

## Latin Charms of Medieval England: Verbal Healing in a Christian Oral Tradition

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This is an essay to open a discussion of medieval Latin charms as a genre rooted in oral tradition. It will concern itself solely with materials drawn from manuscripts made in England from about A.D. 1000 to near 1500. One reason for setting such limitations on the materials is that restricting the study chronologically and geographically will facilitate identification of features peculiar to the insular English tradition of Latin charms.<sup>1</sup> For though Latin charms can be found throughout medieval Europe, to make cross-cultural comparisons prematurely might obscure distinctive regional features. To begin, it seems best to state what is meant by the word “charm” in this paper.

*Carmen* is the word that in classical Latin meant, among other things, “a solemn ritual utterance, usually sung or chanted in a metrical form” (*OLD*). The word denoted, on the one hand, a religious hymn, or on the other, a magical chant, spell, or incantation. Related words in late Latin are *incantamentum* and *incantatio*.<sup>2</sup> These words carry associations with magic due to the implications of chanting or incanting in pagan contexts. In the medieval manuscripts under consideration here, *carmen* is the word repeatedly used as a tag, a heading, or a marginal gloss to call attention to some kind of verbal cure. Its meaning is not confined solely to spoken remedies, since the directions often indicate that the efficacious words are to be written, nor is the term attached especially to poetic texts. The word

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<sup>1</sup> A methodology for the study and comparison of oral literature that takes into account “tradition-dependence” as well as “genre-dependence” is described by Foley (1990:ch. 1).

<sup>2</sup> DuCange gives “*Incantamentum ad leniendum dolorem adhibere, apud Ammian. lib. 16 ubi Lindenbrogius*”; for *incantatio*: “*Fredegar. Epist. cap. 9, Mummolum factione Fredegundae, cui reputabant filium suum per incantationem interfecisse, iussit Rex suggillare.*”

*carmen*, as well as Middle English “charme,” indicates that a remedy works by means of words, rather than, for example, the application of plants.<sup>3</sup> In the early, Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, vernacular words also designate verbal cures: *galdor* and its verb *ongalan* come from the Indo-European root *ghel-*, which has two lines of semantic development, one of which gives rise to the English words *yell* and *yelp*, while the other is associated with enchanting and singing. The latter meaning survives in the word *nightingale*. Old English *gebede*, meaning “prayer,” also appears with reference to healing formulas. In Anglo-Saxon vernacular charms one finds the directions “sing this *gealdor*” and “sing this *gebede*” accompanying the same kinds of formulas. By and large, the most salient feature of the short Latin texts that are denominated charms in this paper is their Christian character.

In what follows I shall address four elementary questions: (1) What are the near-allied genres? In other words, in what contexts do charms appear in the manuscripts? (2) In what sense can the genre be described as oral traditional? (3) What are the forms of language in which the genre coheres? (4) How, on what occasion, by whom, and for whom are charms performed, and how do they function within these situations?

### Manuscript Contexts and Allied Genres

Charms, or verbal remedies, are closely allied with medical recipes (Anglo-Saxon *læcedomes*) and remedial rituals on one side and with prayers, blessings, and in some linguistic features with exorcism on the other, verbal, side.

One important manuscript context for charms, both during the Anglo-Saxon period and afterwards, is the category of manuscripts containing collections of treatments compiled for practicing healers, physicians, or leeches. Charms, intermingled with non-verbal prescriptions for various ailments, occur in these books both in the vernaculars (Old English, Middle

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<sup>3</sup> When such verbal formulas are, however, employed in combination with herbal remedies or become associated with amulets and talismans, they appear in no way different from those unassociated with objects. It is the formulas, spoken and written, intelligible and unintelligible, that are the focus of attention here.

English, Anglo-Norman French) and in Latin.<sup>4</sup> The common purpose of such books is to satisfy the need for a sort of handbook of treatments for symptoms and maladies. Charms fall in among the various modes of curing. For example, in one cure for “the devil’s temptations” from the Anglo-Saxon *Leechbooks*,<sup>5</sup> we can see traces of three curative genres combined—an herb-cure, a ritual employing holy water, and curative words, or a charm, in Latin. Most of the remedy is in the vernacular:

Drenc wiþ deofles costunga. þefanþorn, croleac, elehtre, ontre, bisceopwyrht, finul, cassuc, betonice. Gehalga þas wyrta do on ealu halig wæter and sie se drenc þærinne þær se seoca man inne sie. And simle ær þon þe he drince, sing þriwa ofer þam drenc: Deus in nomine tuo saluum me fac. (B. L. Royal 12.D.XVII, fol. 125v-126r)

[A drink against the devil’s temptations. Tuftythorn, croleek, lupin, ontre, bishopwort, fennel, cassuck, betony. Bless these herbs, put [them] in ale [and] holy water, and let the drink be within the room where the sick man is. And repeatedly before he drinks, sing three times over the drink, “God, in your name make me well.”]

Although the Latin part of this remedy is very simple and slight, its power is implied by its incantatory function and by the directions that the drink (and the words) “be within the room where the sick man is.” The shift in grammatical person from the prescriptive *sing* to *saluum me fac*, in which the speaker who is not the patient speaks for him, acts within the circumstances to coalesce the intent of the care-taker/healer and the patient. The source of power in the formula itself (*Deus in nomine tuo saluum me fac*) resides in its implicative weight. Textually, the formula derives from the first line of Vulgate Psalm 53; however, in this oral performance the single line evokes the entire psalm. John Foley’s concept of “traditional referentiality” seems operative here, for the one line evokes “a context that is enormously larger and more echoic than the text or work itself” (1991:7).

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<sup>4</sup> Examples can be found in Grattan and Singer 1952 (Old English and Latin), Ogden 1938 (Middle English and Latin), and B. L. MS Royal 12.D.XXV (Middle English, Anglo-Norman, and Latin).

<sup>5</sup> In this paper the term *Leechbooks* refers to the entire contents of British Library MS. Royal 12.D.XVII, which is written in the hand of one scribe. It consists of three parts: the first two are commonly identified as *Bald’s Leechbook* on the basis of the colophon at the top of folio 109r; the third scholars have designated a separate collection of recipes. See Wright 1955:13 and Cameron 1983:153.

