

# Newsletter of the Societas Magica / No. 2 (Spring 1996)

This issue of the newsletter is devoted to medieval charms and their relevance to the study of magic. No. 3 (Fall 1996) will be dedicated to work on medieval witchcraft.

## A Report on Recent Work on Charms

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Readers of this newsletter will be familiar with two important books that have examined charms in the cultural perspective of the varieties of medieval magic. Valerie Flint in *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) argues that charms along with lot casting, prognostication, divination and certain other forms of non-Christian magic were preserved in a "salvaging process" from the general condemnation of the magical arts in late antiquity. In order to compete with and overcome thriving beliefs in magic, Christian authorities responded two ways, by confronting the non-Christian magic with a Christian variety and by absorbing needed older magical materials and practices into Christianity.

Charms play a different role in Richard Kieckhefer's *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), a book which explains the varieties of magic current in later medieval Europe. For the most part, medieval charms belong to a "common tradition of medieval magic," that is, a tradition of magic that "was distributed widely," and was "not regularly limited to any specific group," but, rather, practiced by "monks, parish priests, physicians, surgeon-barbers, midwives, folk healers, diviners with no formal training, and ordinary women and men." Kieckhefer demonstrates the elusiveness of the boundary between natural magic and religion in herbal medicine and verbal formulas. Nevertheless, he distinguishes three basic types of verbal formulas: prayers, "which have the form of requests and are directed to God, Christ, Mary, or a saint"; blessings, "which have the form of wishes and are addressed to the patients"; and adjurations or exorcisms, "which have the form of commands and are directed to the sickness itself or to the worm, demon, elf, or other agent responsible for it." To these three types, into which most charms fall, Kieckhefer adds a fourth: "incantations articulating the meaning of sympathetic magic."

The discussion of charms is extended to Early Modern Italy by David Gentilcore's book, *From Bishop to Witch: The System of the Sacred in Early Modern Terra d'Oranto* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1992). Gentilcore includes a cantilina for a skin infection beginning "The Virgin Mary was sitting on a chair" and attributed in 1565 to a Franciscan Friar, Fra Nardo Gasparro, who with seven lay sorcerers and another ecclesiastic had been accused of "enchanted pains of joints." A *scongiuro curativo*, or healing invocation, elicited from Antonia de Supersano, believed to be a witch (*magara*), was recorded in the episcopal court record of Gallipoli in 1600. Her prayer of St. Anne began, "Oh Christ, who sent manna in the forest" and ended, "so make me happy this week with what my heart desires." As to what classes of people used such charms in southern Italy, Gentilcore, following I.M. Malecore's assessment (in *Lares*, 1971), says that, "given the prominence of cunning men and women, the verses, formulae, and *scongiuri* tended to be the property of these select people, who keep the secret of the formulae and the ways in which they must be used."

Stephanie Hollis and Michael Wright in *Old English Prose of Secular Learning*, Annotated Bibliographies of Old and Middle English Literature, IV (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1992) carefully annotate books and articles published, with a few exceptions, before 1990 on the Anglo-Saxon prose charms. They also provide a chart that collates the charm numbering in the editions of Storms, Grendon, and Cockayne, and the classification in Frank and Cameron, *A Plan for the Dictionary of Old English*.

Anglo-Saxon charms are discussed in the context of Anglo-Saxon medical practice, which was overall more rational than magical, according to L. M. Cameron in his book *Anglo-Saxon Medicine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Charms were the last resort of the Anglo-Saxon physician, "in themselves of no effect, but probably of great psychological benefit to the patient." In Chapter 13, on "Magical Medicine," Cameron discusses two kinds of remedies, remedies having both magical acts and magical words, and those having a magical act only. A verbal formula in a remedy may strongly suggest the presence of magic, which, Cameron implies, Anglo-Saxon healers consciously recognized as such and reluctantly employed in cases of intransigent illnesses. Even so, formulas and rituals based on belief in the efficacy of objects sanctified by the Church would not have seemed magical to Anglo-Saxon Christians. Cameron offers readings of the charm "Aga inst Sudden Stitch" and the "Nine Herbs Charm," judiciously tracing the possible medical uses of the herbs involved and the various meanings of the obscure words and finally remarking, with a wisdom born of long reflection on the materials, "It is clear that there is much in these Old English charms which we do not understand and which their Anglo-Saxon users may not have understood."

