

Anglo-Saxon Charms in Performance

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Providing explicit ritual instructions alongside verbal incantations, the Old English healing charms offer us a relatively rare glimpse of poetry in performance in the Anglo-Saxon world. The well-studied verse incantations as well as the lesser known non-metrical remedies functioned as part of rituals performed to cure disease, improve crops, and even return lost or stolen property. Lea Olsan has noted that “unlike epic poetry, riddles, or lyrics, charms are performed toward specific practical ends” and “their mode of operation is performative” (1999:401). Scribes often underscored the importance of performance by stating explicitly that an incantation be spoken (*cweðan*) or sung (*singan*). As John Niles reminds us, the modern usage of the term “charm” is perhaps too limited for conveying the importance of performance in these solemn rites of healing. The native term *gealdor* (or *galdor*),¹ with its broader semantic range, more explicitly denotes performance, deriving from the verb *galan*, which means “to sing,” “to enchant,” “to cry out aloud” (Niles 1999:27).

Because they are so deeply rooted in their performance context, the Old English charms require us to move beyond conventional text-based literary analysis and classification to apply performance-based approaches that allow us to examine the charms on their own terms. Taken collectively, the charms blur distinctions between the oral and the literate, the Christian and the Germanic, the metrical and the non-metrical, the poetic and the practical, even the sensical and non-sensical. In performance, the charm’s function as healing remedy becomes all-encompassing, and once-familiar dichotomies quickly break down, revealing insightful intersections between categories that might at first seem mutually exclusive. In many significant ways, awareness of performance contexts allows us to transcend potentially

¹ *Gealdor* acquires a number of different meanings in the poetic canon: enchantment, spell, incantation, song (Bessinger 1960:25). Niles points out that the verb *galan* could refer to inarticulate sounds as well as human speech or song (212).

reductive binaries and thus enhance our understanding of these complex texts. What follows is an exploration of several such binaries: living ritual/static text, poetry/science, verbal/nonverbal, “pagan”/Christian. In each case metrical charms will be examined alongside non-metrical analogues to gain a more complete understanding of the tradition as a whole.

Living Ritual/Static Text

The first and perhaps greatest challenge confronting any modern reader of the charms involves bridging the gap between their original performance context and their current manuscript form, a difficult task when dealing with any oral-derived text, but especially so in this case. The body of texts known collectively as “charms” are actually scattered across at least twenty-three manuscripts (Storms 1948:25-26) and are anything but uniform in the way they have been preserved in writing. A relatively small number, such as the “Æcerbot” (“Land-remedy” charm), include detailed directions for ceremonial ritual and corresponding incantations in what appear to be full form (Dobbie 1942:116-18).²

Typically, however, the performance cues are more cryptic. For instance, some of the charms, such as the so-called “Journey Charm,” include lengthy incantations with no directions for performance or even a title indicating a clear purpose (Dobbie 1942:126-28).³ Others include elaborate ritual instructions with no verbal element, such as a remedy to cure *wens* (tumors or cysts) that requires a woman to draw cups of water from a spring running east and pour the cups into other vessels in order to bring about a cure (more below). Still others have neither clear performance instructions nor decipherable incantations. A charm marked in its manuscript as a remedy “Wið þeofentum” (“Against theft”), for example, includes no directions but only a brief incantation that is dismissed by many as “gibberish” or “nonsense”⁴ (Storms 1948:303):⁵

² This remedy is found in MS BM Cotton Caligula A VII, ff. 176a-78a.

³ This remedy is found in MS CCC 41 Cambridge pp. 350-53. See further Stuart 1981.

⁴ Grattan and Singer, for instance, title the charm “Gibberish Against Theft” (1952:179). Storms includes this charm among those he labels “gibberish or jingle” charms (1948:297).

⁵ This remedy is found in Harley 585, f. 178a, b.

Luben luben niga efið niga efið fel ceid fel delf fel cumer orcggaei ceufor
dard giug farig pidig delou delupih.

Despite its lack of any discernible meaning at a lexical level, however, this chant has a meaning that would have been very powerful within its original performance context.⁶ In its function as remedy, it does not differ radically from other charms that happen to have been copied with more elaborate explanations or instructions. Recorded with and without ritual instructions, with and without incantations, with and without clear lexical meaning, the body of charms as a whole cannot be fully realized on the printed page, but depend on performance context.

The issues involved here are quite similar to concerns that those working with living oral traditions from various genres must face today. Lauri Honko has explained that Gopala Naika, who performed the *Siri Epic* of the Tulu region in India for a team of folklore scholars from Finland, “had considerable difficulty in visualizing how the Siri epic could ever be put into a book form” because “the performative and allusive elements abolished in the process seemed so essential to him” (Honko 1998a:163). The multiplicity of answers that scholars—even those operating within a single genre in a single tradition—have had for this dilemma teach us that myriad textual renderings can suggest differences far greater than exist in performance.