The line from Psalm 53 either functions as a cue for recitation of the whole psalm, or it adverts to the known, but here unspoken, contents of the psalm. If the reciter here were a monk or priest, the psalm would have been a deeply ingrained habit of thought no longer tied to its textual source.<sup>6</sup>

Words play only a supporting role to the medicinal herbs, which have been blessed and administered with ale and holy water in the *Leechbook* charm. A different overlapping of genres occurs in B. L. Royal 12.B.XXV, fol. 61r.<sup>7</sup> In this fourteenth-century collection of remedial and utilitarian works, a remedy for toothache embodies prayer, which is termed a charm and directed to be tied to the head of the patient. The charm exemplifies the wide overlap between Christian charms and prayers:<sup>8</sup>

Apud urbem Alexandriam requiescit corpus Beate Appolonie virginis et martiris cuius dentes extraxerunt impii. Et per intercessionem Beate Marie virginis et omnium sanctorum et Beate Appolonie virginis et martiris, libera, Domine, dentes famuli tui a dolere dencium. Sancte Blasi, ora pro me. In nomine + patris etc. Pater Noster. Aue Maria. Et ligatur istud carmen super capud patientis.

[In the city Alexandria rests the body of Blessed Apollonia, virgin and martyr, whose teeth the wicked extracted. Through the intercession of Blessed Maria, virgin, and of all saints and blessed Apollonia, virgin and martyr, free, Lord, the teeth of your servant from toothache. Saint Blaise, pray for me. In the name of the Father, etc. Our Father. Ave Maria. And let this charm be tied upon the head of the patient.]

A similar combination of adjuration and intercessory prayers occurs in the medical collection known as the *Liber de Diversis Medicinis*, edited

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<sup>6</sup> See Dyer 1989 (535-36) on the universality of the psalms: "Every monk was expected to memorize all 150 psalms"; furthermore, "years of daily encounters with the prayers of the psalmist fostered a rich contextuality of associations, a private and interior exegesis of scriptural text in an ever-widening field of significance." These facts and the medieval *tituli psalmorum*, which designated some lines in the psalms as the *vox Christi* (538), deserve further consideration as partial explanation for why and how psalms came to be used in formulas for verbal healing.

<sup>7</sup> For a description of this manuscript and an account of the Latin charms, see Olsan 1989b.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the theoretical problem of distinguishing prayers and charms as two genres of discourse and a proposed solution based on the structure of the invocation of the mediator in each, see Todorov 1978:255-56.

by Margaret Ogden (1938:18), where a marginal note reads, “a charme for the teethe.” Instances such as these indicate that in the fourteenth century prayers were used as amulets—as above where the prayer is tied to the patient’s head—and that charms, arising in the contemporary Christian culture and composed of Christian elements (fragments of liturgy, saints’ legends, prayers) were accepted as effective remedial prescriptions (cp. Thomas 1971:42 and Olsan 1989b).

One explanation for the lack of practical differentiation between charms and prayers sees them both as forms of ritualism. Mary Douglas has remarked on the difficulty (even for a thoughtful theologian) of making a “tidy distinction between sacramental and magical efficacy,” since both are “concerned with the correct manipulation of efficacious signs” (1982:9-10). Furthermore, it is but a short step from the evocation of powerful symbols in formal ritual contexts to the evocation of the same symbols, phraseology, and beliefs in essentially magical ways in the humbler circumstances of life when a person feels in distress or need. In Latin Christian charms used by medieval people in England (and elsewhere), the efficacy of the remedies lies, in part, in the patient’s response to the powers associated with symbols evoked from the Christian tradition. Nevertheless, understanding that medieval charms generally appropriate Christian symbols and beliefs leaves the question in too broad a frame to tell us much about how they work and how they might be best understood as a healing genre. A more productive strategy is to ask whether we can speak of medieval Latin charms as constituting a traditional oral genre of some sort and thereby attain some insights not available under the aegis of previous categories, such as “popular religion” or “superstitious medicine.”

## **Orality**

The evidence for defining charms as an oral genre presents a varied landscape in which we can locate objects of different kinds. Every judgment concerning what species of thing we have in a particular charm—whether it be oral, oral-derived, or whether it be conceived as or copied from a written text<sup>9</sup>—must carefully take into account the character

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<sup>9</sup> On the principle of “text-dependence,” see Foley 1990:11 ff.



Another mark of orality in the Lazarus charm, that is, apart from its utilization of sound patterns and its direct recourse to the power of Christ's spoken words,<sup>11</sup> is its evocation of an untextualized communal tradition in which the resurrection/rebirth of Lazarus is symbolically identified with the birth of a child. In the charm, the identity is entirely implicative. However, other instances of the same motif reinforce the sense of its traditional character.<sup>12</sup>

Charms tend to be relatively short pieces, yet frequently we find directions for performance inscribed with the text. Where the verb *dic* or *dices* occurs, the words are meant to be spoken, that is, the written charm is a kind of script for oral performance. Its textualization is somehow incidental. This situation raises the prospect that in medieval charms we can directly observe the textualization of an oral tradition. There is some truth to this statement. That is to say, some charms like the Lazarus charm above seem to have been recorded from aural memory, and others, although neatly textualized, are clearly meant to be performed orally. In addition, incantatory speech, challenges to disease-causing agents,<sup>13</sup> and narrative and dialogue forms<sup>14</sup>—all of which are marks of orality<sup>15</sup>—perdure. Yet a detailed mapping of the orality of charms presents a more complicated picture than these facts at first suggest.

One complicating factor is that writing, including written performance, appears as an integral part of the tradition of insular Latin charms even in the earliest records, just as it did in ancient magic.<sup>16</sup> For

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<sup>11</sup> See Ong for a still useful description of the distinctive perceptual and cognitive impact of spoken words (1967:ch. 3), especially in Christian tradition (179-188).

<sup>12</sup> For example, B. L. Sloane 2584, fol. 25v.

<sup>13</sup> Verbal challenges to disease-causing agents correspond to the “agonistic dynamics of oral thought processes” as described in Ong 1982:43-45.