Bees, childbirth, and protection from the cross have been the foci of articles devoted to single charms. Frederick S. Holton in the article "Literary Tradition and the Old English

Bee Charm," *Journal of Indo-European Studies*, 21 (1993), 37-53 "re-examines the poem [the OE Bee Charm] in the light of specifically literary, non-Germanic sources," namely, "classical and patristic bee thought," with special reference to Aldhelm. L.M.C. Weston in her article "Women's Medicine, Women's Magic: The Old English Metrical Childbirth Charms," *Modern Philology*, 92 (1995), 279-293, reads the three formulas for nourishing a child in the Lacnunga (B.L. Harley 585) as a "conflation of multiple complaints" specific to women's concerns about childbearing "from conception to weaning." From these charms, Weston infers "a female oral tradition existing alongside of and in dialogue with the dominant male traditions—s hamanic, priestly, and scientific—within the manuscript and within the greater context of Anglo-Saxon England." In his article "British Library, Cotton Tiberius A.iii, fol. 59rv: An Unrecorded Charm in the Form of an Address to the Cross" *ANQ*, 4.1 (1991), 3-5, Phillip Pulsiano brings to light a charm for protection against an enemy that is comprised of Latin formulas addressed to a cross. Pulsiano points out that the Tiberius charm varies slightly from one in Cambridge, MS Corpus Christi College 391, published by Zupitza in 1892.

Ronald Grambo's article in Danish, "Folkebiologisk taksonomi Formler mot orm," *Nord Nytt*, 41 (1990), 64-77, addresses theoretical questions. Grambo rejects analysis of charms based on abstract categories in favor of a taxonomy that includes more broadly cultural dimensions: the ecological system, historical elements, social stratification, and influences from literature. He discusses a number of Christian Scandanavian formulas recorded in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, comparing themes and structures in them to pagan Latin ones.

An article by S. Parnell and Lea Olsan, "The Index of Charms: Purpose, Design, and Implementation," *Literary and Linguistic Computing*, 6 (1991), 59-63, describes in detail the ongoing project for a computer database of medieval European charms located in manuscripts dating between 900 and 1500.

Patricia A. Giangrosso has written the entry on "Zauberspruche/Heilsegen" for *Medieval German: An Encyclopedia*, now in progress, conceived and initiated by Ed Haymes and currently under the general editorship of Stephanie Cain Van D'Elden. A bibliography of collective and individual editions of charms is provided at the end of the article.

Brian Murdoch argues that even the oldest Germanic incantations are deeply implicated in Christian liturgical contexts in "'Drohtin, uuerthe so!': Funktionsweisen der altdeutschen Zauberspruche," *Literaturwissenschaftliches Jahrbuch*, 42 (1991), 11-37. He sees charms as prophylactic or curative and, although he places them in the province of the clergy on the basis of their written form, at the same time he says they have significance as an aspect of medicine.

Two articles focus on medieval Latin charms. Edina Bozoky in her article, "Mythic Mediation in Healing Incantations," trans. by John B. Friedman, in *Health, Disease and Healing in Medieval Culture*, ed. Sheila Campbell, Bert Hall, and David Klausner (New York: St. Martin's, 1992) analyzes the function of the brief story, or *historiola*, which precedes the conjuring formula in some charms. The function of such short narratives is "neither a question of referring to a powerful intercessor as in prayer, nor of the reinforcement of the spell by the evocation of a mythic precedent, but rather a true transposition of the mediation from the actual to the mythic level." Taking as guides Mauss and Todorov, Bozoky defines different types of mediation in well-known Latin formulas and offers a folklorist's perceptions of the significance of locations, elements such as stone and water, and colors in charms.

Anna Maria Addabbo in "Stupidus in Monte Ibat: un caso di Interdizione Verbale?" *Civiltà classico e cristiana*, 12 (1991), 330-341 argues that Marcellus Empiricus's incantation and rite can best be understood in the tradition of Romano-Italian incantations, rather than by way of the Germanic analogs to which it was compared by Grimm and others. Addabbo also examines the process of Christianization of other formulas documented in the Roman world in late antiquity.

