathed the manuscript to Exeter Cathedral in 1072; one commentator has suggested that before that time it might have been near Glastonbury.¹⁰⁵⁰

Members of the Brythonic language family often convert the *-er-* element of Latin borrowings into *-ar-*. Thus, Latin *taberna* becomes *tafarn* in Welsh and *tavarn* in Breton.¹⁰⁵¹ Incidentally, Bede exemplified the tendency of early medieval Britons to corrupt expressions with medial *-er-* using a term that closely resembles the name 'Germanus'. The correct collective designation for the invading Angles and Saxons would be *Germani*. Nevertheless, the historiographer explained, 'a uicina gente Brettonum corrupte Garmani nuncupantur' (the neighbouring people of the Britons corruptly call them *Garmani*).¹⁰⁵²

¹⁰⁴⁸ See the discussion at footnote 1110.

¹⁰⁴⁹ See footnote 939.

¹⁰⁵⁰ Hohler 1980: 275.

¹⁰⁵¹ For a more precise description of this phenomenon and further examples, see Jackson 1953: 279–281; Hamp 1980.

¹⁰⁵² Book 5, chapter 9 in Mynors and Colgrave 1969.

'For Theft of Cattle': Cursing with the Thistle

The final four lines of 'For Theft of Cattle' describe an intriguing imprecation. The speaker compares potential thieves to withering vegetation:

Eall he weornige, swa syre wudu weornie,
swa breðel seo swa þystel,
se ðe ðis feoh oðfergean þence
oððe ðis orf oðehtian ðence.¹⁰⁵³

May he completely wither, like dry wood withers,
may he be as brittle as a thistle,
he who might imagine carrying off these cattle,
or [he who] might imagine dispossessing this livestock.

The curse above has been compared to a short section from *Skírnismál*. This poem from the Poetic Edda relates how Freyr has fallen in love with a giantess named Gerðr. The text incorporates a dialogue between her and Freyr's servant, a character called Skírnir. Skírnir initially attempts to convince the giantess of his master's good intentions. When he notices his flattery is falling on deaf ears, he embarks on an imprecatory tirade. He exclaims:

Ver þú sem þistil[!],
sá er var þrunginn
í qnn ofanverða!¹⁰⁵⁴

May you be like a thistle,

¹⁰⁵³ Lines 16–19

¹⁰⁵⁴ Strophe 31 in Dronke 1997: 383.

that was crushed/bulging
at the end of the harvest!

Joseph Harris was the first scholar to notice the similarities between this curse and the section from 'For Theft of Cattle'. In 1975, he argued that the Norse adjective *þrunginn* had a similar meaning as the English adjective *breċel*: both words connoted brittleness, fragility, and immanent organic decay.¹⁰⁵⁵ He also proposed that explaining why *Skírnismál* and 'For Theft of Cattle' use similar, thistle-inspired metaphors 'must begin with [postulating] the probable existence of an old, perhaps common Germanic, tradition'.¹⁰⁵⁶

Harris' argument concerning the overlap of *breċel* and *þrunginn* is convincing. Nevertheless, an additional and hitherto unnoticed literary parallel challenges his proposition that both texts look back to an old Germanic motif. The Old English charm does not only correspond to the cited passage from *Skírnismál*. It also resembles Psalm 82: 14–15. In the Latin version, the psalmist implores his God to subject infidels to the following fate:

Deus meus, pone illos ut rotam,
et sicut stipulam ante faciem venti.
Sicut ignis qui comburit silvam.

O my God, make them like a wheel;
And as stubble before the wind.
As fire which burneth the wood.

Considering Psalm 82 and 'For Theft of Cattle' side by side, we notice that both use a similar metaphor to inflict a curse on a potential malefactor. The

¹⁰⁵⁵ Harris 1975: 30.

¹⁰⁵⁶ Harris 1975: 31.

Old English perpetrator should wither ‘swa syre wudu’. The psalmic infidel should wither ‘Sicut ignis qui comburit silvam’.

The thematic similarity between the Psalm’s ‘stipulam ante faciem venti’ and the incantation’s ‘pystel’ is perhaps less evident. Significantly, most European thistles (members of the genus *Carduus*) disperse their seeds in the same way as dandelions: they release feathery tufts that are light enough to be scattered by the wind. Even though Old English translators of Psalm 82 rendered the Latin term ‘stipulam’ (stubble) variously as ‘healmstrew’, ‘leaf’, and ‘gedrif’, the notion of airborne dispersal is equally central to thistledown or thistle wool.¹⁰⁵⁷

Examples from other medieval texts that consider thistledown and windblown stubble as interchangeable help to show that ‘For Theft of Cattle’ probably mentions a thistle because of a conceptual link to chaff. The earliest version of Wycliffe’s translation of Wisdom 5:15 reads: ‘For þe hope of þe vnpitouse is as a wull loke or þistildoun þat of þe wynd is taken away’.¹⁰⁵⁸ Meanwhile, a second and later rendition of the same line runs: ‘For the hope of a wickid man is as the flour of a brere which is takun awei of the wynd’.¹⁰⁵⁹ Wycliffe and his followers were not the only biblical translators to render the underlying biblical expression ‘lanugo’ as thistledown. A German poem from around 1300 states:

Des glîchseners trôst und hoffenunge sint
als distel blüete, die der wint
füert über velt und si zeströuwet.¹⁰⁶⁰

The consolation and hope of an impious person are
like the bloom of a thistle, which the wind

¹⁰⁵⁷ In the same context, one may refer to *De Klucht van Pyramus en Thisbe* (a Dutch farce from 1669): ‘Gelijk als de Paardebloem vergaat, | die al zeer vroeg op ‘t Veldt schoon staat | Zo drukt ook meê de Minnesmert’. The source provides no page or line numbers. The cited section appears halfway through the play. See Leeuw 1669.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Lindberg 1959-1973.

¹⁰⁵⁹ Forshall and Madden 1850.

¹⁰⁶⁰ Lines 21888–91, edited in Ehrismann 1909: 204.

carries over the field and disperses.

It is probable that the thistle curse in ‘For Theft of Cattle’ is not a reworking of a common Germanic theme. Instead, it exemplifies a somewhat unconventional translation choice for an otherwise conventional biblical simile. This concerns the perishability of windblown substances. Since ‘For Theft of Cattle’ combines a thistle curse with a curse related to desiccated wood, its imagery may have been inspired by Psalm 82.¹⁰⁶¹

‘For Loss of Cattle I’ and ‘II’: Pleading to All Wind Directions

In 1906, John McBryde asserted that theft charms ‘are often made up of independent formulas, either whole or in part, strung together without any connecting links’.¹⁰⁶² Despite its somewhat dismissive wording, this statement undeniably applies to ‘For Loss of Cattle I’ and ‘II’. Their opening verses, which recall Christ’s birth in Bethlehem, recur in Middle English and Middle High German texts.¹⁰⁶³ Their closing motifs (beginning ‘Iudeas Crist ahengon’) also conclude the macaronic charms.¹⁰⁶⁴ The discussion below examines the formula which appears at their centre:

¹⁰⁶¹ If so, ‘For Theft of Cattle’ combines two more prevalent customs related to theft charms. Such texts refer to the Psalms frequently: one thirteenth-century(?) German manuscript (Studienbibliothek Dillingen, MS XV 51) annotates a transcription of Psalm 2 with the message ‘dien psalm sprich úber rober und úber dieb’. Second, theft charms frequently hope to dry out or wither successful thieves (‘For Theft of Cattle’ specifically hopes the culprit will become *syre*, ‘withered’, and *breðel*, ‘brittle’). Later texts advise casting whatever objects the thief has left behind (clothes or footprints) into the fire or hanging them in the chimney. As the objects wither, so will the thief. For the just-cited German manuscript with an anti-theft Psalm, see Wunderle 2007: 80. For examples of theft charms that use Psalms, see Mone 1838: 421; van Werveke 1896: 133; Benati 2018b. For theft charms that employ withering magic, see Bächtold-Stäubli, Hoffmann-Krayer, and Lüdtker 1936-37: 1560–1563; Auen 1854: 189; Bang 1901-1902: 337–338.

¹⁰⁶² Footnote 11 in McBryde 1906: 183.

¹⁰⁶³ Smallwood 1989; Holzmann 2001: 186–187.

¹⁰⁶⁴ See footnote 1018.

Gebide þe þonne þriwa east and cweþ þonne þriwa: Crux Christi ab oriente reducað. Gebide þe þonne þriwa west and cweð þonne þriwa: Crux Christi ab occidente reducat. Gebide þe þonne þriwa suð and cweþ þriwa: Crux Christi ab austro reducat. Gebide þonne þriwa norð and cweð þriwa: Crux Christi ab aquilone reducað, crux Christi abscondita est et inuenta est.¹⁰⁶⁵

Medieval charms have traditionally been regarded as oral, popular texts that can shed light on ancient and otherwise irrecoverable belief patterns. Meanwhile, laws and penitentials from early medieval England often consider ‘wiccecræft’ and the adulation of the ‘sunnan oððe monan’ in the same context as the worship of ‘hæpne godas’.¹⁰⁶⁶ These circumstances have led some scholars to propose ‘For Loss of Cattle I’ and ‘II’ pray to all wind directions because they preserve acculturated remnants of pre-Christian beliefs.

Godfrid Storms compared the Old English charms to a Middle Dutch incantation from the fifteenth century. This includes a compass rose formula that closely resembles those from ‘For Loss of Cattle I’ and ‘II’. It starts ‘Cruus Christi van orienten moet weder bringhen den dief’ (the cross of Christ must bring back the thief from the east) and then similarly addresses the remaining wind directions. Nevertheless, the Dutch charm adds some distinctive ritualistic elements. The performer is told to lie down and stretch out crosswise (so saltu di strecken up die erde in cruus wijs), face the earth (‘dat ansicht in die erde’), and address the ground directly:

Ic mane di, erde, bi den Vader ende bi den Sone ende bi den heleghen Gheest ende bi den heleghen grave ons Heeren, dattu den dief met desen verloren dinghen .N. up di niet en houte, maer dattu hem rechtevoert doet weder bringhen of doet comen eer hi eet

¹⁰⁶⁵ Edition and translation at footnote 1015.

¹⁰⁶⁶ See Canute II.5.1 in Robertson 1925: 176–177. Wulfstan drafted a new law against idol worship in 1020/1021. This later became part of Cnut’s laws of c. 1020–3. It condemns the practices mentioned above. See Hooke 2010: 30–32.

of drinct, hem vluchs omme doest keeren ende dese verloren dinc
.N. weder bringhen.¹⁰⁶⁷

I bid you, earth, by the Father by the Son and by the Holy Spirit, and
by the holy grave of our Lord, that the thief does not keep this lost
property of (name) but that you make him return it directly or [make
him] come back before he eats or drinks, so that he turns around
quickly and brings back this lost property of (name).

Storms proposed ‘this charm contains relics of the incantatory formulas
that accompanied the magical actions of the previous [English] charms’.¹⁰⁶⁸
He argued the compass rose formula was initially based on the veneration
of Mother Earth and that ‘the magician turns to the four heavens [...] in
worship of the Sun, who knows where the thief is hiding and who can throw
light on dark matters’.¹⁰⁶⁹ In 1975, Gert Sandmann wandered further into
speculative territory: ‘Neben Sonnenverehrung (alle Himmelsrichtungen)
liegt im ae. Spruch auch Verehrung des Morgen- und Abendsterns vor
(wegen Ost-West-Richtung)’.¹⁰⁷⁰

The Dutch and English texts are undeniably related. Nevertheless,
they are probably not based on the same *Urtex*t. More likely, they
accumulate more widespread formulas in the manner described by
McBryde.¹⁰⁷¹ Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm. 373 (s. xiv)
preserves a German version of the compass rose motif.¹⁰⁷² A sixteenth-
century manuscript from Sweden preserves a Latin variant:

1° Crux Christi reducat te ab oriente

2° Crux Christi reducat te ab occidente

¹⁰⁶⁷ Braekman 1997: 316–317. Braekman divides the (lengthy) text using letters and numerals. The manuscript presents the text in continuous prose.

¹⁰⁶⁸ Storms 1948: 215.

¹⁰⁶⁹ Storms 1948: 214.

¹⁰⁷⁰ Sandmann 1975: 134. Also see Haver 1964: 293.

¹⁰⁷¹ See footnote 1062.

¹⁰⁷² Holzmann 2001: 145–146.

3° Crux Christi a meridie te reducat

4° Crux Christi ab aquilone te reducat

5° Et illa sancta crux, que a beata Helena inuenta est, reducat te!¹⁰⁷³

The texts which include these formulas diverge as much from the Dutch as from the Old English charms. The German text prefaces it with garbled magical writing and a German rhyme ('Chom wider in daz hvs | da du bist gegangen uz' [come back into the house which you exited]), the latter combines it with a millstone-ritual (the performer needs to grind up the culprit's clothes).¹⁰⁷⁴ The most likely explanation for the similarities between the Dutch and English incantations is not that the former preserves a fuller rendering of an unattested *Urtex*t, but that it constitutes a later and discrete development of a typical constellation of related incantatory themes.

If the above explains the relation between 'For Loss of Cattle I' and 'II' and other texts with similar formulas, it does not clarify our initial query: the origin of the compass rose motif.¹⁰⁷⁵ For this, we need to take into consideration an additional circumstance. The medieval written record preserves a broad range of methods for identifying the identity and the whereabouts of thieves. Most are as detailed as they are eccentric. The following are descriptions of some of the more common customs:

- Choosing one pellet of clay from a more extensive selection; all contain notes with suspects' names. The selected pellet nominates the thief.¹⁰⁷⁶

¹⁰⁷³ No. 95 in Linderholm 1917-1940: 63.

¹⁰⁷⁴ Holzmann 2001: 145–146. For an Old English ritual which uses a millstone to stop thieves, see no 85 in Storms 1948: 309.

¹⁰⁷⁵ On this subject, also see Hill 1978; Liuzza 2007: 296–297.

¹⁰⁷⁶ Bächtold 1911; Braekman 1997: 328.

- Pronouncing names over a psalter or bible. The book has a key placed in it on a specific page. It will rotate after the name of the guilty person is uttered.¹⁰⁷⁷
- Spinning around a sieve and a pair of scissors.¹⁰⁷⁸
- Rotating a loaf of bread. Some texts specify the loaf has to be pierced with knives.¹⁰⁷⁹
- Hitting a nail into a painted eye. The eye represents that of the thief. After the performer pierces the diagram, the thief will reveal himself.¹⁰⁸⁰

The common denominator of these rituals is that they involve selecting a single, correct response from a number of indistinguishable alternatives. Several acknowledge the importance of ritual spinning or replicating a performance in every direction. Presumably, the Old English charms do not ask the performer to turn east, south, west, and north, because they incorporate a sanitised form of nature worship. Instead, they offer such advice because 'spin-the-bottle'-methodologies are a standard feature in rituals that resolve uncertainty. This also explains why later German texts replace the English formulas' wind directions with times in the day:

Das Kreuz geschlagen: 'wiederkehre der Dieb vor Aufgang der Sonne mit dem gestohlenen Gut'. Vaterunser sprechen, das Kreuz schlagen: 'Wiederkehre der Dieb vor Mittag mit dem gestohlene Gut'. Vaterunser sprechen, das Kreuz schlagen: 'Wiederkehre der Dieb [vor Untergang der Sonne] mit dem gestohlenen Gut'. Vaterunser sprechen: 'Das Kreuz Christi ward verborgen, ward wiedergefunden durch die Sankt Hellmann. Also wahr muss der

¹⁰⁷⁷ Diermanse 1929; Eeckhof 1911; Braekman 1997: 332; Kittredge 1929c; Franz 1909: 360.

¹⁰⁷⁸ Cianci 2014; Surtz 2006: 167-168 (footnote 50).

¹⁰⁷⁹ Diermanse 1929; Braekman 1997: 338.

¹⁰⁸⁰ Benati 2017; Stallcup 2015; Taylor 1924.

Dieb wiederkehren und sich wiederfinden mit dem gestohlenen Gut'.¹⁰⁸¹

Having made the sign of the cross: 'May the thief return with the stolen property before the sun rises'. Speaking the Lord's Prayer, making the sign of the cross: 'May the thief return with the stolen property before noon'. Speaking the Lord's Prayer, making the sign of the cross: 'Speaking the Lord's Prayer, making the sign of the cross: 'May the thief return with the stolen property before sunset'. Speaking the Lord's Prayer: 'The cross of Christ was hidden, was found again by Saint Hellmann [Helena]. So, the thief must return and reappear with the stolen property'.

The Macaronic Incantations: Enchanting Tracks and Footprints

One striking feature of the macaronic charms is that they tell charmers to enchant the missing livestock's *hofrec*, 'hoof-track'. This recommendation corresponds to a widespread motif in European folklore.¹⁰⁸² Often, footprint magic is aimed at controlling animals and people from a distance. The *Corrector* of Burchard of Worms (c. 950/65–1025) provides an analogue:

Fecisti quod quædam mulieres facere solent, diabolicis adimpletæ disciplinis? Quæ observant vestigia et indagines christianorum, et tollant de eorum vestigio cespitem et illum observant, et inde sperant sanitatem aut vitam eorum auferre? Si fecisti aut consensisti, quinque annos per legitimas ferias pœnitere debes.¹⁰⁸³

¹⁰⁸¹ McBryde 1906: 182.

¹⁰⁸² Sartori 1894: 42–43. One of the earliest references to footprint magic appears on an Assyrian clay tablet in a charm that prevents the escape of slaves. See Ebeling 1954.

¹⁰⁸³ Section B in Migne 1880: 974. The *Corrector* is the nineteenth book of Burchard's *Decreta*.

Have you done what certain women, filled with diabolical teachings, are accustomed to do? They observe the footprints and tracks of Christians and lift from their footprint a lump of earth, hoping to withdraw from it their health or life. If you have done this, you must do five years of penance on the appropriate fast days.

Likewise, Saxo Grammaticus (1150–1220) narrates a skirmish between two characters, Frothi and Frøger. The former is more competent. The latter triumphs after he manipulates some dust from his adversary's footprint. 'Frotho, loco, quo Frogerus excesserat, puluere correpto' (Frothi snatched up some dust from the place Frøger had vacated).¹⁰⁸⁴ The Danish historiographer explains: 'Quippe, quod nullius ante uiribus licuit, astutia praestitit' (so, what before had been permitted to no man's strength, cunning had made possible).¹⁰⁸⁵

The macaronic charms specifically advise to 'sing on þæt fotspor' (sing on the foot track) and to 'ontend iii candela and dryp on þæt hofrec þæt wex ðriwa' (light three candles and drip the wax three times on the hoof track).¹⁰⁸⁶ Both customs have distant analogues in Scandinavian literature. Old Icelandic texts occasionally incorporate the idiom 'að blístra í spor' (to whistle in [someone's] tracks). Its meaning somewhat approximates 'to whistle after somebody in vain'.¹⁰⁸⁷ *Færeyinga saga* (c. 1200) uses it to describe a magical investigation. The anti-hero Þrándr reveals the whereabouts of three men after 'whistling' around the house and sniffing their obscured tracks like dogs do: 'hann rekti spor sem hundar'.¹⁰⁸⁸ Meanwhile, a Norwegian formula from 1780 — titled 'At fjette Dyr af alle Slags' (to fetter animals of all kind) — tells users to place three

¹⁰⁸⁴ IV.8.2 in Friis-Jensen 2015: 246.

¹⁰⁸⁵ IV.8.2 in Friis-Jensen 2015: 246.

¹⁰⁸⁶ CCCC 190's version, edited in Dendle 2006: 525.

¹⁰⁸⁷ Compare Modern Dutch: 'er naar kunnen fluiten' or 'het nafluiten hebben'.

¹⁰⁸⁸ Chapter 37 in Ólafur 1987: 84. Also see Reichborn-Kjennerud 1927: 40.

enchanted peas into the creature's 'fodspor' (footprint): 'Saa kan du naa det igjen' (so you can reach it again).¹⁰⁸⁹

In the context of theft, footprint magic often aspires to disempower malefactors. Some customs employ sharp objects such as (coffin) nails or broken glass to impede absconding thieves or livestock.¹⁰⁹⁰ Others implement techniques that recall withering curses.¹⁰⁹¹ A Norwegian formula from 1790 instructs:

Hvor en Tyv har været, opgrav der hans Fodspor; eller om du kan faa noget af hans Klæder, hæng dette i Skorstenen; saa maa Tyven til bage med det, han har stjaalet.¹⁰⁹²

Where a thief has been, dig up his footsteps; or, if you can get some (part) of his clothes, hang this in the chimney; then the thief must return with what he has stolen.

The English charms' specific recommendation to light candles and to use an illuminating substance to place into the tracks of missing livestock (as opposed to magical peas or nails) corresponds not only to folklore about footprint magic. It also aligns with an essential element in the resolution of pre-conquest cattle raids. The 'Fonthill Letter' (c. 897–901) records one of the most famous early medieval cases of cattle rustling.¹⁰⁹³ It describes how a certain Helmstan 'forstæl [...] ða unlædan oxan æt Funtial' (stole untended oxen at the Fonthill estate [in Wiltshire]).¹⁰⁹⁴ Two pieces of evidence solve the crime. The first is the *spor* left by the missing cattle.

¹⁰⁸⁹ No. 986 in Bang 1901-1902: 433.

¹⁰⁹⁰ Bächtold-Stäubli, Hoffmann-Krayer, and Lütke 1930-31: 240–243.

¹⁰⁹¹ See footnote 1061.

¹⁰⁹² The subscript to this formula provides an anecdote that ratifies its efficacy. Once, a thief stole all the food of a 'lærnd man'. The woman of the house proceeds to boil the culprit's footprint in a pot. The thief quickly came back to return the stolen wares: 'al hans Blod i hans Legeme kogte ligesaa sterkt som Asken i Potten'. See no. 791 in Bang 1901-1902: 337–338.