<sup>14</sup> Stories are a fundamental way of organizing knowledge in oral societies and a mode for bringing the past into the present. See, e.g., Ong 1982:140-41.

<sup>15</sup> See Ong 1982:38-39 and espec. 43-46.

<sup>16</sup> Goody (1968:16) notes the antiquity of the use of writing in magical texts, which he identifies as a separate category from “Books of God that form the core of world religions.” He observes: “This tradition of magical texts goes back to the beginnings of

some charms in medieval manuscripts consist solely of graphic symbols or letters, which were never meant to be spoken. In addition, directions to write formulas down and carry them on the person occur in the oldest insular manuscripts.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, charms written on objects (leaves, communion hosts, virgin parchment, knife handles, sticks, and the like) have an extended symbolic significance.<sup>18</sup> Such uses of writing in connection with charms do not signify that charms should be understood as if generated primarily as written texts. Rather, writing as a technology was very early adapted to the rituals and tradition of curative magic.

The point needs clarification. In medieval society, even in early Anglo-Saxon society, we are already confronted with a mixed culture in which we find both oral and literate registers. Functionally, however, charms remain closely tied to social contexts in which traditional attitudes, values, and habits of thought predominated in the contexts of human (and animal) illness, childbirth, and protection of property. Furthermore, charms, in fact, live only in performance. Whether the performance is written or oral, it is conceived as an efficacious action and often operates in combination with physical rituals involving face-to-face human interactions characteristic of oral societies.<sup>19</sup> But this picture changes. The interface between written and spoken, literate and oral modes in verbal healing adjusts with cultural shifts in the dominant media. In the later centuries of the period under consideration, that is, by the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Latin charms are not only being written in a more regular clerkly Latin, but some charms appropriate highly literate textual interpretations, for example, the use of Biblical types.<sup>20</sup>

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writing itself, stemming as it does from the Mesopotamian world where writing itself developed.”

<sup>17</sup> For example, ligatures, *Himmelsbriefe*, and *breves*. On the authority of the breve that “speaks to its hearers,” see Clanchy 1973:204-5.

<sup>18</sup> On the interpretation of writing as symbolic object, see Clanchy 1973:205-8.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Goody and Watt 1962-63:307, Goody 1977:ch. 3, and Ong 1982.

<sup>20</sup> Brian Stock (1983:527) has said of the new categories of thought developed in the eleventh and twelfth centuries: “The effects were not only felt in intellectual domain, where one saw a proliferation of exegesis, historical writing, philosophy, and theology. As noted, the new structures also fed into and were in turn nourished by the world of lived

In the next two parts of this paper, the problem of defining the genre will be broached through analysis of structural components and performance contexts. Through these approaches other examples will emerge to clarify the nature and degrees of orality in the charms.

### Linguistic Analysis

Latin charms display a variety of linguistic forms ranging from structural components, or “compositional units” (Halpern and Foley 1978:909) built on patterns of nonsensical sounds to Latin verse, strings of powerful names, narrative themes (including dialogues), and select syntactic patterns—such as performatives of adjuration and conjuration and prescriptives. Frequently, two or three such separable units are combined within one charm, although I have not found a single charm that contains them all.

Sound patterns alone serve as the effective source of power in some charms. In some instances, what have become nonsense syllables show traces of previous semantic structure or borrowing from languages exotic to the latest users. Two charms associated with snakes, one apparently for snakebite, the other for catching snakes, will illustrate:

1. Carmen

PORRO PORRO POTO

ZELO ZELO ZEBETA

ARRA ARRAY P[A]RACLITUS

Et pone predictam aquam in ore patientis sive sit homo sive sit animal.

(B. L. Royal 12 B.XXV, fol. 62v)

[PORRO PORRO I DRINK

ZELO ZELO ZEBETA

ARRA ARRAY PARACLETE

And place the aforementioned water in the mouth of the patient whether it be a man or whether it be an animal.]

2. Ad capiendum serpentes.

In nomine patris etc.

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experience. It was not only the educated, who were in direct contact with classical or Christian tradition, who began to adopt textual models for behavior.” This explanation fits what we observe going on in the charms: when people learned in exegesis and theology employed charms, as they did, they infused those charms with elements deriving directly from exegesis and textual study.

ARAPS IASPER SCRIP  
 PORRO PONTEM  
 ZORO ZEHEBETE ZARAF  
 MARAS SPIRITUS P[A]RACLITUS

hic bubulla bimenna que iaces super petrum et herbas. Audi et intellige quia data est michi potestas super te per deum omnipotentem et per Adam et per Euam et illam malediccionem in qua recepisti. Sta et noli suspirare quia basili[s]cus es.

[For catching snakes.  
 In the name of the Father, etc.  
 ARAPS JASPER WRITE?

PORRO BRIDGE  
 ZORO ZEHEBETE ZARAF  
 MARAS SPIRIT PARACLETE

Here two-fold? creature, you who lie upon the rock and grass. Listen and know that power was given to me over you through God Omnipotent and through Adam and through Eve and the curse in which you were caught. Stay and do not breathe because you are a basilisk.]

Looking for a moment only at the nonsense phrases in these two charms, which follow each other on a leaf devoted to cures for dogbites and snakebites, it appears that the nonsense strings are multiforms<sup>21</sup> of one another and that alliteration and syllabic echoes maintain the strings:

1. PORRO PORRO POTO / ZELO ZELO ZEBETA / ARRA ARRAY  
 P[A]RACLITUS
2. (ARAPS IASPER SCRIP)  
 / PORRO PONTEM / ZORO ZEHEBETE ZARAF / MARAS SPIRITUS  
 P[A]RACLITUS

In the first charm, each three-stress string duplicates a syllabic pattern that varies at the third item. In the third element, ARRA ARRAY seems to be generated by reduplication from the first syllables of the word PARACLITUS. In the second charm, the first three words, which precede the three strings, play the voiceless stop [p] and liquid [r] and spirant [s]