Tony Hunt's *Popular Medicine in Thirteenth-Century England: Introduction and Texts* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1990), an important book containing materials from many medieval medical manuscripts, is a treasure trove of Latin and Anglo-Norman French charms and includes a few Middle English ones. The ninety charms recorded in Chapter Two (by no means all the charms in the book) are drawn from manuscripts dating from the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries. Hunt's detailed accounts of these manuscripts inform the reader's sense of how charms fit in the contents of medieval medical compendia and what role charms may have had in the medical practices of a few known physicians.

Items not seen are Karen Jolly's new book, *Popular Religion in Anglo-Saxon England: The Elf Charms in Context* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina, 1996); Lois Bragg, "The Modes of the Old English Metrical Charms," *The Comparatist*, 16 (1992), 3-23; and A. Astakhova, "'Sound Shaping' of East Slavic Zagovory," *Oral Tradition*, 7.2 (1992), 365-72.

W.L. Braekman, "Prolegomena to a compendium of the forbidden arts," translated from *Een school spierinkjes: Kleine opstellen over Middelnederlandse artes-literatuur*, ed. W.P. Gerritsen, Annelies van Gijsen, and Orlanda S.H. Lie (Hilversum: Verloren, 1991), 21-23 (with permission of the author).

In his doctoral dissertation,<sup>1</sup> G. Storms expressed the conviction that there was an urgent need to assemble all the Netherlandish conjurations and magical practices in a

compendium. Almost half a century later we can only say that this has still not yet happened.

The desire expressed by Storms was partially met in 1964 by the book by J. Van Haver.<sup>2</sup> This presents a compendium of Netherlandish incantation texts, with commentary, which were dispersed in books and journal articles. A systematic search for yet unpublished texts in manuscripts and early printings was beyond the scope of this project.

I have been occupied for more than a quarter century with systematic searching for incantation texts, which, for the most part are still to be found unpublished in manuscripts. Discoveries of substantial extent have been regularly published in journal articles and festschrifts, along with commentaries.<sup>3</sup> The intention was and is to assemble all the medieval incantation texts in a single book. This will supplement the work of Van Haver, at any rate to some degree. I too have become conscious, in this "undertaking of many years,"<sup>4</sup> of how difficult it is to reach a reasonable degree of completeness. Therefore I have limited myself to the texts occurring in medieval and sixteenth-century manuscripts. This chronological limitation will, however, be compensated for by the inclusion of texts which are not genuine incantations, but belong to the sphere of the *artes prohibita*e: magic plants, amulets, magic-religious rituals, recovery of stolen goods (clay balls, key experiments, swallowing experiments, the "eye of Abraham"), etc.

Now, thanks to R. Jansen-Sieben's *Repertorium*, we have progressed beyond the time in which we did not even have access to an overview enabling us to see which manuscripts should come into consideration for excerpting. The collecting of material will now be completed in the near future.

It is not my intention to list here all the difficulties one has to face in such an undertaking, but some examples may give some idea of them.

An especially difficult problem is where precisely the boundary lies between a prayer and a blessing.<sup>5</sup> The intention of the user seems decisive. A prayer requests, supplicates, and hopes, while a blessing (and, *a fortiori*, a magic formula) compels and knows that the result must and will follow. Yet this intention is not to be found--or occurs with insufficient clarity--in the written texts. Verbs such as "must" ("so he *must* become well") or "shall" ("he *shall* become well") are not so unambiguous as one might wish. The problem is especially great in the case of white magic, in which one addresses oneself mostly to God, Mary, or a saint, just as in prayers. Only a pragmatic approach appears feasible with--in doubtful cases--rather citation than omission of the text.

Another question is whether one should incorporate only texts which are completely or partially in Netherlandish. It often happens in manuscripts that formulas in Netherlandish

occur alongside others written completely in Latin.<sup>6</sup> It seems to me sensible to cite short texts of the latter kind completely, and for the longer ones at least to summarize the content.

Van Haver has worked out an appropriate system of classification for his compendium. Because an alphabetical or thematic ordering was found unsatisfactory, he opted for a classification according to the goal of each text. This division is roughly the same as that of I. Hampp.<sup>7</sup> Another possibility is division according to the motifs, as used by A. Spamer.<sup>8</sup> Both ordering principles have their advantages and disadvantages, but a teleological ordering seems to me the best.