¹⁰⁹³ For more on this letter and its description of cattle theft, see Hough 2000.

¹⁰⁹⁴ The letter is edited in Keynes 1992. See section 10 in this edition.

The second is a wound on the culprit's face: 'Ða he fleah ða torypte hine an breber ofer ðæt nebb' (when he fled, a bramble ripped his nose).¹⁰⁹⁵ Without these visible 'tracks', apprehending Helmstan and retrieving the stolen property would have been more difficult. The charms' declaration that after enchanting the trail '[n]e mæg hit þe nan man forhelan' (nobody may hide 'it' from you) may thus have two meanings.¹⁰⁹⁶ It may refer to the missing animals as well as their footprints.

Old English Theft Charms and the Law

Most Metrical Charms are remedial in a medical sense. They mean to heal patients. Some incorporate herbal recipes; others survive in medicine books. Charms against theft are remedial in a legal sense. They seek to avoid and redress larceny. Because some specimens survive in manuscripts that include law texts, it merits examining whether or not they resemble the legal counterparts to herbal recipes: the clauses and subclauses of codes, wills, and charters. If theft charms solve legal problems, do they use legal language?

One rhetorical feature that typifies theft charms and early Germanic legal writings is the combined use of merisms (a concept is signified through an enumeration of its parts) and binomials (idiomatic collocations of two words, separated by a conjunction). If the latter repeat specific sound patterns, they are alliterative binomials.¹⁰⁹⁷ Some modern examples of expressions that combine both figures are 'bed and breakfast', 'safe and sound', and 'hearth and home'.¹⁰⁹⁸ Such doublets differ from non-idiomatic phrases with similar phonological properties (e.g. 'meal and meadow') because they are holistic idioms for overarching concepts. 'Bed and

¹⁰⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹⁶ CCCC 190's version in Dendle 2006: 525.

¹⁰⁹⁷ On this subject in relation to Old English charms, see Fulk 2017: 32–33.

¹⁰⁹⁸ For more modern examples and a brief discussion, see Besserman 1974.

breakfast' does not designate a bed and a breakfast but a small establishment that offers overnight lodging as well as a morning meal.

In theft incantations, meristic alliterative binomials often occur in descriptions of unaccommodating places. These should not permit entry to robbers, shelter them, or conceal stolen goods. A Middle English charm from the fourteenth century exclaims, 'Saue alle þing þat is me lof Wipinne þis hous and withoute'.¹⁰⁹⁹ 'For Theft of Cattle' petitions 'Garmund' to 'hafa and heolda that feoh' (have and to hold that cattle) and then continues to demand

þæt he næfre næbbe landes
þæt hit oðlæde
ne foldan þæt hit oðferie
ne husa þæt he oð hit healde.¹¹⁰⁰

That he [the thief] never has a piece of land
to which [he] may lead them [the cattle],
nor a fold to carry them to,
nor buildings to conceal them in.

In both charms, binomials and merisms supply concrete imagery to emphasise abstract concepts: 'within and without', or 'neither land, nor fold, nor house' are not instructive stipulations that clarify available alternatives. Instead, they are rhetorical synonyms for 'everywhere' and 'nowhere'.

Germanic law texts often use merisms and alliterative doublets in the same way. The phrase 'hafa and heolda' (the undertaking 'For Theft of Cattle' delegates to Garmund) occurs in numerous charters from both the Old and Middle English periods. In these, it is a formulaic synonym for 'to possess indefinitely'. An administrative document from the Cathedral

¹⁰⁹⁹ Cited in Benati 2017: 157.

¹¹⁰⁰ Lines 12–14.

Church of St. Paul, London, discusses ‘land þæt William þe diacon & Raulf his broðer [...] healdeð & habbeð’ (land that William the deacon and Raulf his brother hold and have).¹¹⁰¹ The register from the Godstow nunnery in Oxford records that a certain ‘Thomas and his heires after hym’ should be enabled to ‘have and holde all the forsaid yerd-lond’.¹¹⁰² Intriguingly, the formula’s contractual connotations seem to have been established long before ‘For Theft of Cattle’ was written down in the eleventh century: variations of the same phrase appear in Old Icelandic, Old High German, and Old Frisian texts. An unpublished deed cited in Cleasby and Vigfusson’s *Icelandic–English Dictionary* uses ‘hafa ok halda’; Frisian laws include variations of ‘te hebbene and te haldene’; diplomas from places such as late-medieval Freiburg mention ‘halten und haben’.¹¹⁰³

If ‘to have and to hold’ often appears in legal contexts, so do ‘within and without’ (from the Middle English charm) and ‘neither land nor house’ (from ‘For Theft of Cattle’). William the Conqueror issued a charter in 1068 which mentions both in the same sentence: ‘ic heom geuðe ealle þa cyrican and teoðinge and land and hus binnan Lunden oððe buten’ (I grant them all the churches and tithes and lands and houses inside and outside of London).¹¹⁰⁴ Again, these expressions do not outline specific locations wherein the concomitant regulations are valid. They emphasise the guidelines’ universality: ‘churches and tithes and lands and houses both within and outside of London’ seems to be an administrative way of saying ‘everything everywhere’. Frisian and German analogues corroborate these formulas are again typical of (West) Germanic legal language. The *Rustringer Recht* from thirteenth-century Frisia includes several articles that state specific regulations apply *binna ieftha bûta*; a Westphalian ‘Achtserklärung’ from 1453 explains to all ‘Frischeffen binnen und buszen’ (aldermen within and outside of) the area of Frankfurt that a certain

¹¹⁰¹ Gibbs 1939: 12.

¹¹⁰² Clark 1911: 241.

¹¹⁰³ Hoffmann 1885: 44, 69; Acker 2014: 6–11; Baum 1986: 259.

¹¹⁰⁴ Stevenson 1896: 742.

‘Sigemund Rynek’ is ‘vorfolget, vorwyset, vorsemet und vorsort’ (prosecuted, arraigned, summoned, and condemned [?]).¹¹⁰⁵

‘For Theft of Cattle’ contains two more alliterative merisms that echo legal language. The first is the phrase ‘his mægen and his mihta and his mundcræftas’ (his ability, his might, and his power of hand).¹¹⁰⁶ It refers to the talents of anyone who would consider robbing the charmer of his possessions. Several *Urteile*, ‘verdicts’, from medieval Ingelheim use the formula ‘mogende unde macht’.¹¹⁰⁷ Interestingly, the Old English phrase has heroic parallels, too. The Old Saxon *Heliand* uses the doublet ‘mod endi megincraft’ (courage and power) in a more comprehensive list of attributes that individuals lose with age.¹¹⁰⁸ The phrase’s appropriative or ‘snatching’ connotations are reinforced by its resemblance to a description of Beowulf’s grip strength: ‘he þritiges manna | mægencræft on his mundgripe | [...] hæbbe’ (he has the power of thirty men in his hand grip).¹¹⁰⁹ Just like in the Old English epic, the antagonist and protagonist in ‘For Theft of Cattle’ are well-matched: the thief’s clutching *mundcræft* is opposed by *Garmund*, ordered to ‘have and hold’.¹¹¹⁰

Another binomial from ‘For Theft of Cattle’ which merits further consideration is the charm’s incipit ‘Ne forstolen ne forholen’.¹¹¹¹ It does not reappear verbatim in other legal texts. Nevertheless, negated *for-* constructions tend to describe contractual arrangements in Old English texts.¹¹¹² *VI Æthelred*, a collection of statutes from 1008, uses the formulaic command ‘ne sy forspecen ne forswigod’ (may it not be denied or concealed) and a (possibly forged) charter from King Cnut reminds with a

¹¹⁰⁵ For Frisian analogues, see Dilcher 1961: 42–43. For the German charter, see Werneke 1861. See further Schulze 1961: 93; Hoffmann 1885: 64. The legal terms of the German passage are particular for this period and difficult to transpose to modern English. The translation attempts to approximate the meaning of the phrase; uncertainties remain.

¹¹⁰⁶ Line 17.

¹¹⁰⁷ Erlen 1952: 23; also see Baum 1986: 334.

¹¹⁰⁸ II.156 in Sievers 1878: 14–15.

¹¹⁰⁹ Lines 379b–381a in Klaeber, et al. 2008.

¹¹¹⁰ For a comment on the matching strength of Grendel and Beowulf, see Du Bois 1934: 374.

¹¹¹¹ Line 1.

¹¹¹² Also see the reference to Rynek’s verdict in footnote 1105.

similar stylistic flourish that a monk called Eadwige should not be allowed to pass on his claim to a specific piece of land: ‘hit ne mæg naðer gifan ne syllan, ne forspecan ne forspillan’ (he may neither gift it nor sell it, neither lose it by a suit of law nor by forfeiture).¹¹¹³

If specific words and phrases typify both cattle theft charms and legal texts, so do specific syntactic structures. Legal articles commonly feature conditional incipits such as ‘Gif frigman freum stelþ’ (if a freeman steals from a freeman) or ‘Gif man wið cyninges mægdenman geligeþ’ (if one lies with the king’s maiden).¹¹¹⁴ Meanwhile, the macaronic incantations begin with variations of ‘Gif feoh sy undernumen’.¹¹¹⁵ The *Northumbrian Priests’ Law* (c. 1028–1060) includes an article that runs ‘we forbeodað on Godes forbode, þæt nan man na ma wifa næbbe buton I [...] 7 gif hit hwa gedo, nabbe he Godes mildse’ (we forbid that anyone has more wives than one, and if anyone does so, may he not have God’s mercy).¹¹¹⁶ ‘For Theft of Cattle’ exclaims about the stealing of livestock: ‘Gyf hyt hwa gedo, ne gedige hit him naefre’ (and if anyone does so, may he never profit from it).¹¹¹⁷

Thematic parallels are perhaps the clearest indication that both genres engage with similar issues. ‘For Theft of Cattle’ attaches a specific importance to discovering malefactors ‘Binnan þrym nihtum’ (within three nights).¹¹¹⁸ This is probably not coincidental. *Æpelstan VI* (c. 930–940) also references this deadline in relation to cattle theft: ‘Ðonne beode we, þæt binnan III nihtum he his necheburan gecyðe, gif he þæs ceapgildes biddan wille’.¹¹¹⁹ (Therefore, we command that within three nights he informs his neighbour, if he wants to claim *ceapgild* [cattle-restitution]). The same article reiterates the macaronic charms’ preoccupation with the clarity of a

¹¹¹³ Liebermann 1903: 180; see S981 in *The Electronic Sawyer* 2010.

¹¹¹⁴ Both from Æthelberht’s code. See Art. 9 and 10 in Liebermann 1903: 3.

¹¹¹⁵ See Dendle 2006: 525–529.

¹¹¹⁶ Art. 61 in Liebermann 1903: 384. For more on if-clauses in Old English legal writings, see Schwyter 1996: 53–62.

¹¹¹⁷ Line 13.

¹¹¹⁸ Line 14.

¹¹¹⁹ Art 8.7 in Liebermann 1903: 180.

missing animal's *spor*:

7 we beodaþ eac urum hiremannum, þæt ælc mann wite, hwænne
he his yrfe hæbbe oððe hwænne he næbbe, on his neheburas
gewitnesse, 7 us spor tæce, gif he hit findna ne mæg, binnon þrim
nihton.¹¹²⁰

And we also command our retainers that everyone marks the time
when they possess their cattle and when they do not, with their
neighbour as a witness, and when someone cannot find his cattle,
show us the track within three nights.

The connections between Old English legal texts and cattle theft charms
have led some scholars to question whether Felix Liebermann was right to
omit the latter from his monumental *Gesetze der Angelsachsen* (1903–
1916). In 2015, Tracey-Anne Cooper contended we should understand the
macaronic incantation in the *Textus Roffensis* as ‘a rite performed by a
bishop to bring a fugitive thief to justice’: ‘it should not be considered out of
place among the other anonymous codes’ in the same manuscript.¹¹²¹
Andrew Rabin has argued the surviving macaronic charms attest to an
incremental revision process that suggests the ritual they describe was
gradually ‘being positioned as a legal text’.¹¹²²

The discussion above does demonstrate there are numerous
parallels between theft-incantations and early English legal writings.
Specifically, they contain similar linguistic constructions and stylistic
figures. Before we define these charms as legal texts, we should consider
some caveats.¹¹²³ The first is that two of the three lawbooks that include
cattle theft incantations appear to have been copied after 1066: it is not

¹¹²⁰ Art 8.8 in Liebermann 1903: 180.

¹¹²¹ Cooper 2015: 194.

¹¹²² Rabin 2010: 191.

¹¹²³ How ‘legal’ procedures may relate to the surviving texts is explored in Ireland 2002.

clear whether they document a pre-conquest effort to prescribe English law or a post-conquest attempt to preserve it. Second, the anti-theft formula in one of these manuscripts, CCC 383, was at one point crossed out. One reader seems to have shared Patrick Wormald's sentiment that the charm was 'not, of course, a legal text'.¹¹²⁴

A more profitable way to understand early English theft charms is to view them as pragmatic 'unofficial' solutions to situations for which there also existed more authoritative procedures. They are not misrecognised law texts. Instead, they mimic the style and rhetorical conventions of contemporary legal writings, presumably with the specific intention of ingratiating themselves with the authority of formal judicial traditions. Some specimens are such accomplished imitations that modern scholars have mistaken them for 'the genuine article'.

Conclusion

This chapter begins with establishing the precise relationships between English theft charms. Anti-theft charms from early medieval England can be subdivided into three closely related groups. It is profitable to discuss the different texts from these groups together because they feature related themes (e.g. Helena's discovery of Christ's cross) and because they appear in similar manuscript contexts (CCC 41 presents specimens of all three branches in one longer marginal annotation).

The argument first focuses on two passages in 'For Theft of Cattle' that have generated controversy in previous scholarship: the summoning of a figure called 'Garmund' and the cursing of a thief through a thistle metaphor. The chapter argues that 'Garmund' is not, as has been previously suggested, a pre-Christian figure, but a poetic nickname for

¹¹²⁴ Wormald 1999: 232.

Germanus. The charm has replaced the Latin word *manus*, 'hand', with the English word *mund*, 'hand' and 'guardian'. The substitution is appropriate because Germanus appears to have had a reputation for bringing cattle thieves to justice. He is also explicitly ordered to 'have and hold' the cattle and is thus in a unique position to negate the thief's 'mundcræftas'.

The argument proceeds to compare the charm's thistle curse to a specific passage from Psalm 82. Citing several analogues, it demonstrates that thistle-down sometimes functioned as a poetic alternative for wind-blown stubble. The chapter concludes its discussion of folkloric and religious motifs in the theft charms by contextualising the compass rose formula in 'For Loss of Cattle I' and 'II' and the advice to enchant stolen livestock's footprints in five macaronic incantations. Both motifs appear to provide methods for revealing hidden paths to lost property.

In its last section, the chapter demonstrates that early English charms have a close relationship with judicial writings: the former contain legal formulas and appear in law books. Nevertheless, the argument proposes they should not be mistaken for rituals that were used as part of 'official' legislative procedures. The charms that survive in legal manuscripts have an indeterminate relationship with the practice of law in early medieval England and one has been crossed out. More probably, the Old English theft charms purposefully imitate legislative language because they mean to provide an 'authoritative' solution for a legal dilemma.

9. The Old English Field

Remedy ‘Æcerbot’

Introduction

This chapter examines the Old English field remedy known as ‘Æcerbot’ or ‘For Unfruitful Land’. The eleventh-century document means to cure farmland that is barren or afflicted by *lyblaca*, ‘magical poisons’.¹¹²⁵ It outlines an extensive and complicated ceremony that starts ‘on niht’ and takes an entire day to complete. The first two sections of the chapter examine the invocations that appear in ‘Æcerbot’ and offer a new interpretation for some notorious cruces that appear in these. They also contextualise the remedy’s metaphorical interrelation of agricultural and human fertility. The third section provides focused discussions of specific literary motifs. Specifically, the chapter offers parallels and analogues for the text’s references to magical poison and its instructions to bless four corners of a field and bury a loaf of bread. The argument presented below suggests ‘Æcerbot’ is preoccupied with acting out metaphorical language, incorporates identifiable links to the phraseology of Old English biblical epics, and seeks to restage events from the Genesis flood narrative. The complete text of the remedy runs as follows:

¹¹²⁵ Line 1, 63. This chapter uses the edition in Dobbie 1942: 116–118. Other editions and translations can be found in Nyerup and Suhm 1787: 147–149; Robinson 1885: 149–151; Brooke 1892: 157–159; Stevens 1935: 164–167; Banham 2010: 316–318; Jolly 1993: 221–223; 1996: 6–8; Storms 1948: 172–177; Grendon 1909: 172–177; Kemble 1849: 531–535; Cockayne 1864: 398; Grimm 1876: 1033–1035; Thorpe 1834: 179–181; Klipstein 1849: 251–254; Ettmüller 1850: 300–302; Rieger 1861: 143–146; Thorpe and Rask 1865: 148–152; Wülcker 1882: 30–33; Wülcker and Grein 1883: 312–316; Stuart 1973: 577–622; Sandmann 1975: 142–191; Bjork 2014: 186–193.

Her ys seo bot, hu ðu meahht þine æceras betan gif hi nellap wel
 wexan oppe þær hwilc ungedefe þing on gedon bið on dry oððe on
 lyblace. Genim þonne on niht, ær hyt dagige, feower tyrf on feower
 healfa þæs landes, and gemearca hu hy ær stodon. Nim þonne ele
 5 and hunig and beorman, and ælcas feos meolc þe on þæm lande
 sy, and ælcas treowcynnnes dæl þe on þæm lande sy gewexen,
 butan heardan beaman, and ælcra namcupre wyrte dæl, butan
 glappan anon, and do þonne haligwæter ðær on, and drype þonne
 priwa on þone staðol þara turfa, and cweþe ðonne ðas word:
 10 Crescite, wexe, et multiplicamini, and gemænigfealda, et replete,
 and gefylle, terre, þas eorðan. In nomine patris et filii et spiritus
 sancti sit benedicti. And Pater noster swa oft swa þæt oðer. And
 bere sippan ða turf to circean, and mæssepreost asinge feower
 mæssan ofer þan turfon, and wende man þæt grene to ðan
 15 weofode, and sippan gebringe man þa turf þær hi ær wæron ær
 sunnan setlgange. And hæbbe him gæworht of cwicbeame feower
 Cristes mælo and awrite on ælcon ende: Matheus and Marcus,
 Lucas and Iohannes. Lege þæt Cristes mæl on þone pyt
 neopewardne, cweðe ðonne: Crux Matheus, crux Marcus, crux
 20 Lucas, crux sanctus Iohannes. Nim ðonne þa turf and sete ðær ufon
 on and cweþe ðonne nigon siþon þas word, Crescite, and swa oft
 Pater noster, and wende þe þonne eastweard, and onlut nigon
 siðon eadmodlice, and cweð þonne þas word:
 25 Eastweard ic stande, arena ic me bidde,
 bidde ic þone mæran domine, bidde ðone miclan drihten,
 bidde ic ðone haligan heofonrices weard,
 eorðan ic bidde and upheofon
 and ða soþan sancta Marian
 30 and heofones meahht and heahreced,
 þæt ic mote þis gealdor mid gife drihtnes
 toðum ontynan þurh trumne gepanc,

aweccan þas wæstmas us to woruldnytte,
gefillan þas foldan mid fæste geleafan,
35 wlitigian þas wancgturf, swa se witega cwæð
þæt se hæfde are on eorþrice, se þe ælmyssan
dælde domlice drihtnes þances.

Wende þe þonne III sunganges, astrece þonne on andlang and arim
40 þær letanias and cweð þonne: Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus op ende.
Sing þonne Benedicite aþenedon earmon and Magnificat and Pater
noster III, and bebeod hit Criste and sancta Marian and þære
halgan rode to lofe and to weorþinga and to are þam þe þæt land
age and eallon þam þe him underðeodde synt. Ðonne þæt eall sie
45 gedon, þonne nime man uncup sæd æt ælmesmannum and selle
him twa swylc, swylce man æt him nime, and gegaderie ealle his
sulhgeteogo togædere; borige þonne on þam beame stor and finol
and gehalgode sapan and gehalgod sealt. Nim þonne þæt sæd,
sete on þæs sules bodig, cweð þonne:

50 Erce, erce, erce, eorþan modor,
geunne þe se alwalda, ece drihten,
æcera wexendra and wridendra,
eacniendra and elniendra,
55 sceafta hehra, scirra wæstma,
and þæra bradan berewæstma,
and þæra hwitan hwætewæstma,
and ealra eorþan wæstma.

Geunne him ece drihten
60 and his halige, þe on heofonum synt,
þæt hys yrþ si gefriþod wið ealra feonda gehwæne,
and heo si geborgen wið ealra bealwa gehwylc,
þara lyblaca geond land sawen.
Nu ic bidde ðone waldend, se ðe ðas woruld gesceop,

65 þæt ne sy nan to þæs cwíðol wif ne to þæs cræftig man
 þæt awendan ne mæge word þus gecwedene.

 Þonne man þa sulh forð drife and þa forman furh onsceote, cweð
 þonne:

70

 Hal wes þu, folde, fira modor!
 Beo þu growende on godes fæþme,
 fodre gefylled firum to nytte.

75

 Nim þonne ælces cynnes melo and abacæ man innewerdre handa
 bradnæ hlaf and gecned hine mid meolce and mid haligwætere and
 lecge under þa forman furh. Cweþe þonne:

80

 Ful æcer fodres fira cinne,
 beorhtblowende, þu gebletsod weorþ
 þæs haligan noman þe ðas heofon gesceop
 and ðas eorþan þe we on lifiaþ;
 se god, se þas grundas geworhte, geunne us growende gife,
 þæt us corna gehwylc cume to nytte.

85

 Cweð þonne III Crescite in nomine patris, sit benedicti. Amen and
 Pater noster þriwa.¹¹²⁶

¹¹²⁶ Dobbie 1942: 116–118.