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<sup>21</sup> Albert Lord's concept of "multiformity" as observed in singers' performances of Serbo-Croatian epic (1960:119-20) provides one of the most useful strategies for understanding so-called "variants" of charms, since it does not privilege any one occurrence of a charm as "source" over any other. That is, it frees us from the constraint—the interpretive error, I would say—of choosing a single charm text as the standard, then assuming that all variations from that text were somehow corruptions of one kind or another.

against one another in the string ARAPS-IASPER-SCRIP as r-p-s / s-p-r / s-r-p. The pattern of the first line also finds a sort of “responson” in the MARAS SPIRITUS P[A]RACLITUS as r-s / p-r-s / p-r-s. Further, is *ara-* in ARAPS connected to the ARRA patterns found in the first charm? Given only these two specimens, it is impossible to say with certainty; yet, had we other charms containing these elements it might be possible to confirm a connection. The second element in the second charm (PORRO PONTEM) is related to the similar PORRO-string in the first; the Z-alliteration in the second charm alternates with [r] instead of [l], a small phonetic shift in liquids, whereas ZEBETA and ZEHEBETE appear to be the reflexes of one another. In addition to the phonetic, alliterative, assonantal, and syllabic patterns, both strings contain traces of semantic material: POTO means “I drink;” the P[A]RACLITUS may well be Paraclete, the Holy Spirit; JASPER was an Arab magus; and I suggest that “SCRIP” may be the trace of the word *scribe*, as ARAPS may be *Arab* where the voiced bilabial fricative has undergone assimilation to the voiceless fricative.

Other strings that seem constructed on similar patterns in other charms are, for example, *rex pax nax* in a tenth-century toothache charm (B. L. Harley 585, fol. 184r), *max max pax pater noster* in a charm to stop bleeding (B. L. Sloane 122, fol. 48), and *arex, artifex, filia* in a charm to relieve insomnia (B. L. Harley 273, fol. 213v) or *bhuron bhurinum bhitaono bhitano* for childbirth (B. L. Sloane 2584, fol. 25v). Two other sorts of unintelligible strings occur repeatedly in charms: (1) the palindrome *sator arepo tenet opera rotas*,<sup>22</sup> which is often written in a word square and (2) the “*signum*” *thelbel gut guttany* that someone attempts to represent in Greek letters in the margin of folio 7r of B. L. Sloane 56, where the fourteenth-century surgeon John Arderne says it is good for spasm. In B. L. Sloane 2584, fol. 31r, “Thes names schul be write in parchemyn with crosses”: *thelbal ech guth et guthanay*. The “names” are prescribed for “the cramp”

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<sup>22</sup> Susan Stewart points out that “[t]he palindrome is perhaps the most perfect linguistic reversal, equivalent to being able to turn the whole body upside down” (1979:70). The magical efficaciousness of the *sator* square, which surpasses the palindrome in reversibility by being readable from the right to the left and from the bottom to the top as well as left to right and top to bottom, probably has to do with reversing circumstances, not with hidden meanings or sound patterns. See Forbes 1966:86-93 for a review of its general purposes and Moeller 1973 for a theory of pre-Christian origins and possible number symbolism.

and attributed to the physician “Maistre Ion Cattedene.”<sup>23</sup>

Only a few Latin charms display poetic structures. Below are two closely related examples, which seem to constitute multiforms of a charm for joint pain. These are found in the Anglo-Saxon collections of remedies.

1. Ad<sup>24</sup> articularum dolorem<sup>25</sup> constantem<sup>26</sup> malignantium  
diabolus ligauit<sup>27</sup>  
angelus curauit  
Dominus saluauit  
in nomine medicina. Amen. (B. L. Harley 585, fol. 183r)

[For persistent debilitating pain in the joints  
The Devil has bound  
An angel has cured  
The Lord has freed [made well]  
In (his) name (is) the remedy.]

2. Wip liðwærce  
Sing viiii sipum þis gealdor þæron þin spatl spiw on.  
Malignus obligauit  
angelus curauit  
Dominus sanauit. (B. L. Royal 12.D.XVII, fol. 116r)

[Against joint pain.  
Sing this charm nine times thereon thy spittle spew on.  
The Evil one has tied  
An Angel has cured  
The Lord has healed.]

Both have a kernel three-line structure composed of noun-verb and seven syllables in the first line and six in the two subsequent ones. All three lines

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<sup>23</sup> This John Cattedon is probably the well-known John Gaddesdon, the fourteenth-century physician who wrote the *Rosa Anglica*, mentioned by Chaucer (*CT* I. 434 “Gatesden”). See Talbot and Hammong 1965:145-50 and cf. Kieckhefer 1989:72-73.

<sup>24</sup> Ad] ab MS.

<sup>25</sup> dolorem] dolorum MS.

<sup>26</sup> constantem] constantium MS.

<sup>27</sup> ligauit] lignauit MS.

in both charms show end-rhyme on the perfect tense morpheme *-auit* and a mid-line rhyme on the masculine noun ending *-us*; furthermore, each line has two stresses. What is interesting and suggests oral composition is that within these limited patterns the vocabulary and, in the first line, even the word boundaries differ. For although both initial lines contain seven syllables, in the first one the division is 4-3, in the second 3-4. In the last line the first charm gives *saluauit*, while the second gives *sanauit*. These charms show good internal evidence for oral composition, because the same rhythmical, phonetic, and morphological constraints have generated different lexical items that fit the patterns.<sup>28</sup> These instances of a multiform also argue against the widespread notion that magical formulas will always be the same word-for-word.

Evocation of powerful words, names, and titles constitutes a third kind of compositional unit. Examples range from the use of the name “Ishmael” on a laurel leaf to cure lack of sleep due to elves, to a list of types of Christ in a charm against death and danger, part of which is given below:

Praeterea quicumque homo super<sup>29</sup> se portauerit non morte mala morietur nec in aliquo periculo peribit. Et si mulier in partu torquetur et arma del viderit sito deliberabitur. Et est visio infra s[c]ripta longitudinis domini nostri iesu christi.