A number of formulas are preserved in only a single manuscript. For others we have a variety of versions. Which variant should we choose? The problem is that nearly all the texts date from the late fifteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Thus it is impossible to discern an evolution (and usually this is in fact a deterioration).<sup>10</sup> Only a comparison with similar formulas from surrounding lands can help,<sup>11</sup> but these are sometimes insufficiently inventoried, or difficult to obtain access to, or both.

Finally, there are the background and the sources to which these texts refer. Divergent branches of study are relevant in this regard: ordeals, the Bible (including the apocrypha), hagiography, the Kabbala, and languages such as Hebrew, Celtic, Arabic, etc. Especially difficult to interpret, as a rule, is the mentality in the texts pertaining to black magic. These are usually not folk texts, but belong to the world of scholars, alchemists, etc. One must resign oneself in advance to the fact that not everything can be explained: e.g., the series of apparently meaningless letters and ciphers, one following after another--with the not altogether certain understanding that they once did have intelligibility.

From the preceding loose reflections one can get some idea of all the problems to be confronted in the preparation of a compendium of the forbidden arts with a commentary--problems many of which, we can be quite certain, will not receive satisfactory solution.

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1. G. Storms, *Anglo-Saxon Magic* (The Hague, 1948).

2. J. Van Haver, *Nederlandse Incantatieli teratuur: Een gecommantarieerd Compendium van Nederlandse Bezweringsformules* (Ghent, 1964). For supplements see W.L. Braekman, "Nederlandse bezweringen, zegeningen en krachtige gebeden," in *Oostvlaamse Zanten*, 40 (1965), 120-27.

3. R. Jansen-Sieben, *Repertorium van de Middelnederlandse Artes-Literatuur* (Utrecht, 1989), E30, G280, L830, L1060, etc.
4. J. Van Haver, *Incantatieliteratuur*, 28.
5. Cf. R. Jansen-Sieben, *Repertorium*, p. XIV.
6. E.g., *Repertorium*, G300.
7. I. Hampp, *Beschwörung, Segen, Gebet* (Stuttgart: Veröffentlichungen des Staatlichen Amtes für Denkmalpflege Stuttgart, [1961]).
8. A. Spamer, *Romanusbüchlein: Historisch-philologischer Kommentar zu einem deutschen Zauberbuch* (Berlin: Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für deutsche Volkskunde, 1958).
9. There are only a few exceptions: e.g., the two formulas from the Lower Rhine area (ninth and eleventh century) which the *Repertorium* (W60 and T70), following M. Gysseling, ascribes to the Old Netherlandish (see M. Gysseling, *Corpus van Middelnederlandse Teksten*, ser. 2, pt. 1, The Hague, 1980, pp. 39 and 118).
10. This is in contrast, e.g., to Middle

English texts; see T.M. Smallwood, "'God was born in Bethlehem...': the tradition of a Middle English charm," *Medium Aevum*, 58 (1989), 206-23.

11. See W.L. Braekman, "Middelnederlandse Zegeningen, Bezweringsformulieren en Toverplanten," in *Versl. en Med. KANTL* (1963), 275-386, no. 33, and G. Storms, *Magic* (1948), p. 209.

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Fictional works imaginately depicting the use of charms approach the matter from varying perspectives. Brian Bates's *The Way of Wyrð: The Book of a Sorcerer's Apprentice* (paperback ed. New York: Harper, 1992) shows a missionary scout introduced into the ways of shamanistic magic, based on the charms in the *Lacnunga* manuscript. Sharan Newman, on page 221 of *The Devil's Doorway* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 1994), gives a more understated view. The work is set in the twelfth century; a young boy comes to visit the hermit Gaufridus:

...He was about twelve and had an aureole of golden hair that appeared to have been cut with a sickle.

"Forgive me, Uncle," he said to Gaufridus. "Mother wants to know if she can have some of your radishes."

"Yes, take what you want." Gaufridus waved him away.

The boy didn't move....

"What else?" Gaufridus barked.

"Granny needs some more dockroot. She wants you to come with her tonight to help dig."

"She doesn't need me!" Gaufridus exploded. "I've told that woman it doesn't matter when the stuff is dug up, as long as you say three *paternosters* and make the sign of the cross over the spot before the root leaves the earth. It's pure superstition about having to dig it under a new moon. She could get it at midday and then you could help her."

His newpew waited. Gaufridus sighed.

"Tell her I'll come for her after I've said the evening psalms."

"Thank you, Uncle." The boy grinned and finally left.