Here is the remedy with which you can improve your fields if they will not grow well or [if] anything improper has been done to them through sorcery or magical poisoning. Take at night, before dawn breaks, four sods from four sides of the land, and mark how they
5 stood before. Take then oil and honey and yeast, as well as the milk of all of the livestock on the land, and part of every species of tree that grows on the land, except *heardan beaman* ['hard trees'],¹¹²⁷ and part of every plant known by name, excepting only *glæppe*,¹¹²⁸ and add holy water, and drip then three times on the base of the
10 sods, and then say these words: '*crescite, wax, et multiplicamini*, and multiply, *et replete*, and fill, *terre*, the earth. *In nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti sit benedicti*'. And the Pater Noster as often. And carry the sods to church afterwards, and have a mass priest sing four masses over the sods, and turn the green [side] to the
15 altar, and afterwards, before sunset, bring the sods to where they were before. And have made for them from *cwicbeam* ['live wood'] four crosses and write on each end: *Matheus* and *Marcus*, *Lucas* and *Iohannes*. Lay the cross at the bottom of the pit. Say then: '*crux Mattheus, crux Marcus, crux Lucas, crux Sanctus Iohannes*'. Take
20 then the sod and place it on top and say then nine times these words, '*crescite ...*', and so often the Pater Noster, and then turn eastward and bow humbly nine times, and say then these words:

25 Eastward I stand, I ask favours for myself.
I bid the renowned *dominus*, I bid the great Lord,
I bid the holy warden of the heavenly realm,
earth I bid, and sky,

¹¹²⁷ On this exclusion, as well as that of *glæppe*, see Magoun 1943; Storms 1948: 180; Ward 2019; Niles 1980: 50; Rosenberg 1966: 432. Magoun argued that hard trees are not evergreens and unfavourable in a fertility ritual; Storms proposed they were already sacred and unnecessary to include; Ward suggested they were used as land demarcations instead.

¹¹²⁸ A rare word. 'Perhaps buck-bean'; see *DOE*, s.v. 'glæppe'.

and the righteous *Sancta Maria*,
and the might of heaven, and the high hall,
30 that I may release this hymn from my teeth
with the grace of the Lord, through firm mind,
to awaken these crops, for our worldly use,
to fill the earth, with steadfast belief,
to make beautiful this grassland. As the wise one says:
35 he may have mercy in earth's kingdom, who distributes alms,
judiciously, in line with the Lord's will.

Then turn three times with the course of the sun. Then stretch out
on [the earth] and count the litanies and say afterwards: '*Sanctus*,
40 *Sanctus*, *Sanctus*' until the end. Then sing the Benedicite, arms
outstretched, and the Magnificat and the Pater Noster three times,
and commend it [the land] to the love and praise and mercy of
Christ and *Sancta Maria* and the holy cross for the person who
owns the land and all those that are subordinate to him. When all
45 that is done, one should take unknown seed from almsmen and give
to them twice as much as was taken from them; and gather all
ploughing equipment together. Drill [a hole] into the beam [of the
plough and fill it with] frankincense and fennel and hallowed soap
and hallowed salt. Then take the seed [and] place it on the plough's
50 body.¹¹²⁹ Say then:

Ark, ark, ark, mother of the world/soil.¹¹³⁰
May the all-ruler, the eternal Lord, grant you
growing and flourishing fields,
55 conceiving and fortifying,
high shafts, splendid produce,

¹¹²⁹ 'Plough-body' is a technical term for the wooden base of the plough that connects the share to the beam. See Hill 2000: 14, fig. 12.

¹¹³⁰ See 'The *Erce* Enigma' (page 313).

and the broad barley crops,
and the white wheat crops,
and all the crops of the earth.
60 May the eternal Lord grant him,
and his saints, who are in heaven,
that his crop is protected against each and every enemy,
and secured against each and every harm,
against poisons sown through the land.
65 Now I ask the ruler, who created the world,
that there is not a woman as eloquent nor a man as crafty,
that they can alter the words thus spoken.

Then drive forward the plough and cut the first furrow. Then say:

70
May you be healthy, earth, mother of humankind,
may you be growing, in the embrace of God,
filled with food for the use of humankind.

75 Take then every kind of flour and bake a loaf, broad as a hand palm,
and knead it with milk and holy water, and lay it under the first
furrow. Then say:

80 Field full of food for humankind,
brightly blooming, may you be blessed
in that holy name of the one who created the heaven
and the earth, on which we live.
May God, who created these grounds, grant us a growing
gift,
85 so that every type of grain comes to benefit us.

Say then three times *Crescite in nomine patris, sit benedicti. Amen*
and three times the Pater Noster

Modern scholars rarely face the problems this field remedy describes: crop failure, witchcraft, and infertile land are no longer life-threatening circumstances in most developed countries. In 1966, Bruce Rosenberg admitted at the end of his article on the ritual's meaning that he knew about plants and trees 'from raking leaves and glancing through seed catalogs'.¹¹³¹ Yet, 'Æcerbot' still has a place in our post-industrial world. The Old English ritual has never had a more diverse and more attentive audience. Gardeners blog about its attention to seasonality;¹¹³² metal bands (following nineteenth-century interpretations) distinguish cultic aspects;¹¹³³ novelists and writers of popular history sometimes use it to add anecdotal flair to their narratives.¹¹³⁴ The field remedy's close attention to the natural environment has also attracted scholars who work within the emerging discipline of landscape studies. Mary Ward has argued the text preserves 'the present state of the land, its future state, the voice of the land, and the voice of the people'.¹¹³⁵

Despite its instructive language and widespread recognition, much about the field remedy remains uncertain. Over the last two centuries, scholars have disagreed about the extent to which it reflects early medieval fertility ceremonies. Likewise, researchers have deliberated whether the document retains pre-Christian belief patterns or whether its mixture of Christian words, gestures, symbols, and narratives formulate a unique expression of popular piety.

The eleventh-century text survives uniquely on the last few folios of Cotton Caligula A. vii (176^r–178^r). Aside from marginal inscriptions, the only other text in this manuscript is the *Heliand*, a long Old Saxon poem about the life of Christ.¹¹³⁶ The provenance of Cotton Caligula A. vii's final

¹¹³¹ Rosenberg 1966: 435.

¹¹³² Khan 2019; Eberly 2018.

¹¹³³ Winterfylleth 2018.

¹¹³⁴ See chapter 25 in Morrison 2015; Brooke 1892: 157; Moss 2010: 169; Power 1924: 11–12.

¹¹³⁵ Ward 2017: 164–165. For a reading of 'Æcerbot' that focuses on 'the poetics of materiality', see the first chapter in Kramer 2006.

¹¹³⁶ On the marginalia, see Arthur 2015.

leaves remains unclear. A common position remains that which Robert Priebsch advanced in 1925 and which Dobbie rearticulated in 1942: '[t]hese last few folios were originally separate from the rest of the manuscript, and were not bound together with the *Heliand* until the early seventeenth century'.¹¹³⁷ An instruction to a bookbinder on fol. 1r, written in the hand of Robert Cotton (1570/1–1631), confirms that the codex was re-assembled in the Early Modern period: 'Bind this book [...] in Lether and gilt uppon the Egges [...] and Past thos Leaves together I have crossed'.¹¹³⁸

Perhaps the Old Saxon and the Old English texts had been united before it came into the possession of Robert Cotton. Both compositions narrate or incorporate vernacular versions of biblical stories, and they feature similar scripts and page layouts.¹¹³⁹ Ciaran Arthur recently argued the intertextual interaction between the *Heliand* and 'Æcerbot' 'provides invaluable evidence that the Anglo-Saxons saw connections between the two texts and added them together during the Benedictine Reform'.¹¹⁴⁰ Franciscus Junius (1591–1677), who made a complete transcription of Cotton Caligula A. vii in the seventeenth century, may have been of the same opinion: 'Mihi uterque tractatus (Harmonia Evangelica et Exorcismus) eadem manu atque eodem stilo videtur scriptus'.¹¹⁴¹

'Æcerbot' alternates between prose and poetry. Its four verse sections are all introduced by commands such as 'cweð þonne þas word' (say then these words), suggesting they provide scripts for oral performances.¹¹⁴² The text also gives orders to recite various prayers. 'Æcerbot' does not write these out in full, which means it is intended for

¹¹³⁷ Dobbie 1942: cxxx; Priebsch 1925: 9–10.

¹¹³⁸ An entry on fol. ia' explains that 'thos leaves', which contain illustrations from psalters, were removed from the book and mounted separately in 1931.

¹¹³⁹ See no. 137 in Ker 1957: 172.

¹¹⁴⁰ Arthur 2014b: 5; also see Arthur 2015.

¹¹⁴¹ Note that Junius only began his studies of Old Germanic in the 1640s, when Robert Cotton had already passed away. The quote has been taken from Nyerup and Suhm 1787: 23–24. See Dekker 2000: 284, 289.

¹¹⁴² Lines 23, 49, 68–69, 77.

users who knew them already.¹¹⁴³ The prerequisite that the performer knows Latin prayers problematises Bruce Rosenberg's suggestion that a 'shaman or a churl' would have recited the text.¹¹⁴⁴ Karen Jolly has more plausibly hypothesised that if the field remedy was ever performed at all, the most probable candidate to do so would have been a church official.¹¹⁴⁵

The *Erce* Enigma

Numerous publications about 'Æcerbot' have attempted to contextualise two invocations in the document's verse sections.¹¹⁴⁶ The first is 'Erce, erce, erce, eorpan modor'.¹¹⁴⁷ The phrase immediately follows the instructions to place seed on the plough's *bodig*, 'body' (i.e. the wooden base which connects the share to the beam).¹¹⁴⁸ The second invocation also features a maternal theme and appears in the ritual's closing section: 'Hal wes þu, folde, fira modor' (May you be healthy, earth, mother of humankind).¹¹⁴⁹ As Storms wrote in 1948, these passages have 'baffled all editors'.¹¹⁵⁰ Specifically, commentators have struggled to explain why a Christian ritual that stipulates devotional acts such as going to church and requesting that a priest sings four masses also invokes a mysterious entity called *erce*. Does the ceremony perhaps preserve syncretic references to a pre-Christian fertility rite?

Over the last 180 years, scholarship has witnessed a steady stream of publications that offer either a new or an old explanation in response to the *erce* mystery. Some of the more common answers are that *erce* is an

¹¹⁴³ On the thematic relationship between these prayers and fertility, see Shook 1940: 140.

¹¹⁴⁴ Rosenberg 1966: 428.

¹¹⁴⁵ Rosenberg 1966: 428; Jolly 1996: 9. Also see Bintley 2013: 152.

¹¹⁴⁶ See footnotes 1151–1153.

¹¹⁴⁷ Line 51.

¹¹⁴⁸ See footnote 1129.

¹¹⁴⁹ Line 71.

¹¹⁵⁰ Storms 1948: 11.

Old English name for a Tellurian fertility deity or a figure from folklore;¹¹⁵¹ that it is a misspelling of a Latin word;¹¹⁵² or, that it is a Celtic expression.¹¹⁵³ Rarer postulations include that it is an example of incantatory gibberish,¹¹⁵⁴ a Greek word for ‘dew’,¹¹⁵⁵ or a ‘half-rhyme’ based on a Germanic term for earth.¹¹⁵⁶ Most recently, Caroline Batten and Mark Williams have argued in favour of an Old Irish origin, suggesting *erce* represents a ‘second person singular present subjunctive of the Irish verb *ercaid* [...] with jussive meaning: ‘may you flourish/ increase’.¹¹⁵⁷

None of the aforementioned propositions has been accepted universally, and the debate, which has accumulated many qualifying footnotes, is well-known for its controversy. The eminent Indo-Europeanist Edgar Polomé evinced a hint of frustration in his review of Craig R. Davis’ monograph on *Beowulf* and Germanic legend: ‘he totally misinterprets Erce as the equivalent of an alleged Old Saxon fertility goddess Herke, only known in much later folklore’.¹¹⁵⁸

This chapter supports none of the published arguments and, therefore, also rejects Polomé’s alternative: ‘the term [...] reflect[s] a metathesis of *rece [= Celtic *rica, (W *rhych*) < *prka “furrow”’.¹¹⁵⁹ Instead, this discussion proposes *erce* means ‘ark’ and ‘grain container’. ‘Ark’ is one of the few solutions which does not require postulating an otherwise

¹¹⁵¹ Klipstein 1849: 411; Grimm 1875–1878: 210; Robinson 1885: 149; Brooke 1892: 157, 466; Napier 1901: 375–376; Schlutter 1907: 127; Mogk 1911-1913a: 625; Dieterich 1913: 16; Storms 1948: 10–11; Helm 1951: 34-44; Greenfield 1986: 258; Bragg 1992: 17–18; Erlebach 1993: 58; Jolly 1996: 177; McKinnell, Simek, and Düwel 2004: 106; Fulk 2007: 31; D’Aronco 2008: 101; Hutton 2013: 384; Bintley 2013: 152; Ten Harkel, Franconi, and Gosden 2017: 14-15.

¹¹⁵² Niles 1980: 55; Molinari 1988-1989: 301. See further Rask 1830: 191.

¹¹⁵³ Meroney 1945: 178–179; Schröder 1951: 27; Duckert 1972: 83-90; MacLeod and Mees 2006: 124; Symons 2016: 135; Batten and Williams 2020: 170.

¹¹⁵⁴ Grendon 1909: 220.

¹¹⁵⁵ Boenig 1983: 130-131.

¹¹⁵⁶ See the entry ‘charms (verbal)’ in Simpson and Roud 2000. Also see Mogk 1911-1913b: 625; Jente 1921: 110; Sandmann 1975: 154; Schneider 1986: 291.

¹¹⁵⁷ Batten and Williams acknowledge that the form of *ercaid* they propose is ‘not attested in any surviving medieval Irish text’. They state: ‘the core meaning of the verb is “fills” [...]. But an intransitive sense “abounds, increases” is also reasonably well-attested’. See Batten and Williams 2020: 170.

¹¹⁵⁸ Polomé 1998: 240.

¹¹⁵⁹ Polomé 1998: 240. Polomé followed Schröder 1951: 27.

unattested expression. In 1948, Storms declared that ‘the form *Erce* is impossible in Old English’.¹¹⁶⁰ However, the written record shows that this observation is misleading: *erce* is possible, as a spelling variant of *earce*. This Latin loanword — which in English contexts often denotes Noah’s ship, the Ark of the Covenant, or a storage container — is an orthographical and grammatical chameleon.¹¹⁶¹ It sometimes appears as a masculine or feminine strong noun (*earc*, *arc*, *ærc*, *erc*, *erk*). In the Rushworth Gospels (c. 950–970), for example, ‘ineode Noe in erce’ (Noah entered the ark) (acc. f. cl. 2).¹¹⁶² The Bath Gospels (c. 1050) use similar language and relate how ‘noe on erke eode’.¹¹⁶³ Sometimes, the word also appears as a masculine or feminine weak noun (previous forms plus *earce*, *arke*).¹¹⁶⁴ A homily attributed to Wulfstan relates that ‘on sunnandæg reste Noes earce on þære dune, þe Armenia hatte’ (on Sunday Noah’s ark rested on the mountain which is called Armenia) (nom. f. wk.).¹¹⁶⁵

A circumstance that helps explain the phonological and morphological variation is that Old English scribes never stopped borrowing *arca* from Latin. Late forms stay close to the original and retain initial *a*; earlier loans show evidence of fronting (*a* > *æ*) and subsequent breaking (*æ* > *ea*).¹¹⁶⁶ Variants with initial *e* instead of *ea* have undergone one further sound change: Anglian Smoothing. This process often reversed earlier breaking and monophthongised diphthongs before velars (with or without an intervening *r*).¹¹⁶⁷ The Mercian Rushworth Gospels thus use the feminine strong noun *erc*. ‘Æcerbot’—which also consistently smoothes *ea*

¹¹⁶⁰ Storms 1948: 185. He allowed for the possibility of loanwords.

¹¹⁶¹ See *DOE*, s.v. ‘earc, arc, earce’.

¹¹⁶² Waring 1863: 139. The most recent editor preferred a reading from a different manuscript. See Skeat 1874: 170.

¹¹⁶³ Liuzza 1994–2000: 139.

¹¹⁶⁴ See *DOE*, s.v. ‘earc, arc, earce’.

¹¹⁶⁵ Napier 1883: 230. See no. 45 line 15.

¹¹⁶⁶ Durkin 2014: 149.

¹¹⁶⁷ Compare: West Saxon *meaŕh*, ‘marrow’, *meaŕc*, ‘boundary’, *beaŕg*, ‘gelded boar’, *feaŕh*, ‘young pig’ > Anglian *meŕg*, *meŕc*, *beŕg*, *feŕh*. For these and other examples, see Ringe and Taylor 2014: 308–313. For earlier explanations of Anglian Smoothing, see Wright and Wright 1908: 79; Campbell 1959: 93–98; Hogg 1992: 142–52.

to *e* in *wexan*¹¹⁶⁸ — writes *erce* with a final *-e*, suggesting it follows the cited Wulfstan homily, as well as other texts, in interpreting ‘ark’ as a feminine weak noun.¹¹⁶⁹

Accepting *erce* is a variant of *earce* begins with recognising that the narratives of ‘Æcerbot’ and Genesis demonstrate thematic overlaps. The ritual wishes to free the land from witchcraft and restore the soil’s fertility.¹¹⁷⁰ This resembles God’s promise to Noah in Gen 8:21–22: ‘I will no more curse the earth [...] All the days of the earth, seedtime and harvest [...] shall not cease’. Similarly, the ritual tells users to gather parts of the land’s plants and animals. An abbreviated version of these instructions runs as follows:

Take then [...] the milk of all of the livestock on the land, and a part of every species of tree that grows on the land [...] and a part of every plant known by name [...] and add holy water [...] and then say these words: *crescite*, grow, *et multiplicamini*, and multiply, *et replete*, and fill, *terre*, the earth.¹¹⁷¹

This section is reminiscent of God’s command to Noah in Gen 6:19: ‘And of every living creature of all flesh, thou shalt bring two of a sort into the ark, that they may live with thee’. Both passages provide instructions for selecting parts from an older world to establish a new one.¹¹⁷²

¹¹⁶⁸ Lines 2, 6, 10, 53. *Eax* > *æx*, *eoX* > *ex* is also associated with Anglian Smoothing. See Ringe and Taylor 2014: 309. In addition, the text writes ‘innewerdne’ instead of ‘inneweardre’ and ‘hense’ instead of (presumably) ‘heahre’. The corruptions are probably due to similarities between specific letterforms. In early medieval scripts, ‘n’ and ‘r’ can resemble ‘h’ and long ‘s’.

¹¹⁶⁹ Other examples of ‘ark’ as a feminine weak noun appear in Werferth’s translation of Gregory’s *Dialogues* (ch. 4), Byrhtferth’s *Enchiridion* (ch. 3; l. 325), and the Paris Psalter (Ps. 131:8). See *DOE*, s.v. *wk.*, f. ‘earc, arc, earce’.

¹¹⁷⁰ Line 1.

¹¹⁷¹ Lines 4–11.

¹¹⁷² Only ‘heardan beaman’ (hardwood trees) (l. 7) and ‘glappan’ (perhaps bogbean) (l. 8) need to be excluded, conceivably because they are not beneficial to agriculture. Note that the performer *is* specifically advised to use *cwicbeam*, Old English for ‘mountain-ash’, ‘witch-hazel’, or ‘juniper’, but literally ‘living wood’. The exclusions have attracted several commentaries. See Magoun 1943: 33-34; Storms 1948: 180; Rosenberg 1966: 432; Niles 1980: 50; Ward 2019: 5-14. Also see *DOE*, s.v. ‘glæppe’ and ‘cwic-beam’.

The appearance of the Latin phrase ‘Crescite et multiplicamini et replete terre’ confirms the field remedy’s thematic connection to Genesis is not coincidental: God’s advice to ‘Increase and multiply’ appears in Genesis several times.¹¹⁷³ It is also part of his promise to Noah after the deluge: ‘And God blessed Noe and his sons. And he said to them: Increase and multiply, and fill the earth’.¹¹⁷⁴

Since ‘Æcerbot’ and the flood narrative share several features, it is stimulating to discover that the field blessing’s poetic sections rehearse formulas that also appear in contemporary biblical poems. Specific phrases (key terms in bold) resemble lines from *Genesis A*, a relatively early alliterative composition that recounts episodes from the Old Testament.¹¹⁷⁵ The performer of the field blessing asks for ‘**are on eorprice**’ (favours in the kingdom of earth) and prays for ‘æcera **wexendra** and **wridendra**’ (growing and flourishing fields).¹¹⁷⁶ The aim of the text is to ‘**gefyllan þas foldan**’ (fill the land).¹¹⁷⁷ Meanwhile, *Genesis A* articulates God’s covenant with Noah as follows:

Weaxað and **wridað**, wilna brucað,
ara on eorðan, æðelum **fyllað**
 eowre fromcynne **foldan** sceatas,
 teamum and tudre.¹¹⁷⁸

¹¹⁷³ The parallels are Gen 1:22: ‘And he blessed them, saying: Increase and multiply, and fill the waters of the sea: and let the birds be multiplied upon the earth’; Gen 1:28: ‘And God blessed them, saying: Increase and multiply, and fill the earth’; Gen 9:7: ‘But increase you and multiply, and go upon the earth, and fill it’; Gen 35:11: ‘increase thou and be multiplied’. See further footnote 1178

¹¹⁷⁴ Gen 9:1.

¹¹⁷⁵ *Genesis A* is commonly interpreted as a poem from c. 750–825. A recent discussion of the poem’s date can be found in McBride 2017: 275–276. *Genesis A* is preserved in a tenth-century compilation of biblical verse: Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 11. For the dating of this manuscript (c. 960), see Lockett 2002: 141–173. In Junius 11, *Genesis A* is combined with *Genesis B*, which is a translation of an Old Saxon poem from a later period. See McBride 2017: 270–346.