+ In nomine patris et filij et spiritus sancti Amen. +  
 + MESSIAS + SOTHER + EMANUEL + SABAOTH + ADONAY  
 + OTHEOS + PANTON + CRATON + ET YSUS + KYROS + MEDIATOR +  
 SALVATOR + ALPHA ET O + PRIMOGENITUS + VITA + UERITAS +  
 SAPIENCIA + VIRTUS + EGO SUM QUI SUM + AGNUS + OMNIS +  
 UITULIS + SERPENS + AVIS + LEO + VERMIS + YMAGO + LUX +  
 SPLENDOR + PANIS + FLOS + MISERCORS + CREATOR + ETERNUS +  
 REDEMPTOR + TRINITAS + VNITAS + AMEN + ADHONAY + FLOS +  
 SABAOTH + LEO + LOTH + TAV + . (B. L. Sloane 2584, fol. 45v)

[Moreover whatever man will have carried it written on him will not fall into an evil death or any danger. And if a woman is tormented in childbirth and has looked upon the instruments of the passion of God, she will be quickly delivered. And an image is written below of the length of Our Lord, Jesus Christ.+ In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit Amen.

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<sup>28</sup> Halpern and Foley, working with variants of charms in a living tradition, observe, “variations depend upon identity of the frame [of the individual prosodic units], the immediate textual environment, and the performance situation” (1978:909).

<sup>29</sup> super] suis MS.

MESSIAH + SOTHER + EMANUEL + SABAOTH + ADONAY +  
 OTHEOS + PANTON + CRATON + ET YSUS + KYROS + MEDIATOR +  
 SALVATOR + ALPHA ET O[MEGA] + PRIMOGENITUS + VITA +  
 UERITAS+  
 SAPIENCIA + VIRTUS + EGO SUM QUI SUM + AGNUS + OMNIS +  
 UITULIS + SERPENS + AVIS + LEO + VERMIS + YMAGO + LUX +  
 SPLENDOR + PANIS + FLOS + MISERCORS + CREATOR + ETERNUS +  
 REDEMPTOR + TRINITAS + VNITAS + AMEN + ADHONAY + FLOS +  
 SABAOTH + LEO + LOTH + TAV + ]

That the list constitutes an expandable compositional unit is suggested by the fact that the list of names has been extended after the word CREATOR by a second scribe into the bottom margin of the manuscript leaf. Moreover, although the directions may once have preceded drawings of the instruments of the Passion (especially the nails, cross, and crown of thorns) that are employed elsewhere,<sup>30</sup> in this charm “length of our Lord” refers to the names from Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. Space does not allow a detailed discussion of the symbolic significance of these names here, but I would point out that some of the names—for example, UITULIS + SERPENS + AVIS + LEO + VERMIS + YMAGO + LUX + SPLENDOR + PANIS + FLOS (“bull-calf,” “serpent,” “sheep,” “lion,” “worm,” “light,” “splendor,” “bread,” and “flower”)—reflect a learned tradition of types that is especially developed in twelfth-century sermons and mystical thought.

Verbal remedies that employ narratives, allusion to narrative themes or motifs, and dialogue constitute an interesting category of charms from the point of view of oral traditions, because events involving biblical figures depicted in charms often have no scriptural sources (canonical or apocryphal), although a biblical narrative may supply a cue or kernel, sometimes a model.

Two general observations about narrative motifs in charms can be made. First, the number of themes or motifs is limited, so that although any or every narrative in the Old or New Testament or Apocrypha, not to mention the saints’ legends, might potentially generate a charm, the generation of the narrative motifs associated with scriptural and other written sources derives from the genre itself in its functional aspect as remedy for specific human ills. Charms, which address the sicknesses, needs, and anxieties of medieval people, *tap into or find remedies in* Christian lore. So specific are the curative *loci* developed in the charms that a survey of some of the purposes of charms can function as an index to

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<sup>30</sup> Glazier MS 39-G contains such illuminations. See Sheldon 1978:139,143. So also B. L. Sloane 3160, fol. 168v.

narrative motifs.

<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Narrative Motif</b>
headache	Susanna-Mary Magdalene-Jonah-Daniel-three boys-others
toothache	St. Apollonia, St. Blaise, St. Peter's complaint to Christ
fevers	St. Peter's complaint to Christ, Seven Sleepers
eye spot	St. Nichasius and St. Blaise
blindness	Tobit
bleeding	Longinus, Christ in the River Jordan
wounds	Longinus, Christ's wounds, Three good brothers
childbirth	Anne-Elizabeth-Mary, Christ to Lazarus, Arcus
worms	Job
an evil death	Jonah-Daniel-three boys-others
controlling snakes	Adam and Eve
insomnia	Seven Sleepers
fires of lust	St. Agatha, St. Laurence, St. Columquille
thieves	Dismas and Gesmas, Jerusalem
dwarf	St. Macutus, St. Victor[us]
vermin	Christ in Jerusalem
poison or venom	St. John

The interconnection among need, purpose, and narrative motif is integral to understanding how charms of this kind are generated.

The second observation that can be made is that these motifs, which constitute both whole charms and parts of charms, can also be evoked by mere mention of core elements. For example, worms in a person or in a horse can be ameliorated by the phrase "Job habuit vermes" (B. L. Sloane 122, fol. 113v), because invocation of Job, who is called in the charms "Holy" or "Saint," establishes the speaker's connections to the special power of the holy person, that is, to the *potentia*, which extends between the presence of the saint and the mortal who seeks relief (cp. Brown 1981:ch. 6). The act of naming, or calling, carries with it a constellation of

associations, such as: Job, as a Holy Man, suffered this way, loved God, was loved of God; Job, as a Holy Man, has power from God and as a Holy Man dispenses that power to those in need, so that help in this circumstance, which is his special concern, can be assured.

Another feature of narrative charms is that although some compositional units in the narrative charms persist, others change. The effect of changes is often to bring into operation different symbolic associations. For examples, the *virgo* of the Anglo-Saxon *Arcus* charm shifts to *virga*, an exegetical type of the Virgin, in a late fourteenth-century version of the same charm (Olsan 1989a). In late antique charms, mimetic patterns—such as “Flee, flee barley bit, another one pursues you,” spoken in Greek while one holds a barley seed to a sty (Niedermann 1916: VIII.193)—operate on what Peter Brown (1981:118) has called a “horizontal model of healing,” the efficacy of which lies in virtues of natural phenomena. In Christian charms this pattern shifts to a “vertical model,” which draws its power from Christ in Heaven, as, for example, in a Christian charm to chase away a swelling, “Fuge, diabolus, Christus te sequitur” (Storms 1948:41). This capability for metamorphosis of a motif is one reason why it is useful to focus on the charms of a single tradition. We then have the opportunity to map the forms of a motif over time within one region.