¹¹⁷⁶ Lines 36, 53.

¹¹⁷⁷ Line 34.

¹¹⁷⁸ Boldface not in original. Doane 2013, ll. 1532–1535. For more on this passage, specifically regarding its resemblance of God’s command to Adam and Eve that appears earlier in the poem, see Griffith 2013: 69; Orchard 2007: 339.

Increase and multiply, enjoy desirable things, favours on earth; fill the corners of the land with your noble line, offspring, and offshoots.

There are more similarities. For example, the field blessing asks God to ‘aweccan þas **wæstmas** us to **woruldnytte** | [...] **wlitigigan** þas wancgturf’ (awaken these crops for our worldly use [...] to make splendid the grassland).¹¹⁷⁹ *Genesis A* uses comparable phrases to articulate an instance of when such a ‘gife drihtnes’ was denied. After the violent death of Abel, God says to Cain: ‘ne seleð þe **wæstmas** eorðe | **wlitige** to **woruldnytte**’ (the earth will not give you fruits, splendidly, for worldly use).¹¹⁸⁰ ‘Æcerbot’ does not only incorporate biblical passages: it seems familiar with the exact phraseology of Old English biblical poetry.

Numerous scholars have viewed the field blessing’s agricultural theme and its invocation of an *eorþan modor* as sufficient reason to assume *erce* is the name of a pagan fertility goddess.¹¹⁸¹ Researchers who have supported alternative propositions have often still affirmed that the word is part of an address to the land.¹¹⁸² The immediate context in which the passage occurs problematises such interpretations: the prose which introduces the line specifies that ‘Erce, erce, erce, eorþan modor’ should be recited after repositioning the seed: ‘Nim þonne þæt sæd, sete on þæs sules bodig, cweð þonne’ (Take the seed, place it on the plough’s body, then say).¹¹⁸³ *Erce* is possibly not directed at the earth. The context suggests it is directed at the seed-bearing plough.

Exodus, another biblical epic (like *Genesis A* preserved in Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 11), allows us to explore this proposition further. It recollects the story of Noah as follows:

¹¹⁷⁹ Lines 33–35.

¹¹⁸⁰ Lines 1015b–1016a.

¹¹⁸¹ See footnote 1151.

¹¹⁸² See, for example, Batten and Williams 2020: 168.

¹¹⁸³ Lines 48–49.

Niwe flodas Noe oferlað,
 þrymfæst þeoden, mid his þrim sunum,
 þone deopestan drencefloda
 þara ðe gewurde on woruldrice.
 Hæfde him on hreðre halige treowa;
 forþon he gelædde ofer lagustreamas
 maðmhorda mæst, mine gefræge.
 On feorhgebeorh foldan hæfde
 eallum eorðcynne ece lafe,
 frumcneow gehwæs, fæder and moder
 tuddorteondra, geteled rime
 missenlicra þonne men cunnon,
 snottor sæleoda. Eac þon sæda gehwilc
 on bearm scipes beornas feredon,
 þara þe under heofonum hæleð bryttigað.¹¹⁸⁴

Noah traversed the new floods, that majestic leader, with his three sons, over the deepest deluge that ever happened in this world-kingdom. He had a holy covenant in his heart. So, he led over the ocean streams the greatest of treasure-hoards known to me. In earth's life-refuge, the wise seafarer preserved an eternal remnant for all earth-kind, foundational generations, the father and mother of offspring-givers; he counted a number more various than can be known. Also, the men carried every seed within the ship's bosom that heroes use under the heavens.

In this passage, the *bearm*, 'bosom', of Noah's ship is described as a storage space for 'sæda gehwilc'. The field remedy's modified plough, with grain placed on its *bodig*, '(plough) body', resembles *Exodus'* ark: both are wooden vessels that carry seed.

¹¹⁸⁴ Lucas 1994, ll. 362–76.

Several circumstances lend further support to the idea that *erce* describes the performer’s modified tilling implement. First, sailing–ploughing metaphors are common in classical and medieval sources.¹¹⁸⁵ Isidore of Seville (c. 560–636), whose *Etymologiae* was a foundational text in the curricula of early medieval monasteries, provided the following line to exemplify the metaphorical linking of inanimate objects: ‘Pontum pinus arat, sulcum premit alta carina’ (the pinewood ploughs the sea, the deep keel marks a furrow).¹¹⁸⁶ A similar juxtaposition appears in a Skaldic poem attributed to Rǫgnvaldr Kali Kolsson (c. 1100 – 1158): ‘rekum eigi plog or akri | Erjum urgu bardi | út at Miklagarði’ (let’s not drive the plough from the field; let’s plough with a soaked warship out to Constantinople).¹¹⁸⁷ The logic behind these metaphors is straightforward. Ploughs and ships are specialised vehicles; both include wooden beams; both have tackle; both feature leading edges; both carve furrows into the surfaces they traverse. ‘Æcerbot’ extends the paradigm by recognising that both ploughs and ships incorporate parts named after torsos—the former have a *bearm*, ‘bosom’, and the latter have a *bodig*, ‘body’.¹¹⁸⁸

As explained earlier, ‘ark’ is a loan word. In medieval Latin, the primary meaning was ‘casket’, ‘coffer’ or ‘strong box’.¹¹⁸⁹ This sense was equally borrowed into medieval English. *Genesis A* puns on the word’s different meanings, describing Noah’s ship as a ‘micle mereciest’ (great sea-chest).¹¹⁹⁰ Elsewhere, ‘ark’ often specifically means ‘chest for storing flour or grain’.¹¹⁹¹ The *DOE* gives two examples from Gregory’s

¹¹⁸⁵ For an Early Modern parallel, note ‘Menecrates and Menas, famous pirates, | Makes the sea serve them, which they ear and wound | With keels’. Wilders 1995: 117, 1.4, ll. 49-51.

¹¹⁸⁶ Lindsay 1911, I.37.3. Isidore goes on to explain: ‘Miscuit usum terrae aquis, dum arare et sulcum premere ad terram pertineat, non ad mare’. For more on the history of the line, see Polt 2017: 542-557.

¹¹⁸⁷ Jesch 2009: 607-8.

¹¹⁸⁸ See further *DOE*, s.v. ‘foran-bodig’.

¹¹⁸⁹ Ashdowne, Howlett, and Latham 2018 s.v. 1 ‘arca’.

¹¹⁹⁰ Line 1317a. Compare this with *Exodus*’ description above of the ark as ‘maðmhorda mæst’ (greatest treasure-hoard). See further Anlezark 2005: 174; 2006: 189.

¹¹⁹¹ See Ashdowne, Howlett, and Latham 2018 s.v. 2a ‘arca’.

Dialogues.¹¹⁹² Chapter four mentions a ‘mynstres earke seo wæs hwætes full’ (monastery’s grain ark, which was filled with wheat); chapter twenty-seven describes ‘sum ceorl’ that ‘asette his earce mid hwæte gefyllede’ (put down his grain ark filled with wheat).¹¹⁹³ Quotations from the *MED* provide more context.¹¹⁹⁴ One Northern poem from c. 1300 declares: ‘Quen this corn to the kniht was sald, He did it in an arc to hald’.¹¹⁹⁵ A testament from medieval York (c. 1454) records the last wishes of a certain Willelm Halifax. Along with numerous other items (e.g. ‘the bed that I lye in’, ‘a candylstike with ij floures’, a ‘gridell’, and ‘a gret chaufer for mete’), he left to the Brotherhood of the Holy Trinity ‘a grett corne arke’.¹¹⁹⁶

A further indication that *erce* is a form of *earce* relates to the fact that some activities mentioned in ‘Æcerbot’ evoke Plough Monday.¹¹⁹⁷ This now almost obsolete celebration marks the beginning of the agricultural year on the Monday after Epiphany (6 January). The festival was celebrated in northern England during the Middle Ages and starts to appear in the historical record in the second half of the fourteenth century.¹¹⁹⁸ It declined in popularity during the early modern period. In 1543, Bishop John Bale grouped ‘sensinge [i.e. perfuming with incense] the plowghes vpon plowgh mondaye’ with a range of other popular customs: ‘goynge abought with saynt Nycolas clarkes’, ‘rostynge egges in the palme ashes fyre’, and ‘syngynge Gaudeamus in the worshypp of holye Thomas Becket’.¹¹⁹⁹ In his opinion (Bale was a Protestant bishop with anti-Catholic views), all represented ‘intollerable burdens of tradycyons’.¹²⁰⁰ Late medieval and early modern descriptions reveal it was also conventional to pull the farming implement around town in a

¹¹⁹² *DOE*, s.v. 1 ‘earc, arc, earce’.

¹¹⁹³ Hecht 1900: 41, 158.

¹¹⁹⁴ *MED*, s.v. 1a ‘ark(e)’.

¹¹⁹⁵ Sampson 1924: 350.

¹¹⁹⁶ Raine and Clay 1855: 173.

¹¹⁹⁷ Niles 1980: 47-49.

¹¹⁹⁸ See the references at footnotes 1199, 1202–1204, and those in the entry ‘Plough Monday’ in Simpson and Roud 2000.

¹¹⁹⁹ Bale 1543: 28r-v.

¹²⁰⁰ Bale 1543: 28v.

procession and to collect alms.¹²⁰¹ One of the earliest references to this custom comes from 1378, when an almoner in Durham gave silver to support a plough parade ‘post Natale’.¹²⁰² In 1413, a colleague donated money ‘in Crastino Epiphanie in veteri Elvet trahentibus aratrum’ (on the day after Epiphany in Old Elvet [a borough in Durham] to men pulling a plough).¹²⁰³

It is not challenging to discern some similarities between ‘Æcerbot’ and Plough Monday. Both are theatrical public ceremonies that involve blessing a tilling implement. The ‘sensing’ which John Bale disparaged — ‘Frankensence occupye they ofte as a necessarie thinge in the coniuringe of their ploughes’¹²⁰⁴—seems to be advised explicitly in the Old English ritual: ‘gegaderie ealle his sulhgeteogo togædere; borige þonne on þam beame stor and finol and gehalgode sapan and gehalgod sealt’ (let him gather all his ploughing-gear; drill a hole into the beam and [insert] frankincense and fennel and consecrated soap and consecrated salt).¹²⁰⁵ Both celebrations also feature almsmen. Plough Monday traditionally incorporates an element of money collecting. ‘Æcerbot’ gives grain to ‘ælmesmannum’ during its ceremonial seed transfer.¹²⁰⁶

The precise relationship between the ploughing ceremony in ‘Æcerbot’ and Plough Monday remains inexact. However, regional

¹²⁰¹ See ‘Plough Monday’ in Simpson and Roud 2000.

¹²⁰² Fowler 1898-1903: 212.

¹²⁰³ Fowler 1898-1903: 224.

¹²⁰⁴ Bale 1570. No page numbers provided. The quotation occurs in an exposition of Rev. 18:13.

¹²⁰⁵ Lines 46–49. The grammar of this line is ambiguous and seems to require supplying an additional verb. See *DOE*, s.v. 2 ‘borian’.

¹²⁰⁶ The ritual explains that ‘he may have mercy in earth’s kingdom, who distributes alms, | judiciously, in line with the Lord’s will’ (ll. 36–37). The Bible mentions the positive effects of distributing alms numerous times. The closest analogue is perhaps Prov 19:17, ‘He that hath mercy on the poor, lendeth to the Lord: and he will repay him’. 2Cor 9:6–7 uses a harvest metaphor to express a comparable idea: ‘Now this I say: He who soweth sparingly shall also reap sparingly: and he who soweth in blessings shall also reap blessings. | Every one as he hath determined in his heart, not with sadness or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver’. Other relevant biblical passages are Ps 111:5–9, ‘Acceptable is the man that sheweth mercy and lendeth: he shall order his words with judgment [...] He hath distributed, he hath given to the poor: his justice remaineth for ever and ever: his horn shall be exalted in glory’; and Deut 14:28, ‘The third year thou shalt separate another tithe of all things that grow to thee at that time, and shalt lay it up within thy gates’.

variations of the late-medieval festival may shed some light on the early medieval ritual's use of the term *erce* in its enactment of a plough-as-ship metaphor. The most telling evidence again comes from the northeast of England. Records from c. 1470 imply that inhabitants from Hull and Grimsby celebrated Plough Monday by parading a 'Plough Ship' — a replica of Noah's Ark fitted with wheels.¹²⁰⁷ The festival also appears to have been honoured with a staging of a Plough Play, a re-enactment of the Genesis flood story.¹²⁰⁸

Finally, some blessings for sowing and planting from Flanders repeat several of the themes from 'Æcerbot'. One long ritual — allegedly transcribed from an illicit *Tooverboek*, 'spellbook', in 1867 — begins with explaining that to prevent low quality grain one should 'over de zaaiterwe lezen den o.v. en w.g., het geloove ende Sint Jans evangelie [...] met wijwater daarover sproeiende' (read over the seed an Our Father and a Hail Mary, the Creed, and John 1:1–14 while sprinkling it with holy water).¹²⁰⁹ Afterwards, the performer should place '[v]an gelijke steken op het land vijf palmeblaarkes in kruise met het teeken des H. Kruis' (at equal distance in the shape of a cross five small palm twigs with the sign of the holy cross).¹²¹⁰ Another crop blessing from the same period repeats the idea that farmers should place a palm branch on each corner of their fields and also demands the recitation of the following rhyme:

Koren, koren,
ik kom u palmen.
Dat ge zult wassen en walmen.
Dat ons lieve Heer zal water gieten.

¹²⁰⁷ Mill 1938: 493-495. See further Stokes 2009: 423; Diana 2013: 59-61. A nineteenth-century source provides an account of Plough Monday in Grimsby, another town along the Humber in Lincolnshire and about 20 miles from Hull. The Plough Ship of Grimsby that was used in the procession was a plough. See Sutton 1997: 26-27; Gutch and Peacock 1892-1914: 223.

¹²⁰⁸ See further Canney 1938: 147.

¹²⁰⁹ No. 748 in Haver 1964: 272.

¹²¹⁰ No. 748 in Haver 1964: 272.

Dat ge wel zult schieten.¹²¹¹

Grain, grain,
I have come to place palm branches on your field.
May you grow and billow.
May the good Lord pour water.
May you may germinate well.

Yet another text states that the seed sack should be placed upside down and addressed with a couplet: ‘Tarwe ik zet u op de band | God behoed u voor onkruid en brand’ (Wheat, I’m placing you on the band | God keep you safe from weeds and blight).¹²¹²

These analogues are unlikely to be direct descendants of the Old English source. They are, however, similar to it, and they can help to reinforce our understanding of the medieval document. The Dutch texts repeat some of the activities mentioned in ‘Æcerbot’, such as placing crosses on the corners of farmland, citing prayers, and sprinkling holy water. They also show crop ceremonies sometimes address the sack of grain before sowing. One even invokes the planted seed directly through a duplication formula: ‘Koren, koren’. For all these reasons, *erce* seems to be a complex pun whose meaning derives from the performative context in which it occurs. On a practical level, it perhaps enabled early English speakers to address the deposited grain directly. In Old English, ‘ark’ could describe a container ‘mid hwæte gefyllede’, and later rituals invoke grain through reduplicative formulas. More importantly, it allowed performers to associate their own ploughs with Noah’s ship and to sustain the ritual’s broader interest in re-enacting Genesis. Noah’s providential vessel played an instrumental part in the rejuvenation of the growing world and also carried in its body, as explained in *Exodus*, ‘sæda gehwilt’.

¹²¹¹ No. 788 in Haver 1964: 287.

¹²¹² No. 749 in Haver 1964: 274. Translating ‘brand’ not as ‘fire’ but as signifying ‘brandkoren’.

Mother Earth and *eorþan modor*

If *erce* means ‘ark’, why does ‘Æcerbot’ redefine the term as ‘eorþan modor’? *Eorþan* is in the genitive case, so translating ‘Mother Earth’ is problematic. ‘Mother of earth’ — a common alternative — *is* feasible. The semantic breadth of the word *eorþe* suggests a third option. In some Old English texts, *eorþe* does not describe a substance. Instead, it designates arable land or even the world in general. Ælfric, for example, relates that the sun is ‘swa brad’ (as wide) as ‘eal eorðan ymbhwyrft’ (the whole extent of the earth).¹²¹³ *Genesis A* uses the expression in a description of Noah’s agricultural exploits: ‘Ða Noe ongan niwan stefne | mid hleomagum ham staðelian | and to eorðan him ætes tilian’ (then Noah once again began to build a home with his close relatives and to till the earth for food).¹²¹⁴

Eorþan modor probably does not mean ‘Mother (of) Earth’. More likely, it means ‘mother of the world’ or ‘mother of the soil’. The line articulates the concept ‘ark’ four consecutive times, repeating the Latin loanword *erce* thrice. For its final reiteration, it utilises a kenning that highlights the ark’s function as a fetal microcosm which, like a mother, gives birth to the macrocosm of which it preserves the representative parts. In this manner, ‘Æcerbot’ participates in a more extensive contemporary custom of highlighting qualities of Noah’s ship through poetic comparisons. Earlier, it was mentioned that *Genesis A* calls the vessel a ‘micle mercieste’ (great sea-chest) and that *Exodus* describes it as the ‘maðmhorda mæst’ (greatest of treasure-hoards).¹²¹⁵ *Genesis A* contains many more examples of such circumlocutory poetic descriptions. Some phrases that are reminiscent of the field remedy’s *erce* are ‘wudufæsten’ (wooden stronghold), ‘þellfæstene’, ([dat.] planked stronghold), and the

¹²¹³ See *DOE*, s.v. A.3, C ‘eorþe’. The cited text is edited in Blake 2009: 78.

¹²¹⁴ Lines 1555–57.

¹²¹⁵ *Genesis A* line 1317; see *Exodus* lines 368–370.

‘horde’ that contains ‘æðelum [...] eorðan tudres’ (the lineage of the earth’s offshoots).¹²¹⁶

If ‘eorþan modor’ is not a direct invocation of the earth, ‘Æcerbot’ does call the land ‘mother’ elsewhere: ‘Hal wes þu, folde, fira modor’ (may you be healthy, ground, mother of humankind).¹²¹⁷ As with *erce* and *eorþan modor*, this phrase has encouraged commentators to assume the influence of pre-Christian phraseology.¹²¹⁸ Here, it is essential to point out that eminent early medieval authorities unproblematically used ‘mother’ as a figurative alternative for ‘progenitor’. Pope Gregory (c. 540–604) said the following in his commentary on two biblical passages that maternalise the earth, Job 1:20–21 and Sir 40:1: ‘Quia vero omnes nos terra genuit, hanc non immerito matrem vocamus’ (since, truly, the earth produces us all, we not unreasonably call her ‘mother’).¹²¹⁹ Rabanus Maurus (c. 780–856) wrote: ‘Mater omnis animalis utique natura est’ (nature is, of course, the mother of all living beings).¹²²⁰ Alcuin of York (c. 735–804) even taught Charlemagne’s son Pippin to conceptualise the earth as a maternal figure. In a wisdom dialogue written for the Frankish prince’s education, Pippin’s character asks: ‘Quid est terra?’ Alcuin’s character, Albanus, answers: ‘Mater crescentium, nutrix viventium, cellarium vitae, devoratrix omnium’ (the mother of growing things, the nurse of living things, the storeroom of life, the devourer of all).¹²²¹ ‘The field remedy’s personifications of the growing world do not substantiate pre-Christian roots but further indicate a consistent preoccupation with figurative language. The ritual seeks to

¹²¹⁶ Lines 1312, 1482, 1439–1440.

¹²¹⁷ Line 71.

¹²¹⁸ Most recently, Ciaran Arthur has distinguished a different connection. The phraseology of the address parallels an address in the *Heliand* to Mother Mary. See 2018: 90.

¹²¹⁹ Migne 1849: 570. In Job 1:21, the protagonist drops down to the ground and prays: ‘Naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return thither’. Sir 40:1 states: ‘a heavy yoke is upon the children of Adam, from the day of their coming out of their mother’s womb, until the day of their burial into the mother of all’. See further Psalm 138: 13–15: ‘thou hast protected me from my mother’s womb. [...] My bone is not hidden from thee, which thou hast made in secret: and my substance in the lower parts of the earth’.

¹²²⁰ Migne 1851: 498.

¹²²¹ Suchier and Daly 1939: 140.

impregnate barren land with a biblical promise of regeneration. To do so, it draws on an expressive idiom related to maternal fertility.

Folkloric and Religious Analogues

Agricultural Witchcraft and Magical Poison

The controversy about the invocations in ‘Æcerbot’ implies the rest of the text is equally obscure. This assumption is not unreasonable: much about the field remedy is unique. Nevertheless, it is possible to provide analogues for some of the document’s specific themes and statements. For example, several passages in early Germanic law codes demonstrate that the objective to protect land ‘para lyblaca geond land sawen’ (from magical poisons, sown through the land) echoes a more widespread concern.¹²²² The *Visigothic Code* (7th cent.) condemns people who seek to use magic to harm others either ‘in agris vel vineis diversisque arboribus’ (in their crops, vineyards, or trees).¹²²³ The *Bavarian Code* (c. 748) is more explicit:

Si quis messem alterius initiaverit maleficis artibus et inventus fuerit, cum XII solidis conponat, quod aranscarti dicunt, et familiam eius et omnem substantiam eius vel pecora eius habeat in cura usque ad annum.¹²²⁴

If anyone performs magic on another person’s crops through witchcraft, which they call *aranscarti*, and he is discovered, let him compensate with twelve solidi. And let him [the victim] have the

¹²²² Line 63.

¹²²³ VI.2.5 in Zeumer 1902.

¹²²⁴ I.5.2 in Schwind 1926: 411.

former's domestic slaves and all his property and livestock in his care for a year.¹²²⁵

The inclusion of the Germanic word *aranscarti* — a term which describes a supernatural method to harm crops, but which is most accurately translated as 'harvest-damage'¹²²⁶ — permits the assumption that in this particular instance, the often formulaic legal record preserves a folkloric belief about agricultural witchcraft.¹²²⁷ Perhaps the *Bavarian Code's* section against 'anyone who performs magic on another's crops' and 'Æcerbot' were drafted to prevent similar forms of supernatural malice.

References to magical harvest damage are not restricted to the early medieval legal record. Agobard of Lyon (c. 779–840) ridiculed local individuals who believed evil sorcerers caused hail and thunder: 'et maledicunt dicentes: "Maledicta lingua illa, et arefiat, et jam praecisa esse debebat, quæ hoc facit". Dic, rogo, cui maledicis?' (and they curse saying 'that cursed tongue who has done this: may it shrivel. It should have been cut off already'. Tell me, I ask, who are you cursing?).¹²²⁸ He also lampooned several more detailed legends that circulated in his district. One story concerned exotic buccaneers called 'Magonians'. These individuals allegedly crewed airborne sailing crafts, colluded with hail-makers, and reaped standing crops as they traversed the skies on clouds. Another legend involved Grimaldus, the duke of Benevento. Supposedly, this man had at one time ordered malefactors to poison crops and cattle with noxious powders.¹²²⁹

Agobard clarified that believing in agricultural witchcraft testified to 'profunda stultitia' (profound stupidity).¹²³⁰ Nevertheless, similar stories

¹²²⁵ Trans. Rivers 1977: 154–155.

¹²²⁶ Lade 1986: 150–152.

¹²²⁷ Lade 1986: 150–152. Also see Schmidt-Wiegand 1994, 1992.

¹²²⁸ Migne 1864: 154. The source text is called 'contra insulam vulgi opinionem de grandine et tonitruis'. Also see Heidecker 1995: 175.

¹²²⁹ Migne 1864: 158.

¹²³⁰ Migne 1864: 148.

survive from all over Europe and from a broad range of periods.¹²³¹ 'Æcerbot' ensures 'þæt ne sy nan to þæs cwíðol wif ne to þæs cræftig man | þæt awendan ne mæge word þus gecwedene' (that there is no woman as eloquent nor a man as crafty, that they can alter the words thus spoken).¹²³² It also appeals to work 'wið ealra feonda' (against all enemies) and to cure *lyblaca*, 'magical poisons'.¹²³³ These statements imply the field remedy is perhaps familiar with beliefs similar to those related by Agobard.

Blessing Sods and Protecting Field Corners

One section of 'Æcerbot' whose origins are intriguing is the recommendation to dig up and bless four sods.¹²³⁴ An abbreviated version of the relevant passage is as follows:

Take, at night before dawn breaks, four sods from four sides of the land, and mark how they stood before. [...] And carry the sods to church afterwards, and have a mass priest sing four masses over the sods, and turn the green [side] to the altar, and after that, before sunset, bring the sods to where they were before. And have made for them from *cwicbeam* ['live wood'] four crosses and write on each end: *Matheus* and *Marcus*, *Lucas* and *Iohannes*. Lay the crosses at the bottom of the pit. Say then: *crux Matheus*, *crux Marcus*, *crux Lucas*, *crux Sanctus Iohannes*. Take then the sod and place on top [of the cross].¹²³⁵

¹²³¹ Blöcker 1982; McCartney 1925; Kittredge 1929d; Ward 1968; Oster 2004; Ager 2010; White 2015; Robertson 1987; Hofmeister and Hofmeister 2000.

¹²³² Lines 65 – 66.

¹²³³ Lines 61-63.

¹²³⁴ Previous scholarship on this section is as follows: Rosenberg 1966: 430–431; Hill 1968; Storms 1948: 8–9, 101, 178–180; Hill 1977; Ward 2019.

¹²³⁵ Lines 3–21.

The passage is governed by the ambition to delineate and fortify a sacred horticultural space. In this regard, it echoes several customs related to the apotropaic demarcation of boundaries.

Burying items at corners to ensure ‘þæt hys yrþ si gefriþod wið ealra feonda gehwæne’ (that his crop is protected, against each and every enemy) was also practised during classical times.¹²³⁶ Pliny (d. 79 CE) describes an analogue:

pestem a milio atque panico, sturnorum passerumve agmina, scio abigi herba, cuius nomen ignotum est, in quattuor angulis segetis defossa, mirum dictu, ut omnino nulla avis intret.¹²³⁷

I know flocks of starlings and sparrows, pests to millet and panic, are repelled using a particular herb, the name of which I do not know, being planted at the four corners of the grain field: it is a miraculous thing to relate, but [in such case] not one bird will enter it.

Later sources exemplify similar traditions. A rodent exorcism from early medieval England recommends strewing breadcrumbs in the four corners of infested barns.¹²³⁸ Chaucer used a variant of the same custom in *The Miller’s Tale* (c. 1380–90). When John the Carpenter falsely assumes the scholar Nicholas is possessed by evil spirits, he proceeds to carry out a performative ritual ‘fro elves and fro wights’: ‘Therwith the nyght-spel seyde he anon-rightes | On foure halves of the hous aboute’.¹²³⁹ The Early Modern antiquarian Thomas Browne (1605–1682) reported the following practice:

¹²³⁶ Certain ‘deviant’ burial practices demonstrate a comparable concern for delineating and enforcing boundaries. Designating a space by interring (dis)reputable figures at its edges is not restricted to agricultural traditions. See Reynolds 2009: 219–227. Also see Sartori 1898: 36–43.

¹²³⁷ XVIII 16–17 in Mayhoff 1875-1906.

¹²³⁸ Banham 2010: 299–300; Storms 1948: 101, 181–182.

¹²³⁹ Lines 3480–81 in Benson, Robinson, and Cannon 2008: 72. Also see Thoms 1878.

The Rural charm against Dodder, Tetter and strangling weeds, was contrived after this order: [...] they placed a chalked Tile at the four corners, and one in the middle of their fields, which though ridiculous in the intention, was rational in the contrivance, and a good way to diffuse the magick through all parts of the Area'.¹²⁴⁰

The idea to enlist the names of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John, as well as the symbol of Christ, to devise an evangelical threshold mirrors related beliefs about garrisoning farmland with apposite magical scarecrows. The *Geoponika*, a Byzantine husbandry manual from the tenth century, recommends the use of seashells carrying Hercules' name for counteracting pestilential 'lion's grass': 'if you wish this plant totally to disappear, take five shells, and describe on them with chalk, or with some other white pigment, 'Hercules suffocating the lion', and set them at the four corners and in the middle of the ground'.¹²⁴¹ The magical principle that motivates the practice is 'verbal homeopathy':¹²⁴² the shells are furnished with a herculean label so they will slay leonine weeds in the same manner as their mythical namesake once killed the Lion of Nemea.

Bread Burials and Cemetery Rites

As Hellen Gittos has proposed, 'Æcerbot' may create sacred soil in a somewhat similar way as contemporary cemetery blessings.¹²⁴³ Such rites gained in popularity during the Benedictine Reform. After spreading to France and Germany, they eventually became part of the standard liturgy

¹²⁴⁰ Endnote 7 in Drury 1992: 106.

¹²⁴¹ Book 2, chapter xlii in Owen 1805: 88. Original in bk. B, cap. 42 in Beckh 1994: 78. Also see Zadoks 2013: 223–226.

¹²⁴² See footnote 306.

¹²⁴³ Gittos 2013: 49.

of the Roman church.¹²⁴⁴ If the Old English field remedy was developed in the eleventh century, ceremonies for creating a *gehalgodum lictune* (consecrated graveyard) would have been known to its composer.

A representative script for a cemetery consecration ceremony survives in the *Benedictional of Archbishop Robert*. The rite in this tenth-century manual from early medieval England features several benedictions and instructs users to recite an ‘oratio’ at the four corners of the graveyard. As with ‘Æcerbot’, the governing principle is to ‘sanctificare, purgare, atque benedicere’ (sanctify, purge, and bless) a stretch of land; to keep it clear from harmful influences (‘ab omni incursione malorum spirituum’); and to petition the resurrection of the organic matter buried inside it (‘a morte corporis resurrectura creditur’).¹²⁴⁵

Cemetery consecrations are relevant to our understanding of ‘Æcerbot’ for two main reasons. First, such ceremonies indicate that the remedy’s interest in creating a sanctified field probably reflects a more prevalent contemporary preoccupation with the correct methodology for delineating a *vicus christianorum*. There is no immediate reason to assume ‘Æcerbot’ constitutes a redevelopment of cemetery rites. The conceptual foundations of the latter may be rooted in similar apotropaic field-demarkation practices as those which are already described by authors such as Pliny (d. 79 CE). Nevertheless, the resemblances between the field remedy and cemetery rites indicate that contemporary members of the clergy had specific ideas about how to bless a plot of land. It is not impossible that field benedictions informed graveyard consecrations and vice versa.¹²⁴⁶

Moreover, ‘Æcerbot’ is in many ways *like* a cemetery rite. Its conception of agricultural soil rests on acknowledging the regenerative nature of the natural world. During one stage of the field remedy, the performer is advised to entomb a sacrificial loaf of bread in the first furrow

¹²⁴⁴ Gittos 2002; 2013: 45; Zadora-Rio 2003: 13; Treffort 1995.

¹²⁴⁵ Wilson 1903: 101–103.

¹²⁴⁶ Gittos 2013: 49.

of the infertile land — effectively an ‘aged’ version of ‘bradan berewæstma’ (broad barley crops) and ‘hwitan hwætewæstma’ (white wheat crops).¹²⁴⁷ The farmland is fertilised through a sepulchral ceremony, a rejuvenating interchange that encourages the germination of living crops by inseminating the soil with the embodied remains of old ones. In ‘Æcerbot’, life represents one stage in a more elaborate reproductive cycle. Death and decay succeed and invigorate new growth. The field remedy’s description of ‘ðas eorþan þe we on lifiaþ’ (the earth on which we live) as a ‘fira modor’ (mother of humankind) is appropriate because it reveals the conceptual womb-tomb nexus that governs the document’s understanding of the origin of ‘ealra eorþan wæstma’ (all the crops of the earth).¹²⁴⁸

Conclusion

This chapter examines ‘Æcerbot’ alongside a broad range of analogues. The first section offers a new interpretation for *erce*, a notorious crux in Old English scholarship which has often been understood as a syncretic reference to a pre-Christian deity. The argument presented above proposes that *erce* is a variant of *earce*, ‘ark’, and that ‘Æcerbot’ constitutes a practical early medieval script for reiterating the Genesis flood narrative. A stretch of once-fertile farmland has degenerated into a sterile wasteland, engulfed by a deluge of noxious witchcraft. The performer must reposition the deadened space in a biblical context, rearticulate humanity’s covenant with God, and, like Noah, construct a regenerative ark from which new life may emerge.

The chapter proceeds to develop the proposition that ‘Æcerbot’ reiterates themes from the Genesis flood narrative by examining the

¹²⁴⁷ Lines 56–57. For later analogues, see Bächtold-Stäubli, Hoffmann-Krayer, and Lütke 1934-1935: 1726-1728; Meyer 1904: 139; Bächtold-Stäubli, Hoffmann-Krayer, and Lütke 1930-31: 883; Opie and Tatem 1989, s.v. ‘First Furrow’.

¹²⁴⁸ Lines 82, 71, 58.

biblical resonances of some of the remedy's instructions and linguistic formulas. It demonstrates that sections from 'Æcerbot' resemble *Genesis A*. The chapter also argues that the field remedy's instructions to rejuvenate cursed land and collect specific lifeforms to create a newer world are connected to particular verses in *Genesis*. Citing the Old English *Exodus*, Isidore, and late-medieval descriptions of Plough Monday, the argument proposes that the meaning of *erce* in 'Æcerbot' is context-specific: the word allows performers to typify their own grain-laden plough as a providential vessel that, like Noah's ark, carries seed in its body to serve as a microcosmic 'mother to the world'.

The chapter ends with several focused discussions of some of the remedy's folkloric and religious motifs. First, it provides some analogues for the Old English text's requests for protection against harmful enemies and magical poisons. Early medieval laws mention destructive crop magic, and Agobard of Lyon (c. 779–840) described beliefs about malefactors who sowed noxious powders 'throughout the land'. Subsequently, the chapter offers a brief overview of apotropaic rituals related to constructing defensive field boundaries. The discussion concludes with a comparison between 'Æcerbot' and contemporary liturgical rites for consecrating cemeteries. The comparison is pertinent because both field remedies and cemetery consecrations offer ritual scripts for turning a designated plot of land into a sanctified, protected, and resurrective space.

10. ‘Settle, Settle, Bees’: ‘Wið ymbe’ and the ‘Lorscher Bienensegen’

The old man sat; and the chore-girl still
Sung to the bees stealing out and in.
And the song she was singing ever since
In my ear sounds on:
‘Stay at home, pretty bees, fly not hence!’¹²⁴⁹

Introduction

Up to this point, each chapter in this thesis has focused on contextualising one or more texts from early medieval England. This last chapter adopts a different approach. It contextualises an Old English charm from the eleventh century and an Old High German one from the ninth. The first of these is called ‘Wið ymbe’ (against a swarm of bees). The second is known as the ‘Lorscher Bienensegen’ (the bee blessing from Lorsch). Both texts hope to achieve the same objective as the ‘chore-girl’ in Whittier’s poem: ‘stay at home, pretty bees, fly not hence!’ The discussion presented below draws on medieval apicultural legislation and a broad range of contemporary and later analogues to argue that the earliest medieval swarm charms reflect a multilingual transmission climate and are specifically meant for domestic beekeepers. The chapter also proposes a

¹²⁴⁹ See stanzas 13–14 in John Greenleaf Whittier’s *Telling the Bees*. The poem is edited in Hollander 2004: 470.

potential connection between swarm charm composition and early medieval monastic beekeeping in the southern regions of the Old High German language area.

There are several reasons to broaden our analytical scope and to look beyond the confines of Old English literature. First of all, 'Wið ymbe' resembles the 'Lorscher Bienensegen' in some important respects. Both are early, west Germanic compositions and they use similar phraseology. In addition, both are marginal additions to manuscripts that have no apparent connection to beekeeping. The former survives in CCCC 41 (11th cent.), alongside a vernacular translation of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*. The latter appears upside-down in Cod. Pal. Lat. 220 (9th cent.), underneath a copy of the *Visio St Pauli* (an apocryphal apocalypse).¹²⁵⁰

An effective way to understand the thematic and textual overlaps of these compositions is to consider them side by side. The Old English charm runs as follows:

Wið ymbe nim eorþan, oferweorp mid þinre swiþran handa under
þinum swiþran fet, and cwet:

Fo ic under fot, funde ic hit.
Hwæt, eorðe mæg wið ealra wihta gehwilce
and wið andan and wið æminde
and wið þa micelan mannes tungan.

And wiððon forweorp ofer greot, þonne hi swirman, and cweð:

Sitte ge, sigewif, sigað to eorþan!
Næfre ge wilde to wuda fleogan.
Beo ge swa gemindige mines godes,

¹²⁵⁰ See 'Figure 11'.

swa bið manna gehwilc metes and epeles.¹²⁵¹

For a swarm of bees: take earth, cast it with your right hand under your right foot and say:

If I catch it under my foot, I will recover it.
Indeed, earth has virtue against each and every being,
and against ill-will, and against jealousy,
and against a person's powerful tongue.

And, when they swarm, cast grit over them and say:

Sit yourselves down, victory/descent women, descend to earth.
May you never fly, wild, to the woods.
May you be as mindful of my good fortune,
as each man is of food and property.

Meanwhile, the 'Lorscher Bienensegen' runs:

kirst imbi ist huc²e
nu fliuc du uihu minaz hera¹²⁵²
fridu frono in munt godes
gisunt heim zi comonne
sizi sizi bina
inbot dir *sancte* maria

¹²⁵¹ Dobbie 1942: 125. Other editions and translations can be found in the following publications: Kemble 1849: 404; Grimm 1875: 358; 1876: 1040; Cockayne 1864: 384–385; Brooke 1892: 155–156; Robinson 1885: 154; Storms 1948: 132–133; Grendon 1909: 168–169; Sandmann 1975: 30–31; Stuart 1973: 751–759; Abernethy 1983: 41–42 Bjork 2014: 216–217.

¹²⁵² Schirokauer proposed to emend to *kera*: Schirokauer 1942: 64.

hurolob ni habe du
zi holce ni fluc du.
noh du mir nindrines
noh du mir nintuinnest
sizi uilu stillo
uuirki godes uu'llon.¹²⁵³

Christ, the swarm is out!¹²⁵⁴
Now, fly and come here, my cattle.
In the Lord's peace; in the protection of God;
come home in good health.
Sit, sit, bees,
Saint Mary impels you.
You have no furlough.
Do not fly into the woods.
Neither will you escape me,
nor will you elope me.
Sit completely still;
work God's will.

We will discuss the similarities between these texts along with some potential interpretations of their phraseology more attentively throughout this chapter. Nevertheless, even a cursory glance shows that the two include comparable motifs and expressions. The Old English poem tells the bees to 'Sitte ge'; the German text says 'sizi sizi bina'. Likewise, 'Wið

¹²⁵³ Transcribed from the MS (Pal. Lat. 220, fol. 58^r) with altered line layout. The most common editions are von Steinmeyer 1916: 396; Braune, Helm, and Ebbinghaus 1994: 88–89. These are not always the most useful because they change the word order of the original to improve the rhyme. For a discussion that examines the lexicography of the 'Lorscher Bienensegen' in some detail, see Grienberger 1921: 415–417.

¹²⁵⁴ An attractive German translation of this line is as follows: 'Jesses, das Bienenvolk ist weg'. See Sonderegger 1971: 181. Notably, the term 'kirst' in this context is an interjection and performs a linguistic function that is similar to that of the Old English expression 'hwæt'. On this German 'Schreckensrufe', see Wipf 1975: 65–66.

ymbe' commands: 'Næfre ge wilde to wuda fleogan'. The 'Lorscher Bienensegen' declares: 'hurolob ni habe du | zi holce ni fluc du'.

There is another good reason to discuss the English text alongside a German one. Swarm charms from England are remarkably uncommon. Most Old English verbal charms can in some way or other be compared to later English texts for similar purposes. This is not the case for 'Wið ymbe'.¹²⁵⁵ William Clarke Robinson stated in 1885 that 'I believe there are still extant in country places many charms thought efficacious for staying the flight of swarms of bees'.¹²⁵⁶ Nevertheless, when Jonathan Roper assembled a corpus of 523 English incantations in 2005, he concluded that 'the only *Bienensegen* I was able to find and include in the database is from the Anglo-Saxon period'.¹²⁵⁷

That no swarm charms were recorded in England after 1066 is remarkable considering that in 1964 Austin Fife was able to find 97 of such texts from other regions. He counted '9 charms in Latin (ninth to fourteenth centuries), 8 in German (tenth to seventeenth centuries), 59 modern German charms, 6 Flemish and Holland Dutch, 1 Danish, 1 Anglo-Saxon, 1 modern English, 3 Greek, 1 Slavonic, 27 French, and 1 Italian'.¹²⁵⁸ The

¹²⁵⁵ Some other texts from early medieval England do offer remedies against bee theft, but none of these are verbal charms and all of them are ultimately based on foreign sources. Two are from Cotton Vitellius E.viii (the Vitellius Psalter). The first is a diagram with a clear connection to Insular literature called 'Columcille's Circle'. It hopes to protect an apiary (probably with several hives) from thieves. Aside from mentioning an Irish saint, it says in Latin that it is 'cont apes ut salvi sint et in corda eorum' (that they are safe and in their hearts). Perhaps 'corda' puns on Old Irish *clíab*. This term can mean both 'beehive' and 'breast, bosom'. See *eDIL*, s.v. 'clíab'. For an alternative reading of 'Columcille's Circle', see Rust 1999. The second text constitutes a brief statement that bee theft can be prevented by placing madder in the hive. This is based on a widespread remedy which also appears in the Old English *Herbarium of Apuleius*. The latter work, however, advises the use of *veneria*, which it appropriately translates as 'beo wyrt'. See no. VII in Cockayne 1864: 97–100. For editions of the remedies for the loss of bees in the Vitellius Psalter, see Cockayne 1864: 395–397.

¹²⁵⁶ Robinson 1885: 154.

¹²⁵⁷ See note 37 in Roper 2005: 202. Some recent scholars have used somewhat misleading language to suggest more Old English swarm charms exist: 'The most famous Old English bee charm, popularly known as *Sitte ge Sigewif*, is found in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 41'. See Price 2017: 456.

¹²⁵⁸ Fife 1964: 154. This summation is incomplete. See, for instance, Ohrt 1917: 338–340; Klaster-Ungureanu 1974; Bischoff 1984b. As Ebermann explained in an earlier collection of the same texts, 'vollständigkeit konnte wegen der Verstreutheit des Materials nicht

shortage of comparative material from the British Isles and the prevalence of sources from continental Europe foreshadows a circumstance that we will examine more closely in this chapter's section on transmission: swarm charms are not typically English.

A last and decisive reason to discuss the Old English poem against a broader background of medieval and modern swarm charms is that Old English scholars have until recent times advocated that the charm's adjuration of *sigewif* recalls Valkyrie worship.¹²⁵⁹ Jacob Grimm and John Mitchell Kemble initially advanced this view in the 1840s, when scholarship had uncovered only a few sources with which the Old English document could be compared.¹²⁶⁰ The argument should have been abandoned later in the nineteenth century after other philologists discovered the 'Lorscher Bienensegen' and several similar Latin swarm charms.¹²⁶¹ These have nothing to do with Valkyries, but they do address the bees using regal female appellations. One adjures the queen bee as a 'mater aviorum' (mother of birds);¹²⁶² another addresses an 'apis apicula' (bee, little bee) as a 'mater matercula' (mother, little mother).¹²⁶³

The appellation *sigewif* seems to constitute a variation on such forms of address. The Old English word for queen bee is *beo-modor*, and the contemporary poem *Elene* describes its royal female protagonist as a

erreicht werden'. See Ebermann 1917: 332. The modern English charm Fife mentions is not a swarm charm, but an incantation to split up a bee colony. See footnote 1282.