The following examples of narrative charms containing a dialogue between Peter and Christ are intended to illustrate two features: first, that the same motif can serve two different purposes, curing both toothache and fevers; and second, that different kinds of compositional units have attached to each charm. This feature of adding and substituting secondary parts operates just as readily in charms used for the same purpose.

1. Another for the same euel of aking of teth.  
 Aue rex noster. Aue spes nostra. Aue salus nostra.  
 Adoramus te christe et benedicimus tibi.  
 Dominus noster iesus christus noster omnipotens  
 super mare sedebat. Et Petrus tristis ante eum erat.  
 Et dixit Dominus Petro, “Quare tristis es?”  
 Respondit Petrus et dixit, “Domine dentes mei dolent.”  
 Tum Dominus ait, “Adiuro te migranea et maligna per patrem  
 et filium et spiritum sanctum et per duodecim apostolos  
 et quatuor euuangelistas, Marcum, Matheum, Lucam, et  
 Johannem, ut non habeas potestatem nocere N[omen] hoc breve  
 portanti.” + AGIOS + AGIOS + AGIOS + PATER . AUE . CREDO.  
 TORAX CALAMITE. TORAX RUBEE. TORAX LIQUIDE. OMNES  
 GUMME. (B. L. Sloane 2457, fol. 19v)

[Another for the same evil aching of teeth.  
 Hail our King. Hail our Hope. Hail our Salvation.  
 We adore you Christ and we bless you.  
 Our Lord, Our Jesus Christ, Our Almighty  
 was sitting upon the sea. And Peter, sad, was before him.  
 And the Lord said to Peter, "Why are you sad?"  
 Peter answered and said, "Lord, my teeth hurt."  
 Then the Lord said, "I adjure you ache and evil through the  
 Father and Son and Holy Spirit and through the twelve  
 apostles and four evangelists, Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John,  
 that you not have the power to harm *Name* who is carrying this  
 narrative. + HOLY + HOLY + HOLY + FATHER + HAIL + I BELIEVE  
 + TORAX CALAMITE. TORAX RUBEE. TORAX LIQUIDE. ALL GUMS.]

2. Pro Febrebus.

In nomine Patris et Filij et Spiritus Sancti Amen.  
 Petrus autem iacebat febricitantibus<sup>31</sup> super petram  
 mormoriam. Et super veniens illi Iesus dixit, "Petre quid  
 iacis?" Et respondit ei Petrus, "Domine iaceo de febre mala."  
 Et dixit Iesus, "Surge et dimitte illam, et continuo surrexit  
 et dimisit." Et dixit Petrus, "Domine, rogo te vt quicumque  
 haec verba super se portaverit scripta quod non n[o]ceat ei  
 febres frigide nec calide, cotidiane, biduane, triduane, nec  
 quartane." Et ait Iesus, "Petre, Fiat tibi sicut petisti  
 nomine meo." Amen. (B. L. Sloane 122, fol. 163r)  
 [For fevers.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit Amen. Then  
 Peter was lying feverishly upon a marble rock. And above him Jesus said,  
 "Peter, why are you lying down?" And Peter answered him, "Lord, I am  
 lying down with fevers." And Jesus said, "Rise and let it be gone." And  
 immediately he rose and the fever was gone. And Peter said, "Lord, I ask  
 you that whoever should carry these words upon them written that fevers  
 not harm him [whether] cold, hot, daily, two-day, three-day, or four-day."  
 And Jesus said, "Peter, let it be for you just as you have asked in my name  
 Amen."]

Despite a core of stable elements, narrative details can change, *mare / mormoriam, Dominus sedebat / Petrus iacebat*, command / adjuration. Scholars like Giangrosso (1988) have remarked differences in patterns of detail and emphasis in charms based on the same motif, but deriving from different geographical areas. Because of the core of stability in a motif, a sense of the traditional associations can be built up through encounters with multiple texts. Thus, cryptic and allusive references in one charm can be

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<sup>31</sup> febricitantibus] MS *sic*.

understood by reference to the matrix of traditional associations provided by other charms employing the motif. But here too it can be important to maintain a sense of the specific tradition within which one is working.

The last type of structural component to be discussed here is a certain kind of speech act, that is, performatives.<sup>32</sup> A formulaic pattern that distinguishes Christian Latin charms is the extensive use of the performatives “conjuro” and “adjuro” (“I conjure” and “I adjure”).<sup>33</sup> The usual pattern, “I conjure / adjure A by the power of (*per virtutem*) B that C (or A) not have the power to harm this person” can be seen in the toothache charm above: “Adiuro / te migranea et maligna / per patrem et filium et spiritum sanctum et per duodecim apostolos et quatuor euuangelistas, Marcum, Matheum, Lucam, et Johannem, / ut non habeas potestam nocere N[omen] hoc breue portanti.” Various parts of this performative formula are amenable to contraction and expansion. In the toothache narrative, the second part (“by the power of B”) is greatly expanded. It can also be omitted, as it is in a conjuration against demons, thieves, elves, and epilepsy: “Coniuro vos demones et latrones, elphos et morbum caducum vt non habeatis potestatem nocere hunc famulum dei .N[omen].” (“I conjure you demons and thieves, elves, and epilepsy that you not have the power to harm this servant of god, Name.”)<sup>34</sup> In a charm for the earwig, we find an unusual conjuration in which the formula that the worm not have the power to gnaw the man is matched by the reverse that it *does* have its freedom (*licencia*) to depart—exhausted (B. L. Additional 33996, fol. 104v).