¹²⁵⁹ Some recent proponents are Purser 2013: 90; Damico 1990: 178; Elsackers 1987: 454.

¹²⁶⁰ Kemble initially communicated this Valkyrie hypothesis to Grimm in a letter, along with a transcription of the charm. See Wiley 1971: 149. The edition of the letter transcribes 'valkyrias' incorrectly as 'Nalhyrias'. Both scholars subsequently published the text: Kemble 1849: 404–405; Grimm 1875: 358; 1876: 1040.

¹²⁶¹ Pfeiffer 1866: 5; Haupt 1871; Zupitza 1878; Nyrop and Weinhold 1892.

¹²⁶² For an edition of the entire charm, see no. 2 in Ebermann 1917: 333. Some editors have emended to 'mater aviolum' but this is unnecessary. Bees were commonly described as birds in the later Middle Ages and classified as such in bestiaries. See George and Yapp 1991: 28. In addition, a swarm charm from 1907 addresses 'Immevögele' and a sixteenth-century riddle with the answer 'bee' begins, 'Little bird of Paradise, | She works her work both neat and nice'. The charm is edited as no. 24a in Ebermann 1917: 338. The riddle is quoted in the lemma 'bees' in Simpson and Roud 2003.

¹²⁶³ See footnote 1314.

sigecwen.¹²⁶⁴ The expression *sigewif* is, however, more than just an imitative vernacular invocation. It is also a duplicitous attempt at so-called *Namenzauber*, or 'name-magic'. At the same time the poem endows the escaping female insects with a triumphant reputation, it weighs them down with an encumbering nickname. The noun *sige*, 'victory', equally has the rare meaning 'fall', and it resembles the verb *sigan*, 'to sink, to settle'.¹²⁶⁵

¹²⁶⁴ Lines 260, 997 in Krapp 1932b. Early medieval perceptions of bee colonies differed from Early Modern ones. In the sixteenth- and seventeenth century, the rulers of bee colonies were often understood to be male. See Prete 1991.

¹²⁶⁵ Bosworth and Toller, s.v. 'sige' and 'sigan'. On this line, also see Crawford 1963: 106; Frank 1972: 209; Elsackers 1987: 454. See further this thesis' section on *Namenzauber*.

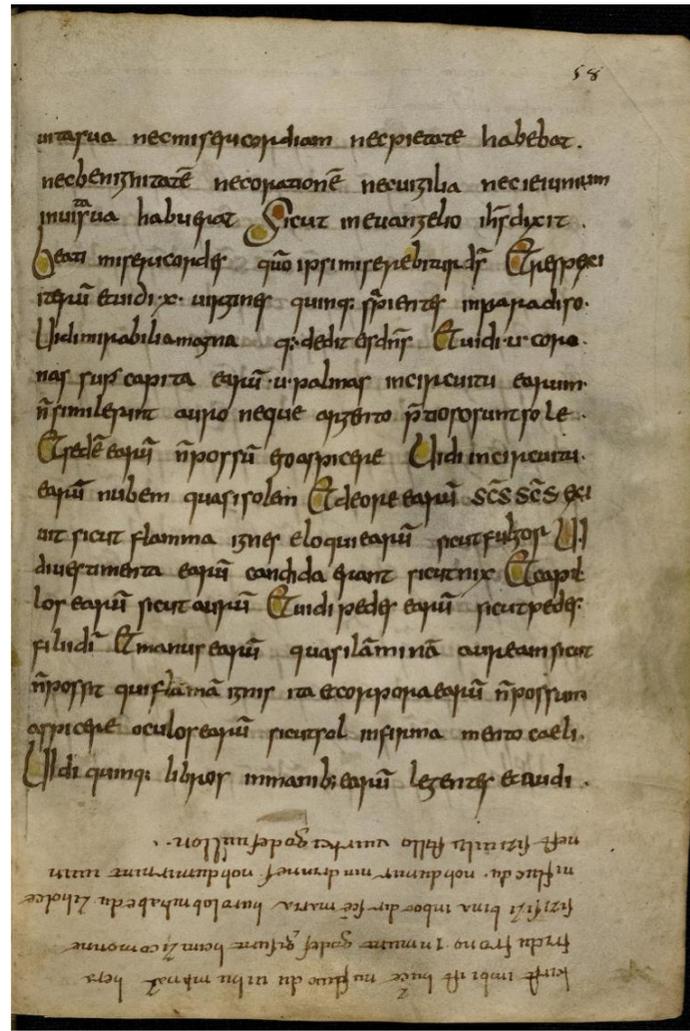
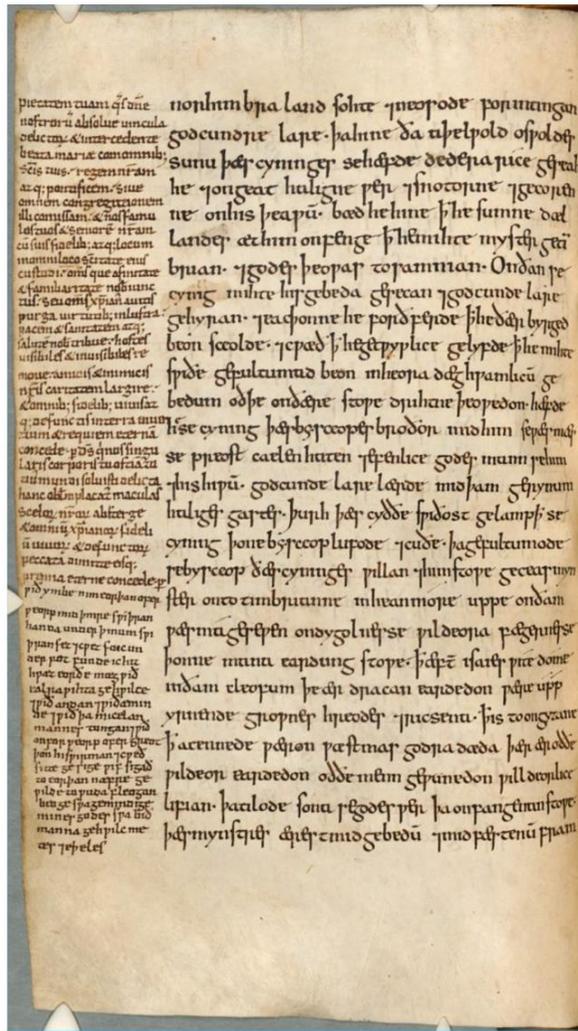


Figure 11 The manuscript contexts of 'Wið ymbe' (left) and the 'Lorscher Bienensegen' (right). The former appears in the margin of p. 182 in CCC 41; the latter on fol. 58^r in Cod. Pal. Lat. 220. Courtesy of the Parker and the Vatican Library.

Domestic Beekeeping and Honey Hunting: Medieval Apiculture in Practice

Understanding the phraseology of ‘Wið ymbe’ and the ‘Lorscher Bienensegen’ requires a short introduction to medieval beekeeping. Modern apiculturists often make use of so-called Langstroth hives: rectangular wooden boxes with moveable combs. Such bee houses allow beekeepers to extract a colony’s produce without harming it. They also facilitate improved brood access, which simplifies the prevention of swarms (for instance, by clipping a queen’s wings or by replacing full frames with empty ones).¹²⁶⁶

Moveable combs were only invented in 1835. Before this time, there were two fundamental methods of procuring honey and wax. The first was to cultivate swarms in hives with immovable combs (e.g. wicker skeps, hollow tree trunks, or bee boles).¹²⁶⁷ If beekeepers owned more than one hive, they would often place these in an apiary. The second was to harvest wax and honey directly from wild bees. This method is also called honey hunting or forest beekeeping.¹²⁶⁸

Medieval beekeepers and honey hunters followed different routines. The former fed their bees if necessary and made sure hives were protected from bad weather, thieves, and parasites. Honey hunters spent a significant part of their time moving between nesting sites and climbing trees, drilling holes into them to attract new colonies. Modern practitioners of this profession often mark their finds with a personalised ownership tag. This custom is based on longstanding traditions, and the law codes of the

¹²⁶⁶ See Spamer 1978: 280–282.

¹²⁶⁷ For additional insights into Early English apiculture, see Exeter Book Riddle 17 and 27 in Krapp and Dobbie 1936. See also Hausleitner 2015; Price 2017; Osborn 2005, 2006.

¹²⁶⁸ For a simplified comparison, see ‘Figure 12’. The history of beekeeping is an extensive subject and medieval beekeeping remains an understudied subject. See further Crane 1983, 1999; Fraser 1958; Kritsky 2017.

Lombards and the Visigoths already prohibiting removing bees ‘de arbore signato’.¹²⁶⁹

On most days, domestic beekeepers worked within the confines of their apiary. Nevertheless, to succeed in their profession, they did have to enter the forest on certain occasions. Bees fundamentally differ from cows or horses in that they cannot be domesticated. Even if it is possible to mark a nesting site, it is impossible to brand an actual swarm. Problematically, bees are migratory creatures, and they commonly abandon their nests in the spring. If beekeepers undertake no action to prevent their bees from swarming — this is challenging without moveable combs — they will either have to chase them or let them go. In the Middle Ages, owning bee swarms involved recapturing them.¹²⁷⁰

Even if beekeeping could be practised in two different ways, most medieval swarm charms are for domestic beekeepers. Some specifically refer to the material appurtenances and equipment associated with the occupation: ‘habeo bona uasa parata’ (I have a good hive prepared), one ninth-century specimen states, ‘ut uos in dei nomine laboretis te alloces cum omni tuo genere uel cum socia tua ibi’ (so that you may work in the name of God; may you move there with all your kind or with your associates).¹²⁷¹ Middle High German *Bienensegen* sometimes mention a ‘peystock’ (log hive) or a ‘peigürtel’ (apiary).¹²⁷² Some swarm charms also note the domestic boundaries bees should respect. ‘Wið ymbe’ asks the bees to be mindful of the beekeeper’s *eþel*, ‘personal residence’. A Low German charm that, like the Old English text, advises the ceremonial strewing of earth includes the following adjuration: ‘Ich verbiete dir Biene und Imme bie Gots stimme das du nit fligest aus desses Hofes Kringe’ (I

¹²⁶⁹ No. 319 in 1868: 72. and VIII, 6, 1 in Zeumer 1902: 349. Also see the marked tree in ‘Figure 12’.

¹²⁷⁰ See ‘Figure 13’ and ‘Figure 14’. For more on the practicality of swarm charms and beekeeping, see Garner et al. 2011.

¹²⁷¹ No. 2 in Ebermann 1917: 333.

¹²⁷² See nos. 9, 12, and 16 in Ebermann 1917: 334–336. *Peigürtel* is a rare term. This thesis interprets it as a variant of *peigartel*, ‘little bee garden’. Later texts use *Bienengartel* to denote an apiary.

forbid you, bees and swarms, by the voice of God, that you do not fly outside the perimeter of this yard).¹²⁷³

¹²⁷³ No. 15 in Fife 1964: 155. See footnote 113 for a section from the same *Segen*.



Figure 12 An antiquarian impression of late-medieval forest beekeeping versus a medieval depiction of domestic beekeeping. The image on the left is from (Schirach and Vogel 1774: table 1) The image on the right is from Lyon, Bibliothèque Municipale, MS 27, fol. 51^r.



Figure 13 London, British Library, Stowe 17, fol. 148^r (c. 1325). A beekeeper in pursuit of an escaping swarm.



Figure 14 New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS. M.81., fol. 58r (c. 1187). A medieval beekeeper houses a captured swarm in a hive.

Swarm Charms and Beekeeping Laws

The ‘Lorscher Bienensegen’ and ‘Wið ymbe’ mean to persuade escaping bees to return home. In this regard, they resemble cattle theft charms. Some phraseological motifs are common to both genres. The ‘Lorscher Bienensegen’, for instance, addresses the bees as *uihu*, ‘cattle’, and asks them ‘in munt godes gisunt heim zi comonne’. Meanwhile, ‘For Theft of Cattle’ asks Garmund to ‘fere ham þæt feoh’ (drive the cattle home).¹²⁷⁴ The ‘Wiener Hundensegen’, an Old High German text for safeguarding sheepdogs, prays all parties will arrive ‘heim gesunta’ (home in good health).¹²⁷⁵

As explained earlier in this thesis, cattle theft charms share a close relationship with contemporary legal records. The ‘Lorscher Bienensegen’ and ‘Wið ymbe’ relate to law texts, too. Law codes from early medieval England are comparatively silent about the practicalities of beekeeping and concentrate instead on regulating matters pertaining to theft and honey taxes.¹²⁷⁶ For our purposes, it is more beneficial to consider Middle High German law books.¹²⁷⁷ Most of these were composed at the same time and in the same places as the earliest surviving swarm charms. Such texts specifically help us to understand why ‘Wið ymbe’ and the ‘Lorscher Bienensegen’ are wary of bees escaping to woodland, as well as why the former seeks to prevent them from becoming ‘wilde’.

Ruprecht von Freising’s *Rechtsbuch* offers a beneficial starting point for a comparative discussion of swarm charms and medieval apicultural law. This southern German law book from 1328 contains the following passage:

¹²⁷⁴ Edited in Dobbie 1942: 125–126.

¹²⁷⁵ The similarities between the ‘Wiener Hundensegen’ and the ‘Lorscher Bienensegen’ have been noted before. See Kroes 1960. The entire poem is edited in von Steinmeyer 1916: 394–396.

¹²⁷⁶ Crane and Walker 1999: 5–6. For a wider context, see Carlen 1975.

¹²⁷⁷ Germanic *Bienenrecht* has been a special subject in legal history for more than two centuries. See Biener 1773; Carlen 1975; Lühn-Irriger 1999.

Gêt einem ein imp ab aus seinem peichar, der sol im under dem flug nâch gênmit clophen und mit laeutten; und swô er sich hin gelaet, dô sol man in lân schephen und sol im das nieman wern. Ist aver daz er aus dem flug chumbt, daz er sein nicht mêr sicht, sô ist er gemain, und swer in vindet, des ist er. Und der den imp vindet, ist ir nur ainer, sô sol er ein wartzaichenn bei den imp lân, dô er mit bewaer, daz er in des êrsten funden hab. Und swer hin nâch chumt, der hât an dem fund nicht.¹²⁷⁸

If a swarm flies out of its hive, its owner should follow it during its flight while [making] knocking and ringing [noises]; and where it settles, he should be allowed to seize it, and nobody should prevent him. If, however, the swarm descends from its flight in such a way that he is no longer able to see it, then it is a common good, and it will belong to whoever finds it. And the person who finds the swarm shall, if he is alone, leave a mark with the swarm and with it prove that he had found it first. And whoever comes afterwards can lay no claim to the find.

Regulations such as these clarify why the speaker in the ‘Lorscher Bienensegen’ is careful to tell the bees that ‘noh du mir nindrinnes | noh du mir nintuinnest’. Medieval beekeepers would lose their ownership claims the moment they lost sight of their escaping swarms. An untracked colony was ‘gemain’ or ‘common good’. Other articles from contemporary law codes show that the Old English charm’s apprehension about bees flying off into the woods and becoming ‘wilde’ can be understood in the same manner. The *Jutisch Lowbok* (German version c. 14th cent.), for instance, explains that ‘Findet ein Man Immen in dem wilden wolde, [...] unde is densulvigen nemandt gefolget, so horen se dem jennen, de se erst findt’ (If

¹²⁷⁸ Quoted in Lühn-Irriger 1999: 75.

someone finds a swarm of bees in the wild wood, and nobody has followed it, they will belong to the person who finds them first).¹²⁷⁹

A lemma in Joseph Wright's *English Dialect Dictionary* confirms the relevance of the just-cited passage from Ruprechts von Freising's *Rechtsbuch* for understanding texts such as the 'Wið ymbe' and the 'Lorscher Bienensegen'. It provides a rare indication that swarm charms were occasionally used in post-medieval England. '[T]o cherm bees', the dictionary explains, is 'to follow a swarm of bees, ringing a stone against a spade or watering-can'.¹²⁸⁰ The lemma then clarifies that '[t]his music is supposed to cause the bees to settle in the neighbourhood; another object in doing this is to let the neighbours know who the bees belong to if they should chance to settle on adjacent property'.¹²⁸¹

Like almost all other English sources, Wright's *Dictionary* makes no mention of verbal charms.¹²⁸² Nevertheless, producing cacophonous noises as an indication to neighbours, playing music to bees to lure them down, and charming a swarm through verbal utterances are related ideas. It is perhaps not surprising that other sources from continental Europe combine the three. A folklorist from Flanders recorded the following memory in 1897:

Wanneer er, in den goeden ouden Vlaamschen tijd, een bieman was die eenen zwerm kreeg, zoo begon men, zoo haast de zwerm aan het aflopen was, onder t' slaan op blekken schelen of op oude pikken en zeissens, tang en blaaspijp, daar met sprieten aarden in te werpen, en ook te schuifelen, en terwijl las men het volgende gebed:

¹²⁷⁹ Quoted in Lühn-Irriger 1999: 66.

¹²⁸⁰ See 'CHARM, sb.2 and v.2' in Markus 2019. A related entry recommends 'beating a tea-tray'. See 'CHIRM, sb. and v.'. Also see Dyer 1878: 124.

¹²⁸¹ See 'CHARM, sb.2 and v.2' in Markus 2019.

¹²⁸² The only known example is from 1754 and from Cornwall. This is not an ordinary swarm charm, but a charm for splitting an old colony into two new ones: 'the Cornish to this day invoke the Sprit Browny, when their bees swarm, and think that their crying Browny, Browny, will prevent their returning into their former hive, and make them pitch, so as to form a new colony'. See Borlase 1754: 168.

O grote koning der bieën
Daal neder van deze tak.¹²⁸³

When, in good old Flemish times, a beekeeper had a swarm, people started, as soon as the swarm was escaping — while hitting on tin bells, or on old sickles and scythes, prong[s] and blowtube[s] — to throw clouts of earth into it, and also to whistle. At the same time, people would read the following prayer:

O great king of bees,
come down from this branch.

This text was written down long after the medieval period, but it is not difficult to see it replicates themes from some of the sources discussed earlier. The German law book mandates that apiculturists should ‘under dem flug nâch gēnmit clophen und mit laeuten’; the English dictionary records swarm owners would ring spades and watering cans; the Flemish text states that beekeepers would follow absconding bees while whistling and beating scythes, sickles, and tin bells.

The same passage connects the widespread practice of making loud, ringing noises to the performance of verbal charms, and it also repeats some motifs we find in ‘Wið ymbe’ and the ‘Lorscher Bienensegen’. The swarm is strewn with ‘sprieten aarden’; afterwards, the beekeeper reads a prayer that petitions the great king of bees to ‘come down’ from his branch. The Old English’s charm mirrors these themes in its directive to ‘forweorp ofer grot, þonne hi swirman’ and to afterwards perform a text that asks *sigewif* to ‘settle down’ and to avoid woodland.

¹²⁸³ No. 699 in Haver 1964: 255. The prayer has here been truncated.

‘Wið ymbe’ mentions that it hopes to avoid *anda*, ‘ill-will’ and *æminde*, ‘jealousy’. It also hopes to silence ‘þa micelan mannes tungan’.¹²⁸⁴ Most often, such statements occur in apotropaic incantations and prayers.¹²⁸⁵ The speaker in the ‘Lorica of St Brendan asks’, ‘defende me Domine, [...] ab invidiis, et a malis oculis, auribus’;¹²⁸⁶ a Norwegian charm recorded in 1750 declares, ‘Jeg binder alle mine Uvenners Avun(d), | jeg binder Tænder og Tunge’.¹²⁸⁷ In this instance, however, the same expressions echo the complicated legal situation regarding swarm ownership and retrieval. As the article from Ruprechts von Freising’s *Rechtsbuch* explains, ‘swer hin nâch chumpt, der hât an dem fund nicht’.

The fact that coming second just meant being the first loser does seem to have persuaded some medieval beekeepers to engage in poor sportsmanship. ‘Wið ymbe’ it is not the only medieval swarm charm which seeks to thwart the efforts of other apiculturists. One Latin specimen from the fourteenth century utters the hope ‘ut nunquam quis hominum seducat uos ab isto loco’ (that no one ever leads you away from this place);¹²⁸⁸ another from the tenth- or eleventh century asks the bees to avoid ‘omnes alienas pigartōn’ (all unfamiliar apiaries).¹²⁸⁹ Meanwhile, the *Westerwolder Landrecht* (c. 1470) provides a specific example of how beekeepers might express their *anda* and *æminde*. A long and detailed section on various apicultural practices states: ‘[d]aer ensal niemant gene lockhuven setten in dat moer off velt’ (nobody shall place lure-hives in either swamp or field).¹²⁹⁰

Legal records can also help contextualise the tone and vocabulary choices of some medieval swarm charms, specifically regarding expressions about ownership. ‘Wið ymbe’ asks the bees to be ‘gemindige

¹²⁸⁴ On these statements, also see Elsackers 1987: 452–453.

¹²⁸⁵ Ebermann has characterised this section as the remnant of a *Gerichtssegen*. See Brunner 1924: 67.

¹²⁸⁶ Moran 1872: 42.

¹²⁸⁷ No. 294 in Bang 1901-1902: 167.

¹²⁸⁸ No. 8 in Ebermann 1917: 334.

¹²⁸⁹ Bischoff 1984b: 259.

¹²⁹⁰ Richthofen 1840: 266.

mines godes' and reminds them of the importance of 'metes and epeles'. These are legal terms for types of property. Æthelstan (c. 895–939), in the prologue of his first law code, distinguishes between 'minum agenum gode' and 'heora agenum gode'.¹²⁹¹ Frisian legal texts use doublets such as 'ethele and erve', which they sometimes couple with the doublet 'hof and hüs'.¹²⁹² German swarm charms and German laws, in turn, make use of this latter formula. One fifteenth-century text asks the bees 'das du hie bie mir wohnest zu haus und zu hofe' (that you live here with me at my house and garden).¹²⁹³ Meanwhile, the *Prager Stadrecht* (14th cent.) provides rules for what should happen if a swarm does settle in a 'nackepures haus oder hoff' (neighbour's house or garden).¹²⁹⁴

Even if swarm charms use legal jargon, they convey a sense of amicability and reverence towards their listeners that is uncommon for both incantations and law texts. A possible explanation to account for the inconsistency is that bees are social animals that are traditionally understood to exemplify human virtues. They build houses, respect a hierarchy, and perform diligent labour.¹²⁹⁵ They also dance and they make humming sounds that medieval poets have traditionally compared to human speech and music. For instance, in Chaucer's *Squire's Tale*, a group of people 'murmureden as dooth a swarm of been'.¹²⁹⁶

Traditional legends envision bees as sensitive, even innocent creatures who need to be involved in the beekeeper's social life and talked to regularly.¹²⁹⁷ As Jacqueline Simpson and Steve Roud explain in *A Dictionary of English Folklore*:

¹²⁹¹ Liebermann 1903: 146.

¹²⁹² Behagel 1935: 12.

¹²⁹³ Holzmann 2001: 144.

¹²⁹⁴ Rosslor and Grimm 1963: 139.

¹²⁹⁵ See Schumacher 2015: 300–302.

¹²⁹⁶ Line 204 in the *Squire's Tale*, edited in Benson, Robinson, and Cannon 2008: 171. The use of bee colonies as metaphors for people is explored extensively in Hollingsworth 2005. For early medieval examples, see Taylor 2005; Constable 2007; Casiday 2004.

¹²⁹⁷ For more on this subject, see Ransome 1937.

They had to be treated as members of the household; in particular, they must be told about deaths, births, and marriages in the family, their hives must be appropriately adorned, and they must be given their share of the festive or funereal food. They would then hum, to show they consented to remain.¹²⁹⁸

Simpson and Roud do not provide medieval examples to support this statement. Nevertheless, it seems plausible that the domestic and cordial phraseology we find in swarm charms reflects a traditional sensitivity to the idea that bees are capricious, easily offended animals who can comprehend what is said to them. Striking the wrong tone or using improper forms of address might be unwise: affronted and uncooperative bees could decide not to be *gemindig* of their beekeeper's best interests.¹²⁹⁹

Early Vernacular Swarm Charms: Transmission and Origin

'Wið ymbe' and the 'Lorscher Bienensegen' were written down in geographically distant locations — in south-west England (perhaps in the vicinity of Exeter or Glastonbury) and in Lorsch, in the south-west of Germany. Scholars have advanced two main hypotheses to explain why these texts resemble one another. A critical factor in both explanations is that the 'Lorscher Bienensegen' mentions Christian figures, while 'Wið ymbe' does not.

The first hypothesis sees both texts as individual iterations of a much older and more widespread oral tradition. It suggests prototypes of

¹²⁹⁸ See 'bees' in Simpson and Roud 2003.

¹²⁹⁹ For additional notes on the relationship between the bees and the charmer, see Spamer 1978; Osborn 2006: 280.

the Old English document were brought to England in the fifth century or soon afterwards.¹³⁰⁰ Over time, the ‘Lorscher Bienensegen’ was adapted to fit with Christian mentalities, while ‘Wið ymbe’ was able to retain its pre-Christian character. In 1993, Frederick Holton claimed that ‘most scholars’ support this theory.¹³⁰¹ Nevertheless, evidence for the idea that singing songs to escaping bees is an ancient, pan-Germanic custom is not considerable. If so, we would expect a much greater number of texts from later English sources.

Another reason for scepticism is that ‘Wið ymbe’ is a marginal inscription in CCC 41. Some of the marginalia in this eleventh-century manuscript are remarkably inconsistent with other texts from early medieval England. The manuscript’s office chants, for instance, are for the secular office with nine lessons at Sunday matins, not the Benedictine twelve.¹³⁰² Moreover, numerous inscriptions betray foreign influences. The manuscript contains Irish and Hiberno-Latin material, and it also describes a unique *ordo* for Candlemas that combines elements from English and German missals.¹³⁰³

The second explanation reverses the train of thought of the first. Austin Fife reasoned in 1939 and later also in 1964 that both the ‘Lorscher Bienensegen’ and ‘Wið ymbe’ are individual translations of Latin poems made by Christian monks.¹³⁰⁴ The reason that the Old English poem includes no religious references is that it is ‘a premature instance of a Christian swarm charm which has been completely secularized’.¹³⁰⁵ In this regard, it is essential to emphasise many late- and post-medieval swarm charms do look back to the work of churchmen writing in Latin. This is perhaps not surprising, as some medieval monasteries cultivated bees on

¹³⁰⁰ Sandmann 1975: 35.

¹³⁰¹ Holton 1993: 37. He cites the following studies as being in agreement: Elsackers 1987; Jongeboer 1984. Another study which espouses the same view is Storms 1948: 132–140.

¹³⁰² Hohler 1980: 276.

¹³⁰³ Hohler 1980: 276.

¹³⁰⁴ Fife 1939: 347–350; 1964.

¹³⁰⁵ Fife 1939: 380.

an almost industrial scale. In 1269–1270, the Beaulieu Abbey in Hampshire may have possessed as many as 300 hives. To compare: Domesday Book records show that three out of every ten landholdings in Essex had bees; on average, each holding possessed four to five hives.¹³⁰⁶

Proof that some monks were in the habit of composing swarm charms comes in the form of a comical, albeit slightly deprecating marginal inscription in Codex Sangallensis 190, a ninth-century manuscript from the Stiftsbibliothek of St. Gallen in Switzerland.¹³⁰⁷ The codex contains two copies of the same Latin *Bienensegen*. The first appears on page 1; the second on page 37. These ask the bees ‘ut non te in altum leuare nec longe uolare’ (that you neither lift up into the air nor fly far away).¹³⁰⁸ However, the first copy misspells the word ‘altum’ as ‘alutum’.¹³⁰⁹ The orthographical mistake was noticed by an early reader who appears to have known the culprit personally. He annotated the second version as follows:

*Quod puer hic floruid apium dum carmina finxit
Inclitus & partus caelesti dogmate fartus
Nonpet& hec altum velis etsi dicere verba.*¹³¹⁰

That boy lived here while he made songs about bees.
He was renowned, born full of heavenly teaching,
Let him not attempt ‘altum’, even if you want to say these words.

¹³⁰⁶ Kritsky 2017: 253–254. Also see Crane and Walker 1999: 8–9.

¹³⁰⁷ For a study of this manuscript and its content, see Mathisen 1998.

¹³⁰⁸ No. 2 in Ebermann 1917: 333.

¹³⁰⁹ Ewald 1883: 357. Also see Armbruster 1955.

¹³¹⁰ Page 37, Cod. Sang. 190.

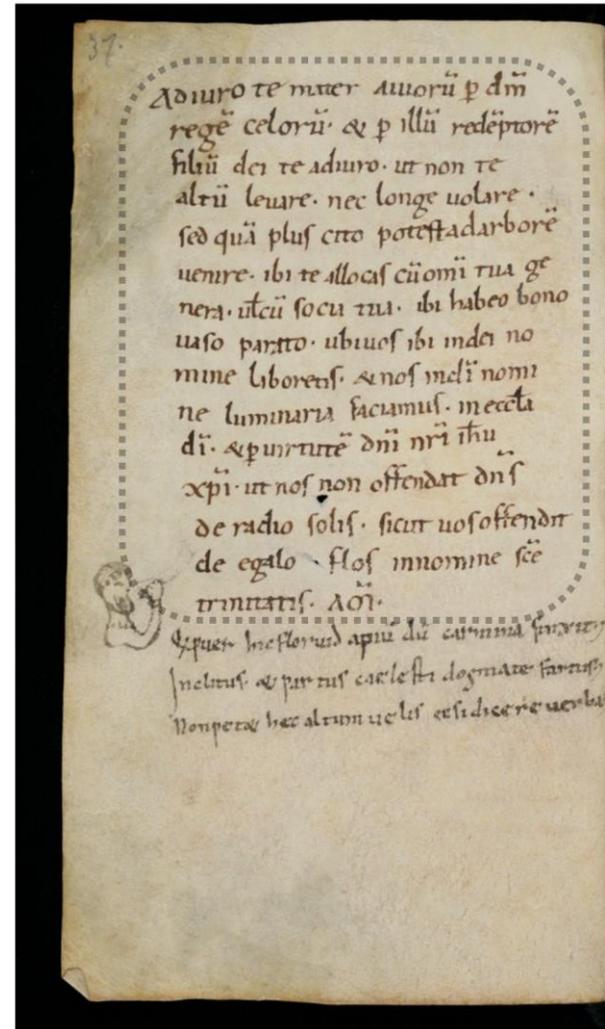
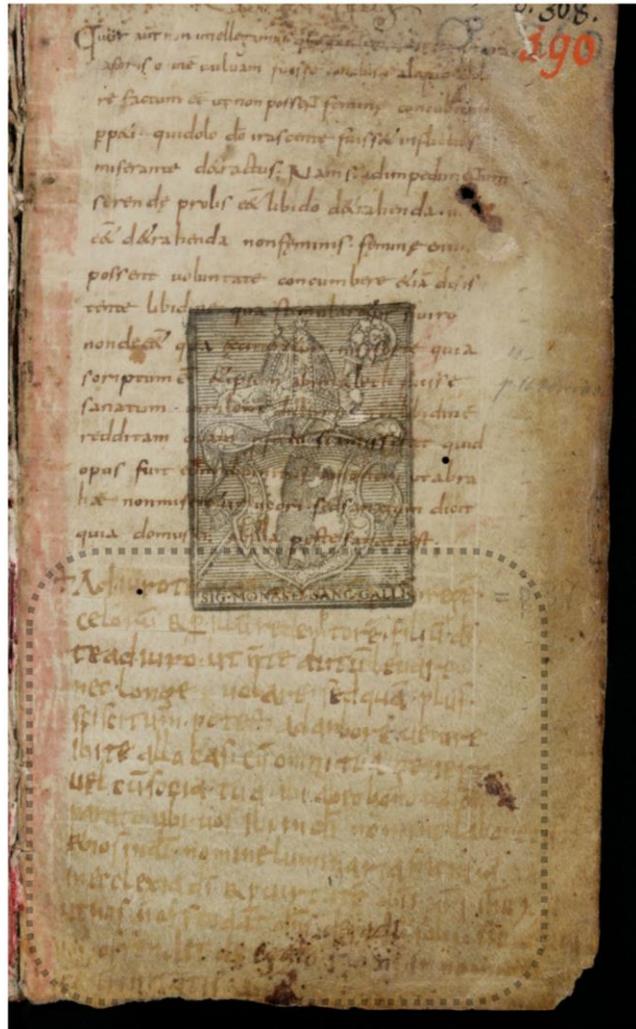


Figure 15 St. Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod 190, page 1 and 37. The manuscript contains two almost identical swarm charms. One was annotated by a later scribe (right image).

Other evidence for the idea that some late Middle High German swarm charms are ‘secularised’ translations of pre-existing Latin examples comes in the form of transmission irregularities. One fourteenth-century German manuscript misunderstands a text for bees as one for a consumptive ‘swyn’.¹³¹¹ An underlying Latin copying mistake is the reason for the error: *apes* means ‘bees’, but *aper* means ‘swine’. In early medieval German scripts, the glyphs for *s* and *r* are almost identical.

Fife’s idea that many late medieval and Early Modern charms are based on earlier Latin texts is convincing. Nevertheless, his proposition that ‘Wið ymbe’ and the ‘Lorscher Bienensegen’ are translations of Latin texts is less plausible. If early Germanic swarm charms would be ‘vernacularised’ documents, we would expect them to contain traces of Latin syntax and phraseology. The opposite is the case: two early Latin charms include Old High German words.¹³¹²

We already mentioned that ‘Wið ymbe’ contains no Christian references and the ‘Lorscher Bienensegen’ contains phrases that resemble those of other Germanic charms, both in German and English. In this regard, it is interesting to discover that one of the earliest references to charming bees appears in an eighth-century sermon from either a Franconian or Alemannic territory (modern-day Southern Germany, Austria, and Switzerland). It condemns such practices as pagan:

quicumque super sanctum simbulum et orationem dominicam carmina aut incantationes paganorum dicit, in animalibus mutis aut in hominibus incantat, et prodesse aliquid aut contra esse iudicat, [...] iste non christianus, sed paganus est. carmina uel incantationes, quas diximus, haec sunt: ad fascinum, ad spalmum, ad furunculum, ad dracunculum, ad aluus, ad apium.¹³¹³

¹³¹¹ See MS 838 in Pensel and Stahl 1998: 115.

¹³¹² Bischoff 1984b; Haupt 1871: 8.

¹³¹³ Caspari 1881: 315.

Whoever, in addition to the Credo and the Lord's Prayer, says pagan songs or incantations, whoever chants in the case of humans or mute animals, and judges such to do good or to be efficacious [...] is not a Christian, but a pagan. The songs or incantations, of which we speak, are these: for witchcraft, for spasms, for a furuncle, for a serpent, for diarrhoea, for bees.

If members of the church did compose some of the earliest swarm charms we have available today, did they perhaps model these on less-acceptable, 'carmina uel incantationes [...] ad apium'?

Several strong arguments suggest charms to recover bee swarms did indeed emerge from a multilinguistic milieu, characterised both by lay and clerical contributions. The most helpful way to support this proposition is to plot the available information on a map. We can utilise the following datasets:

1. The provenance of medieval swarm charms. At the beginning of this chapter, it was explained that Austin Fife was able to collect nine Latin and eight medieval German swarm charms in 1964. Since then, the corpus has expanded: in 1984, Bernard Bischoff found an additional Latin text and research undertaken for this thesis has uncovered another.¹³¹⁴ Of these nineteen documents, nine retain

¹³¹⁴ This appears on fol. 117^d of HS. 749. Dombibliothek Hildesheim. The text is not edited elsewhere. It runs as follows:

Coniurat(i)o ad apes . apis . apic(u)la u(el) modic(u)la mat(er) mat(er)cula altu(m)
uolans aerem i(m)pugna(n)s q(ui)b(us) cera(m) seratis an(te) d(omi)n(u)m porteris
. adiuro uos p(er) patre(m) & filiu(m) & sp(iritu)m s(an)c(tum) ut n(on) habeatis
potestate(m) hic fugie(n)di . adiuro (etiam) uos pedat(ri)ces siue i(m)pugnantes
apes per patre(m) & filiu(m) et sp(iritu)m s(an)c(tum) ne ledatis aliq(u)e(m) uene .
expellatis existis domesticis apib(us) . ayos . am(en) . ayos . am(en) . ayos .
am(en).

some indication of their provenance.¹³¹⁵ Table 1 offers more precise codicological information.

2. The isoglosses of the Old High German language. If Latin swarm charms were based on German examples, we would expect them to have been composed and transmitted within these. The fact that CCC 41 preserves an Old English swarm charm is not an immediate invalidation of this hypothesis, as the scribe who wrote down much of this manuscript's marginalia seems to have used non-English sources.¹³¹⁶

3. The geographical difference in historical preferences for domestic and forest beekeeping. As explained earlier, swarm charms are for domestic beekeepers, not honey hunters. Ludwig Armbruster has conjectured both professions were conducted in different ratios depending on the location. In the densely wooded regions of Northern and Eastern Europe, people often favoured forest beekeeping. In the Alpine areas to the south and the Germanic-speaking areas to the west, people preferred to cultivate bees in hives and apiaries.¹³¹⁷ If the swarm charms we encounter in medieval manuscripts related to 'vernacular' practices, we would expect them to have been recorded in the areas dominated by domestic apiculture.

After combining the listed information into a single diagram, we notice that most texts for recovering bees were documented within the expected area. Aside from the Old English charm 'Wið ymbe', all medieval swarm charms

¹³¹⁵ 'Wið ymbe' has an approximate region of origin. Because it is an atypical document for several reasons, its provenance has not been taken into consideration here. See footnote 1303.

¹³¹⁶ See footnotes 939 and 1303.

¹³¹⁷ Armbruster 1931. For an accessible reiteration of Armbruster's argument, see Schier and Beck 1975: 517.

with a tentatively traceable provenance seem to have been written down within the isoglosses of the Old High German language. The same texts were also recorded in regions predominantly reserved for domestic beekeeping. The convergence of various forms of evidence does not offer a conclusive answer regarding the origin of medieval swarm charms. However, it does suggest that even if some of the earliest swarm charms were composed in Latin, the cultural experience of singing songs to bees was mediated by the German language.

Shelfmark	Library	Date	Provenance	Type	Language	Included Charms
Vindob. 387	Nationalbibliothek, Vienna	9 th cent.	Salzburg	Astrological miscellany	Latin/German	No. 1 in Ebermann 1917: 332.
Vindob. 751	Nationalbibliothek, Vienna	9 th cent.	Cologne/ Mainz?	Relig. and med. miscellany	Latin/German	No. 3 in Fife 1939: 309.
Pal. Lat. 220	Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana, Rome	9 th cent.	Lorsch	Homiletic miscellany	Latin/German	No. 4 in Ebermann 1917: 333.
San. Gall. 190	Stiftsbibliothek St. Gallen	9 th cent.	St. Gall	Eccl. correspondence	Latin	No. 2 in Ebermann 1917: 333.
Vindob. 2532	Nationalbibliothek, Vienna	12 th cent.	Vienna?	Medical miscellany	Latin	Nos. 6 and 7 in Ebermann 1917: 334.
Monac. 7021	Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich	1400– 1450	Bavaria	Med. and tech. recipe book	Latin/German	Nos. 8,9,11, and 12 in Ebermann 1917: 334–335.
MS. Schloß Wolfsthurn	Lost	1450	Tirol?	Med. and tech. recipe book	Latin/German	No. 16 in Ebermann 1917: 336.
Monac. 467	Bayer. Staatsbib., Munich	1477	Bavaria	Med. and tech. recipe book	Latin/German	No. 10 in Ebermann 1917: 335.

Table 1

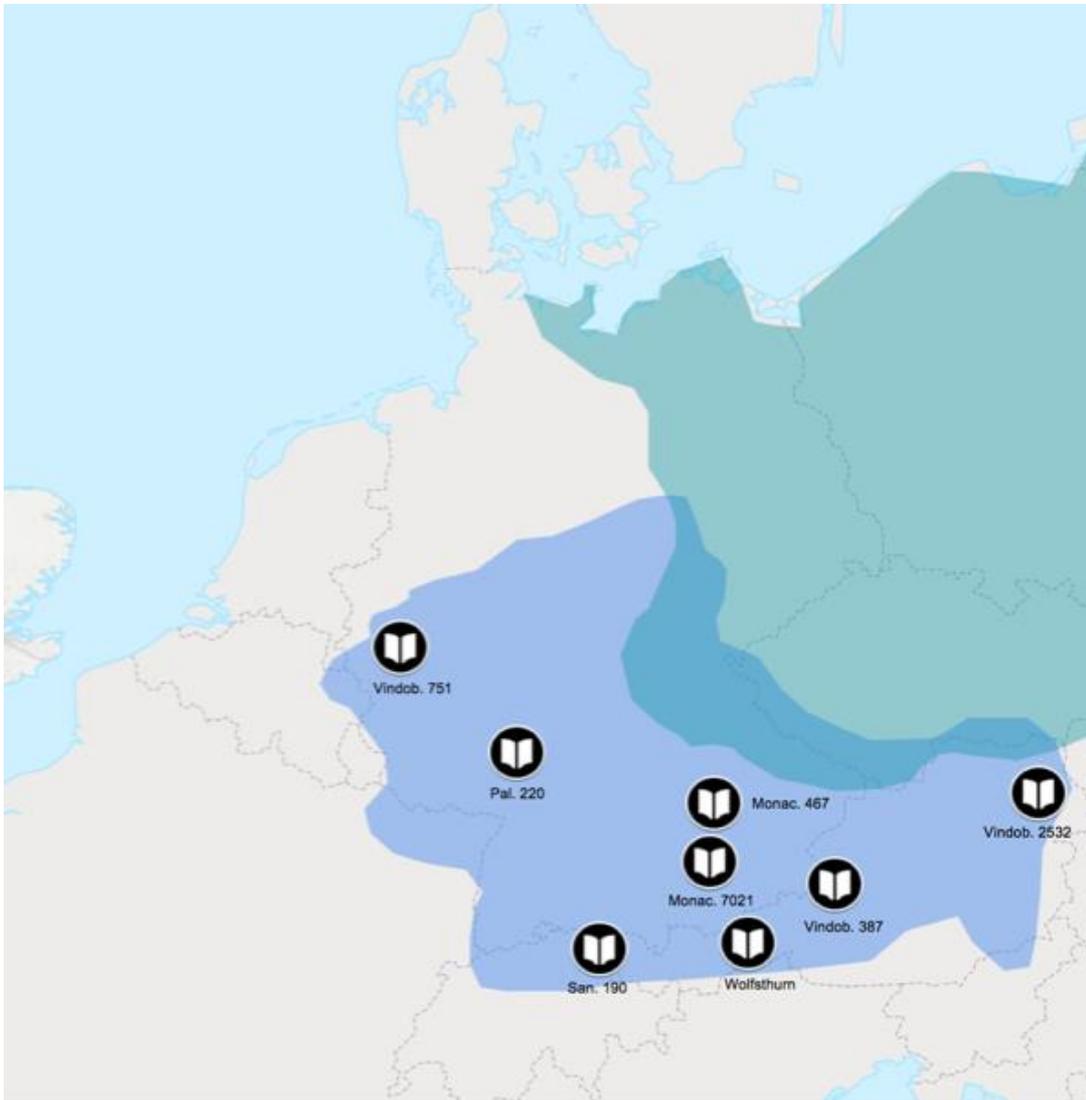


Figure 16 Provenances of medieval swarm charms. The blue area describes the isoglosses of the Old High German language; the green area covers regions predominantly reserved for forest beekeeping. The isoglosses were based on Meineke and Schwerdt 2001: 209; Schmidt 1985. The division between domestic and forest beekeeping follows Armbruster 1931. Note Vindob. 751 moved from Mainz to Cologne at an early date (both within the blue area) and that Monac. 467 and 7021 have been placed in the heart of Bavaria on account of dialectal features. The provenances of Vindob. 2532 and Wolfsthurn are speculative.