### Performance Contexts

The circumstances of performance, including what can be observed about who recited or provided charms, about the audience, and about the phenomenology of the situation in which charms were performed, constitute

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<sup>32</sup> A performative is an utterance that is equivalent to an action, one in which “to say is to do,” e.g., “I give and bequeath...” or “I pronounce you man and wife” or “Let there be light.” Both the authority of the speaker and the circumstances in which the words are uttered determine the effectiveness (Austin’s “felicity”) of a performative utterance. For an extended discussion, see Austin 1975:6,12-38.

<sup>33</sup> The “adjure” and “conjure” performatives also occur less commonly in the Greek magical papyri; for examples, see Betz 1986:57, 123, 125, 149, 155.

<sup>34</sup> B. L. Sloane 2584, fol. 73v-74r.

the most distinguishing feature of this genre. Charms are unique in that performance is typically private; the audience is often only one person—someone sick, injured, anxious, suffering some pain, or some mental distress. Unlike performances of other traditional genres, performance of a charm is occasioned by a specific, experienced need. When a medical problem or other distress arises for which effective remedial measures are lacking, a charm may provide efficacious words.<sup>35</sup> For perennially risky situations, such as childbirth and journeys, charms are perennially available. A man wishes to avoid a toothache. He may desire to recover a lost horse or cure his ailing pigs, or for that matter, he may be worried about his failing eyesight or his bowels. A woman has a fever or suffers from joint pain or worries about someone on a journey. Thus, when charms are performed, a direct reciprocity obtains between need and the occasion of performance, as well as between the specific character of the need and the choice of the work performed. A heading or tag designating the purpose of a charm in a manuscript is an integral part of any charm text because it explicitly denominates the occasion for performance.

When we seek to know who performed charms, the evidence of the texts gives us partial answers. A spectrum of performers is implied in the directions incorporated in Anglo-Saxon charms. Charms seem to be performed by those who wish to take action regarding a specific concern—the landowner and his community interested in insuring the fertility of the fields,<sup>36</sup> the person who has lost livestock or property, the pregnant woman, the horse-leech. Some people seek long-term prophylactic measures for toothache and the like by carrying the words with them. Despite this diversity of individual users, a large group of performers of verbal cures were leeches and others to whom care for the sick normally fell.

In addition, Anglo-Saxon charms that employ sacramentals (salt, holy water, blessings by priests)<sup>37</sup> and rituals carried out within the precincts of

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<sup>35</sup> Cp. Cameron 1988:194: “It is noteworthy that magical remedies are most common for diseases which are intractable to rational treatments, as many of the same diseases are today.”

<sup>36</sup> For an extended discussion of this charm, see Niles 1980.

<sup>37</sup> See Storms’ edition (1948) of 86 charms from Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, of which 68 contain Latin of some sort, not to mention his appendix of 16 Latin blessings, prayers, and charms.

the church suggest that priests performed charms.<sup>38</sup> An herb drink for *lenctenadle*, fever, requires that masses be sung over the prescribed herbs before the drink is concocted and that afterwards “the names of the four evangelists, and a charm and a prayer,” be sung (“feower godspellara naman and gealdor and gebed”) (B. L. Royal 12.D.XVII, fol. 53r). Similarly, in an herb salve prescription in the *Lacnunga* (fols. 146v-148), we find the following steps: (1) the herbs used are recited in rough Anglo-Saxon verse (Grattan and Singer 1952:122); (2) then follow instructions in prose for a butter base, compounded with the herbs and hallowed water, to be stirred with a four-pronged stick, carved with the names of the four evangelists. (3) The directions say next, “you sing over [the mixture] these ‘psalms’” (*sealmas*)—*Beati immaculati*, the *gloria in excelsis deo*, the *credo in deum patrem*, litanies (*letanias*) of holy names, the *deus meus et pater*, the *In principio*, and the “wormcharm” (*wyrmgealdor*). (4) After this procedure, we find the words, “and this charm (*gealdor*) sing (MS *singe*) over [the mixture],” where a nonsense incantation follows in the text. (5) The Old English directions continue:

Sing this [the incantation given] nine times and put in your spittle and blow and lay the herbs beside that container and *then [let] the mass-priest bless them.*

It is not clear in this long rite exactly where the acts of the leech leave off and the words of the priest take over. In steps (2) and (3), the instructions seem directed to the compounder of the salve. In step (4), the intended incantor of the nonsense charm is less certain, since a subjunctive form of *singan*, which might indicate third person (“may he sing”), appears at that point. The “mass-priest” (*mæssepreost*) who blesses the herbs in step (5) is not distinguished by this act, because of the long string of liturgical forms already prescribed in step (3) and because the second person imperative form *gehalga* is used, instead of the third person *gehalgie*, which would confirm an explicit third-person subject (“let the mass-priest bless”). Nevertheless, whoever the intended speaker of each section of this charm is, it seems clear that a priest plays a part and that the herbalist, who recalls his ingredients in alliterative fashion, recites Christian “psalms” while he stirs the butter.

One other point deserves mention. Although Grattan and Singer suggest that the worm charm mentioned in the list of “psalms” is “presumably that beginning *Gonomil*” (1952:125, n. 4), a nonsense

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<sup>38</sup> Cp. Niles 1980:49-50, Jolly 1987:90, and Kieckhefer 1989:58.

incantation in the *Lacnunga* (fol. 136v), the worm charm probably meant here is the Latin Christian one “Job habuit vermes” discussed above, since it more readily fits in with the overtly Christian formulas linked together in this ritual. In either case, *sealmas* and the *wyrmgealdor* are mentioned in the same breath. In the two richest Anglo-Saxon medical collections, the *Leechbooks* and the *Lacnunga*, then, the evidence of the instructions suggests that, in practice, not only the *medicus* (OE *læce*) but not uncommonly the priest (OE *mæssepreost*) performed words and rituals associated with charms. In the Anglo-Saxon charms, traditional magical healing and Christian faith coalesce with one another, functioning together to one purpose (cp. Jolly 1980:ch. 4).