Conclusion

This chapter has considered the Old English charm 'Wið ymbe' alongside the 'Lorscher Bienensegen' and several other swarm charms from medieval German manuscripts. Previous scholars have associated 'Wið ymbe' with pre-Christian beliefs about Valkyries. This is mostly because it addresses swarming bees with a unique Old English word, *sigewif*. The discussion presented above argues that *sigewif* is an Old English pun: the compound noun integrates contemporary notions about how to address bees (as female royalty) with the charmer's wishes that the swarm 'descends' to earth.

The linguistic and thematic overlaps between 'Wið ymbe' and vernacular and Latin charms from Germany shed light on some of the English charm's phraseology. The charmers' request that the bees do not fly 'wildy' to woodland relates to the fact that absconding swarms became common property after resettling in non-domestic environments (often trees or forests). The phrase appears to communicate a specific legal concern about ownership rights. Bees are naturally inclined not to be 'mindful' of estate boundaries (despite the charmer's request that they are) when searching for new nesting sites during swarming season. The overlaps between 'Wið ymbe' and charms from Germany also permit suggesting that the development of written early medieval swarm charms should be associated with monasteries in Southern Germany, Switzerland, and Austria, where domestic beekeeping appears to have been practised on a large scale.

Conclusion

Mixing together the nine herbs from this medieval manuscript [...] creates amazing new flavor combinations. [...] [T]he result is a mild green cup that provides you with great health benefits. A full body tonic, nine Herb Tea is also quite enjoyable, with its fresh clean aroma.

Each sample contains 50g of our unique organic herbal mixture. Use one tablespoon per mug. Add freshly boiled water and leave to brew for 5–10 minutes.¹³¹⁸

Remember, Mugwort, what you told us?
What you arranged at Regenmeld for us?
Against poison, against contagion, against
the hateful one who travels through the land?

Three against thirty, Mugwort.
Remember? Remember

polio, tuberculosis, HIV?
Remember sickle cell, and diabetes?
Pediatric cancers? Hemophilia?
Have you forgotten these?
[...]
But to which pole can we flee when it comes to us from each?
When it has videotaped our wives

¹³¹⁸ 'Peppermint Nine Herbs Charm Organic Tea 50g' [no date].

at their ablutions? Photographed
our husbands as they mowed the lawn?

[...]

And when, in the end, even
our sweethearts
turn from us
in sorrow
& disgust
you tell us to recite a charm, to grind
some herbs to dust? And if

this fails, what
then?¹³¹⁹

Above are two excerpts from recent, non-academic texts. The first is the product description of 'Peppermint Nine Herbs Charm Organic Tea 50g', sold for £5.75 on 'nineherbs.uk'. The second is a shortened version of Laura Kasischke's poem 'Nine Herbs', published in the *New England Review* in 2013. Both texts are based on the 'Nine Herbs Charm' from *Lacnunga*. The tea claims it '[m]ix[es] together the nine herbs from this medieval manuscript'. Kasischke's poem repeats some of the medieval incantation's most distinctive phraseology. It reiterates the latter's signature invocation of Mugwort and reprises its preoccupation with triumphant arithmetic: 'Three against thirty, Mugwort. | Remember?'.

Nevertheless, 'Nine Herbs' mentions few of the zoological diseases that slither and wing their way through the medieval charm. Its malignant 'hateful one[s] who travel through the land' are the diagnostic labels of medical specialists: 'HIV', 'diabetes', 'hemophilia'. These noxious voyeurs scrutinise their victims during private moments of vulnerable introspection.

¹³¹⁹ Kasischke 2013.

The patients have also changed. They are middle-aged stereotypes of American suburbia: husbands mowing the lawn and wives taking a shower.

Kasischke's poem and the product description from 'nineherbs.uk' are not just similar because they are based on the same medieval source. Both use medieval phraseology to formulate a statement about modernity. Kasischke's composition adapts the charm's imagery to interrogate contemporary paranoia and helplessness about (stigmatised) conditions: 'when [...] even our sweethearts turn from us in sorrow & disgust [...] what then?' The marketing strategy of the tea is unmistakably 'New Age'. Its official position is that the infusion offers 'amazing new flavor combinations' and 'great health benefits'. Subliminally, it articulates a different premise: consumers who buy the tea will be able to have an authentic 'organic' experience and tap into the unpolluted sources of healing that spring from the pre-industrial past.

The conclusion of this thesis begins with these two texts because they raise several intriguing and important questions about the Old English Metrical Charms: Dobbie's *Minor Poems* from 1942 contains numerous early medieval compositions. Few have generated as much academic controversy or appealed as much to the general public as the Metrical Charms. There exist no post-modern imitations or marketing pitches based on 'The Capture of the Five Boroughs', 'The Seasons for Fasting', 'The Death of Edgar', 'Judgment Day II', or 'The Lord's Prayer III'. At the end of this thesis, it is important to ask why not. What sets the Charms apart? Specific adaptations of a Metrical Charm can shed light on modernity. But has modernity also shaped interpretations of the Metrical Charms?

This thesis has revealed that fashions in specific interpretations of the Metrical Charms are often relatable to much broader trends in contemporary academia. The commencement of the academic study of vernacular charms — some of the earliest poetic texts in German and English — succeeded and amplified the formation of a 'Teutonic' national

identity early in the nineteenth century.¹³²⁰ The misleading yet inveterate view that the Metrical Charms are ‘native’ compositions derives from this branch of scholarship. Meanwhile, the final stage in the confirmation of the Metrical Charms as ‘minor poems’ occurred in tandem with the rise of literary criticism in liberal arts programs around the 1940s.¹³²¹

Readings of specific texts occasionally match up with contemporary developments, too. Marie Nelson and Lisa Weston published their articles on Dobbie’s ‘Metrical Charm 6’ during the proliferation of feminist literary criticism in the 80s and 90s. These studies, titled ‘A woman’s charm’ (1985) and ‘Women’s Medicine, Women’s Magic’ (1995), make a case for a new translation of the Old English line ‘pon(n)e ic me wille habban’.¹³²² The phrase needs to be spoken by a pregnant woman and presumably refers to an unborn child.¹³²³ In 1948, Godfrid Storms had suggested to emend ‘pon(n)e’ to *pone* and to translate ‘such a one I want to have’.¹³²⁴ Nelson and Weston preferred to preserve the manuscript reading, construing ‘then I wish to own myself’ or ‘I want to have control over my own body’.¹³²⁵ These interpretations are not commonly accepted: Nelson herself characterised the second as ‘outrageously feminist’.¹³²⁶ However, they are noteworthy because they illustrate the proficiency of the Metrical Charms to hold up a mirror to the present.

Several circumstances help to explain why interpretations of the Metrical Charms are sometimes associated with modern developments. First, they are unusually challenging on a linguistic level. Thomas Hill asserted in 2012 that ‘[s]cholars concerned with editing and interpreting the Old English Metrical Charms would all readily agree [...] that these are some of the most enigmatic texts in the corpus of Old English and indeed

¹³²⁰ See ‘Romantic Philology’ (page 17).

¹³²¹ See ‘Professional Journals, Collections, and Critical Editions (1875–1942)’ (page 21).

¹³²² Nelson 1985; Weston 1995.

¹³²³ See ‘Ritual Three: Burdened Stomachs, Gravid wombs, and Fetal Nourishment’ (page 212)

¹³²⁴ Storms 1948: 198–199.

¹³²⁵ Nelson 1985: 5.

¹³²⁶ Lisa Weston misconstrued the charm as a lactation remedy and argued ‘This reading is apt’. See Weston 1995: 291.

in the whole of the medieval English literary corpus'.¹³²⁷ Specifically, the ambiguity of specific words and phrases has encouraged speculation and widened the spectrum of interpretative possibilities. The line 'pon(n)e ic me wille habban' attests to this circumstance. Similar examples are *erce* in 'Æcerbot',¹³²⁸ *Woden* in the 'Nine Herbs Charm',¹³²⁹ *inspidenwiht* in 'Against a Dwarf',¹³³⁰ *magapiht* and *metepiht* in *Lacnunga*'s third pregnancy ritual,¹³³¹ *ear* in 'For the Water Elf Disease',¹³³² *Garmund* in 'For Theft of Cattle',¹³³³ *gyrd* in the 'Journey Charm',¹³³⁴ and *sigewif* in 'Wið ymbe'.¹³³⁵ These words have all attracted a broad range of explanations and hypotheses. Their enduring complexity has sometimes endowed them with a degree of notoriety. In 2020, Caroline Batten and Mark Williams asserted the phrase which contains *erce* 'has perhaps been the subject of more debate than any other line in the Old English metrical charm corpus'.¹³³⁶ In 2006, Philip Shaw called *inspidenwiht* 'one of the best-known cruces of Old English literature, and, indeed, in the history of the English language'.¹³³⁷

Another circumstance that has encouraged scholarly debate is that the Metrical Charms straddle conceptual categories that medieval and modern thinkers have often regarded as contrastive. They have been considered Christian *or* pre-Christian, popular *or* superstitious, oral *or* textual, magical *or* religious. Such either-or models are unaccommodating: most Metrical Charms blur these dichotomies into an indistinct, multidimensional spectrum. Similarly, academic progress has witnessed numerous implicit, sometimes confusing changes in the significance of

¹³²⁷ Thomas D. Hill 2012: 145.

¹³²⁸ See footnotes 1151–1156.

¹³²⁹ See 'Woden as an *Interpretatio Germanica*' (page 65).

¹³³⁰ See footnotes 374–379.

¹³³¹ See 'Figure 7'.

¹³³² See 'Muddy Ears and Sacral Cups' (page 157)

¹³³³ See 'The Garmund Conundrum' (page 279)

¹³³⁴ See 'Walking Canes and Protective Girdles' (page 254)

¹³³⁵ See footnotes 102–107, 1263–1265.

¹³³⁶ Batten and Williams 2020: 1.

¹³³⁷ Shaw 2006: 101.

technical terminology. Several key terms have a different meaning now than they did 150 years ago. Examples are ‘charm’, ‘superstition’, ‘magic’, and ‘paganism’.¹³³⁸

A third circumstance that has fostered disagreement is that scholars often regard the Metrical Charms as expressive of a vital yet elusive dimension of medieval literature: ‘popular’ oral poetry. Medieval writers ordinarily valued other genres (the marginal scribe of CCC 41 is an exception), to the extent that the surviving written record includes denunciations of both charms and nonreligious verse.¹³³⁹ A previous generation of academics supposed that most Metrical Charms had survived to the present day because they had escaped contemporary censorship.¹³⁴⁰ Nevertheless, oral literature must have flourished outside the walls of monasteries and scriptoria. Historians and literary critics have often interpreted the Metrical Charms as documents that can give an impression of what the early Middle Ages were *really* like, even if there are only very few documents from the same region and period that resemble them.

In summary, the Metrical Charms have attracted controversy due to a combination of three circumstances: longstanding and unsolved lexicographical problems; imprecise terminology and genre definitions; and a widespread consensus that charms are ‘popular’ and ‘oral’ texts that enable the extrapolation of otherwise only fragmentarily attested beliefs and practices. Individually, these circumstances demand ingenuity and resourcefulness. Combined, they offer an alluring possibility: underpinning a specific model of medieval history that is backed by modern theory but not unambiguously articulated by the medieval record.

Sometimes, the presumption that the Metrical Charms are representative of widespread but suppressed beliefs and practices has

¹³³⁸ See footnotes 59, 874–878, as well as ‘Genre Labels: “Metrical Charm” and “Galdor”’ (page 24) and ‘Pagan Resonances and Popular Piety’ (page 27).

¹³³⁹ See, for instance, footnote 156.

¹³⁴⁰ See footnote 226.

caused the speculative analysis of a single obscure passage to attain a much more pervasive cultural relevance. This helps to explain why propositions about fertility cults from early medieval England are often tied to Frazerian misinterpretations of 'Æcerbot' and arguments about tenth or eleventh-century syncretism often claim the 'Nine Herbs Charm' mentions Christ as well as the supreme deity of the Germanic pantheon.¹³⁴¹ That vernacular charms have often been regarded as popular rather than elitist forms of literature also clarifies why scholars have used them to recover voices of historically marginalised groups. Jacob Grimm turned to these texts in the 1840s to unearth the mythic foundations of Romantic nationalism. Feminist scholars in the 1980s and 90s discerned in them indications of female emancipation and pro-choice rhetoric.

Contributions to the Field

If the above answers our initial question (has modernity shaped interpretations of the Metrical Charms), it raises new ones: what are the consequences of the fact that the collective scholarship of the Metrical Charms is not just an accumulation of knowledge about an obscure set of medieval texts, but also a testament to how scholars have telescoped the medieval past? How does this thesis participate in this tradition, and what are the prospects for the future of the field? These questions are much harder to answer.

The contribution of this thesis to Old English studies is first and foremost lexicographical. It provides some new answers to the complex problems mentioned above. For instance, it argues *erce* is not a Tellurian goddess but a pun on 'ark' and 'grain bin'. *Gyrd* is not some rod or staff but a West Germanic cognate for 'girth'. In the 'Journey Charm', it refers to the

¹³⁴¹ See 'the *Erce* Enigma' (page 313) and 'Is the "Nine Herbs Charm" a "Germanic" Poem?' (page 61).

protective aura of the poem. *Magapiht* and *metepiht* are poetic compound nouns that purposefully conflate gestation and nutrition: a well-fed ‘stomach burden’ produces a well-nourished or ‘full born’ ‘womb burden’.¹³⁴² (It is about the latter that the pregnant woman says: ‘þon(n)e ic me wille habban’). If accepted, these propositions will improve our understanding of the lexicography of the English language, enabling us to update the reference works with which we study it.¹³⁴³

Second, this thesis aims to offer a clearer insight into the literary contexts of specific texts and the implications such contexts have for our perception of early English syncretism. The discoveries that *erce* means ‘ark’, *Garmund* signifies ‘St Germanus’, and *Woden* refers to Hermes Trismegistus modifies the still established view that the Metrical Charms preserve references to pre-Christian beliefs.¹³⁴⁴ Even if some rehearse phraseology from classical compositions, none openly advocates belief patterns that disagree with popular tenth- and eleventh-century approaches to religion.

Third, this thesis contributes to our understanding of the multi-linguistic and learned origins of these vernacular texts. The ‘Journey Charm’ resembles Old Irish and Hiberno-Latin texts, and ‘For Theft of Cattle’ survives in a manuscript with much insular material. The latter invokes *Garmund* instead of **Germund* and might document a Brythonic influence.¹³⁴⁵ ‘Æcerbot’ contains Latin and English. The ‘Nine Herbs Charm’ borrows magical techniques and phraseology from late-classical treatises on medicine and botany.¹³⁴⁶ ‘Against a Wen’ construct puns in

¹³⁴² See ‘Figure 7’.

¹³⁴³ Proposed lemma changes are as follows. In the *DOE*: ‘earc, arc, earce’ (footnote 1159); ‘ham Noun (m., cl. 1)’ (footnotes 391–388); ‘gyrd Noun, f., cl. 2’ (footnotes 966–992); ‘feologan Vb.’ (footnotes 597–599); ‘ĕare, ĕar Noun, n., wk., rarely st.’ (footnotes 613–626). In the *MED*: ‘hāme n.(2)’ (footnotes 391–388); ‘tight n.(2)’ (footnotes 818–831). In the *OED*: ‘hame, n.2’ (footnotes 391–388); ‘gird, n.1’ (footnotes 966–992); ‘tight, adj., adv., and n.2’ (footnotes 818–831).

¹³⁴⁴ See ‘the *Erce* Enigma’ (page 313), ‘the *Garmund* Conundrum’ (page 279), and ‘*Woden* as an *interpretatio germanica*’ (page 65).

¹³⁴⁵ See footnotes 1051–1052.

¹³⁴⁶ See ‘*Namenzauber* and Verbal Homeopathy’ (page 72).

English that demand a familiarity with Latin, and it equally incorporates a previously unidentified and covert reference to the Bible.¹³⁴⁷ Nevertheless, it develops themes and images that are otherwise primarily attested in Scandinavian literature.¹³⁴⁸ 'For the Water Elf Disease' rehearses motifs first attested in Roman Gaul,¹³⁴⁹ while 'Wið ymbe' resembles contemporary and later German texts.¹³⁵⁰

Finally, this thesis provides a compelling argument for the value of a comparative methodology in the analysis and contextualisation of Old English literature. Recent decades have already witnessed the publication of several monographs that shed light on specific texts or genres by analysing them alongside analogues. Christine Rauer, for example, has examined the dragon fight in *Beowulf* through a comparison with saints lives.¹³⁵¹ Patrick Murphy's monograph on the Exeter Book Riddles 'unriddles' these texts by situating them within a broader folk tradition.¹³⁵² This thesis shows the Metrical Charms also benefit from a comparative approach. The chapters on 'Against a Dwarf' and 'Against a Wen', specifically, show that it is sometimes possible to uncover entirely new dimensions of the Old English sources by reading them alongside later and contemporary analogues. A nightmarish entity that harasses two siblings with a magical bridle also appears in migratory legends such as 'The Bishop's Wife of Yarrowfoot'; diseases that need to 'go north' feature in incantations from nineteenth-century Norway; Warts that should become as small as biblical mustard seed turn up in nineteenth-century Swedish charms. The Metrical Charms are undeniably related to earlier and later literary traditions, not just from England, but also from Germany, Scandinavia, Ireland, and the Low Countries. An examination of the Old English sources frequently benefits from acknowledging and analysing

¹³⁴⁷ See 'Name-Calling' (page 175) and 'Belittling Similes' (page 190).

¹³⁴⁸ See 'Cadaverous Analogies' (page 183).

¹³⁴⁹ See footnote 595.

¹³⁵⁰ See footnote 1258.

¹³⁵¹ Rauer 2000.

¹³⁵² Murphy 2011.

such connections.

Prospects and Future Challenges

It is challenging to predict the future of the Metrical Charms and their place in Old English studies. The curricula of modern universities tend to favour texts that appeal to modern audiences and that have an established reputation as 'literary' compositions. The Metrical Charms have satisfied these criteria for over a century. It is likely they will continue to do so in the future. Meanwhile, most current research that engages with the Metrical Charms (including this thesis) is concerned with questions that reach beyond the confines of Dobbie's corpus. At present, English charm scholarship faces two main challenges: collecting the available sources and determining an appropriate method for making these available to a modern audience.

English charm scholars are somewhat unique in international circles in that they do not have access to a comprehensive catalogue. Charm collections are available for Danish, Swedish, German, and Dutch, as well as for many classical and Eastern European languages.¹³⁵³ The surviving English sources remain scattered in articles, notes, manuscripts, and personal records.¹³⁵⁴ To further our understanding of the Old English charms, we must assemble these dispersed materials and publish them in the same database.

¹³⁵³ For catalogues used in this thesis, see Ohrt 1917, 1921; Haver 1964; Braekman 1997; Bang 1901-1902; Linderholm 1917-1940; Holzmann 2001; Forsblom 1927; Af Klintberg 1965; Heim 1892. For more examples, see Ilyefalvi 2017: 38-39.

¹³⁵⁴ Notable print publications are Forbes 1971; Sheldon 1978; Hunt 1990. In 2017, Katherine Hindley compiled a corpus of more than 1000 charms, dating from the eight to the fifteenth centuries, for her PhD thesis, *Textual Magic in Medieval England*. Jonathan Roper's monograph *English Verbal Charms* from 2005 draws on an unpublished corpus of 523 charms, mostly from the post-medieval period.

The current consensus among charm specialists is that modern editions should be electronic.¹³⁵⁵ Digitisation increases accessibility and lowers costs. It also permits addressing several editorial problems that have plagued editors of paper editions since the nineteenth century. Charms can be ordered in numerous ways: chronologically, linguistically, structurally, thematically, or functionally. All of these arrangements have their advantages and disadvantages. Digital editions remove the necessity of prioritising a single one. Online catalogues have the additional benefit that they can reveal manuscript contexts, support full-text searches, list analogues, visualise datasets, present normalised and diplomatic editions side by side, log user information, incorporate updates, and synchronise with other databases.¹³⁵⁶

An English charm catalogue may not encourage the re-discovery of ‘amazing new flavour combinations’. However, it will help to contextualise a fascinating yet enigmatic genre and reveal hidden connections between historical cultures, writings, and languages. Incantations played a vital role in the lives of previous generations, and they continue to inspire people living in the present, from modern scholars to famous poets, from re-enactors to ‘New Age’ healers. A digital database will not just enable an unprecedented understanding of the past; it will also provide a clearer view of the past’s ever-changing relationships with the present.

¹³⁵⁵ A previously proposed project has not materialised. See Parnell and Olsan 1991. For recent discussions on the advantage of digital editions in charm and Old English studies, see Ilyefalvi 2017; Del Turco 2016.

¹³⁵⁶ Comparable German, Dutch, and French projects are currently underway. See Borsje 2011; *Nachlass Adolf Spamer des Instituts für Sächsische Geschichte und Volkskunde* 2020. The French database is under the direction of Béatrice Delaurenti at the Centre de Recherches Historiques. It will be called *Carminabase*. No publications have been made available about its precise composition.

Works Cited

Artworks

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