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, charms were performed as before by individuals in need of relief from certain ailments or distress, as well as by unlearned healers and professional surgeons and physicians. Householders might seek out and use a charm in the same manner they might use a recipe to make a certain color dye or follow directions for building a dovecote on a manor. For charm remedies are collected in utilitarian manuscripts, medieval how-to books. Charms also appear in medical recipe books, where verbal cures usually constitute a small proportion of the medical remedies. The healers most likely to employ verbal remedies are the marginal, but active “unlicensed and unaffiliated practitioners,” among whom we know of “amateurs, *leches*, bone-setters, tooth-drawers, midwives, *treaclers*, *blodleters*, herbalists, ‘wise women,’ quacks” (Ussery 1971:21-24).<sup>39</sup> Professional physicians and surgeons employed charms at least occasionally (*ibid.*:7). For example, John Arderne recommends a charm for spasm in B. L. MS Sloane 56, fol. 7r-v, while the same charm is attributed to John Cattesdon in B. L. MS Sloane 2584, fol. 31r. John Arderne takes care to warn the person who wishes to use the charm to keep the words of the incantation secret by folding it tightly in parchment, lest some lay person acquire it. In B. L. Sloane 2584, fol. 68r-v, prayers are prescribed to be recited by the patient three times for three days or three times until the physician returns.<sup>40</sup> For the duration of the treatment under the direction of the *medicus* who will return in three days or less, a certain emotional or conative state conducive to healing is

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<sup>39</sup> Keith Thomas (1971:178) catalogues healers who were viewed as disreputable during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries because they used magical methods—“cunning men,’ ‘wise men,’ ‘charmners,’ ‘blessers,’ ‘conjurers,’ ‘sorcerers,’ ‘witches.’”

<sup>40</sup> “Et dicat eger ter Pater Noster et Aue Maria. Et medicus similiter. Et sic fiat per tres dies vel ter antequam medicus recedat.”

maintained through the remedial words of the charm. This belief in the power of the words to change the circumstances or reality lies at the basis of the use of a charm. The words might be spoken in a patient's ear, written on bread or hosts and ingested, or carried on the person as a preventative. The directions for performance of the charm not seldom include specific accompanying acts, which in late medieval manuscripts are often simple tasks of caretakers, on the one hand, or acts intended to strengthen the sufferer mentally by means of evocation of deeply felt religious symbols.

Three remedies to stop bleeding found in B. L. Sloane 122 (fols. 48r and 49r) will illustrate three different modes of managing the same medical crisis with verbal healing. The first charm relies on the direct effect of Psalm III and powerful letters (ms. *has caractas*) written down and placed upon the patient. Their efficacy can be verified by writing them on a knife, then killing a pig, which, as a result, will not bleed. In the second charm, the charm speaker not only speaks the words (MAX MAX PAX PATER NOSTER) but also rubs the patient's hands and feet with an herb unguent, actions that would probably prevent the patient from going into shock. The third charm binds the bloods "through the blood and water of the side of Jesus Christ, namely the blood of our redemption and the water of our baptism." This charm relies on Christian belief and the powerful symbolic identification of the blood and water that flowed from Christ's side with the blood of redemption and the water of baptism. The patient is psychologically fortified by the certainty of Christian salvation through the blood and water to expect, indeed, to intend a physiological result that stops the bleeding. The patient's conative response takes precedence here over the physical action taken in the second charm or the pseudo-scientific proof in the first charm.

The purpose of this paper has been to define the genre of medieval Latin charms as found in English manuscripts dating from about 1000 until nearly 1500. The strategies adopted toward this purpose have been (1) to delineate the genres closely allied to charms, (2) to describe the character and degree of the orality in charms, (3) to analyze typical compositional features, and (4) to describe the circumstances in which charms were performed.

The evidence of the manuscripts suggests the following conclusions: first, that charms, as a genre, occupy a place between non-verbal plant remedies and prayers for healing but overlap both. A particular charm may align more closely with one or the other of these other curative modes, depending on its compositional constituents. Anglo-Saxons, for example,

seem completely unconcerned with maintaining divisions among these different sorts of curative measures, referring to “charms,” “psalms,” and “prayers” interchangeably.

Second, the answer to the question “What degree of orality do charms display?” turns out to be complex. That is, the degree of orality displayed in charms varies through a continuum that includes invocations of holy names and recitation of nonsense strings, Christian narratives and dialogues (sometimes modeled on textual sources), repetition of well-known Christian prayers and litanies (in part and in entirety), and reproduction in writing of purely visual signs and symbols. Furthermore, it is true that the psychodynamics of charms seem dominated by attitudes, beliefs, habits of thought, and responses especially characteristic of traditional oral societies; nevertheless, when a range of charms dating from Anglo-Saxon times to the fifteenth century is considered, a pattern of progressive textualization can be traced. Signs of residual orality and of an increasing textuality appear in the way charms are recorded in manuscripts. Other late features, such as appearance of a more learned variety of Latin and more theologically sophisticated vocabulary appear after the twelfth century.

Third, when charm structures are approached from the point of view of oral theory, some apparently chaotic features begin to present a shape. To recall two examples, the great multiplicity of similar, but not verbally identical, charms can be understood through the notion of multiformity. Likewise, the additive feature of stringing different kinds of compositional units together is also characteristic of oral traditional style.

Finally, I have suggested that the circumstances of performance distinguish the genre of Christian charms from other oral traditional works and also from much of the praxis of magic. Charms (which may be quite brief) are usually performed only one at a time (although one formula may be repeated several times) on the occasion of a specific medical or psychic distress by or for some person (or persons) who suffers some harm or faces some risk to body or property. The choice of the work to be performed relates directly to the distress to be relieved. The circumstances of performance in addition to the language of the formula, usually presuppose a certain *auctoritas* in the charm speaker. Christian charms identify the ultimate source of power with which the charm speaker aligns himself or herself as Christ or Mary or some saintly mediator. The operation is intended to effect a conative response toward health in the Christian on whose behalf the charm is performed. Yet the overwhelming dominance of Christian symbols and ritual in medieval charms does not preclude the continued use of remedies that do not exhibit Christian features. The

healing stream carries along some old formulas as it adds new ones. The tradition forgets and drops charms that people no longer value and conserves some old ones that people credit as effective, at the same time turning to and borrowing from formal religious and ritualistic words of power that speak to specific needs.<sup>41</sup>

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