The Zuni story of the world’s beginning, for instance, has been transcribed and translated in multiple ways (ways that move beyond differences in individual performance styles and settings): Frank Cushing chose to tell the tale in rather romanticized prose (1901); Ruth Bunzel provides a dual language Zuni/English edition (1932/1992); Matilda Cox Stevenson presents the story in the format of a dramatic play (1904); Dennis Tedlock transcribes the narrative as poetry with paralinguistic aspects of performance indicated through manipulation of typography and parenthetical descriptions (1972/1999).⁷ If a single tradition can be represented in such different ways even in our modern society of standardized texts, we should certainly not be surprised to find extreme diversity during this period of what Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe has termed “transitional literacy” (1990) in Anglo-Saxon England. The manuscript’s subordinate role to the larger

⁶ On the significance and transmission of such “gibberish” charms and insightful parallels in the South Slavic tradition, see Foley 1980a:80-83.

⁷ See further Tedlock 1981.

living tradition requires us to shift our defaults from print to performance and accept the genre in its many manifestations throughout the surviving texts.

Below is an examination of two Anglo-Saxon remedies from Harley 585 (otherwise known as the *Lacnunga*). The first, a charm against black blains (skin swellings or sores), creates potential confusion by its brevity, while the second, an aid for women before and after childbirth, raises questions because it includes more than one would expect in a single charm. Both cases provide examples of “the illusion of completeness and independence” that John Miles Foley attributes to “our automatic assumptions, the unconsciously applied logic for all of our reading” (2002:60). Rather than viewing the texts in isolation, we will examine each in the context of the wider healing tradition.

Like many Old English spells, the charm against black blains includes ritual directions accompanied by an incantation in what seems to be abbreviated form. The charm describes a poultice to be made after saying “tigað” nine times (Grattan and Singer 1952:160-61)⁸:

þis gebed man sceal singan on ða blacan blegene IX siðum: **tigað**. Wyrce
ðonne godne cliðan: genim anes æges gewyrðe greates sealtes

One must sing this prayer over black blains nine times: **tigað**. Then work
a good poultice: Take the measure of one egg of coarse salt

A charm recorded for black blains in another manuscript⁹ indicates that “tigað” is merely the first word of a much longer incantation (Storms 1948:302):

Tigað. Tigað. Tigað. calicet ac locluel sedes adclocles arcre encrcere ernem
Nonabaioth arcum cunat arcum arcua fligata soh wiþni necutes cuterii rafaf þegal
uflen binchni. arta. arta. arta. tuxuncula. tuxuncula. tuxuncula.¹⁰

⁸ Harley 585, f. 165b

⁹ MS Bodley Junius 163 f. 227

¹⁰ Cf. also MS Gonville & Caius College, Cambridge, 379, f. 49a (Storms 1948:302):

Thigat. Thigat. Thigat. calicet. Archlo. cluel. Sedes. Achodes. Arde. et hercleno.
Abaioth. ArcocugtiA. Arcu. ArcuA. fulgura. sophuinit. ni. cofuedi. necutes cuteri.
nicuram. Thefalnegal. Uflem. archa. cunhunelaja.

This abbreviation is very similar to commands to recite the “Pater noster”—the first words and working title of the longer prayer—that are very common throughout the charms, as illustrated by the “Æcerbot.” This field remedy requires the *pater noster* at several points alongside other metrical and non-metrical incantations. At no point is the prayer written out in its entirety:

... and paternoster swa oft swa þæt oðer (13)

... and swa oft Pater Noster (23)

... and pater noster III (42)

... and pater noster þriwa (82)

... and Our Father as often as the other [incantation]

... and as often Our Father

... and Our Father three times¹¹

For the audience already familiar with the full form of the prayer, two words in print could easily stand in for the whole to be recited in performance. Just as familiar to Anglo-Saxon healers, it seems, were other incantations, such as “tigað.” Rather than a transcript of performance, the manuscripts offer us only a shorthand form of the more elaborate living rituals they represent.

Another kind of gap left in the transmission from performance to print involves the connections between a series of acts related to pregnancy and childbirth in Harley 585 (f. 185 a, b). The first ritual for “se wifman, se hire cild afedan ne mæg” (“the woman who is not able to nourish her child”; l. 1) requires a woman to step over a grave and recite the following incantation three times (Dobbie 1942:123-24, ll. 4-6):

þis me to bote	þære laþan lætbyrde,
þis me to bote	þære swæran swærbyrde,
þis me to bote	þære laðan lambyrde.

Again, what appears nonsense to literate eyes is important enough in its context to transmit and record in multiple places. The differences reveal very similar sound patterns despite extreme differences in orthography. On the transmission of sound patterns, see further Foley 1980a and 1980b.

¹¹ On the Pater Noster as a protecting charm in Irish tradition, see Wright 1993:236-41.

This as a help for me against the hateful late birth, this as a help to me against the grievous difficult birth, this as a help to me against the hateful lame birth.

The second, for a woman *mid bearne* (“with child”; l. 7), involves an incantation to be recited in the presence of the woman’s *hlaforde* (“lord”), and the third an incantation to be recited at church “þonne seo modor gefele þæt þæt bearn si cwic” (“when the mother feels that the child is alive”; l. 12). The fourth requires a woman to wrap part of a child’s grave in wool to be sold to a merchant, thereby sending away *sorge corn*, “seeds of grief” (l. 20). And the final section, for “se wifman, se ne mæge bearn afedan” (“the woman who is not able to nourish her child”; l. 21), includes a fairly elaborate sequence (ll. 21-31) in which a woman drinks milk from a cow *anes bleos* (“of one color”), mixes it with water from a running stream before drinking, recites a verse incantation, and then takes food at a house other than her own.

Godfrid Storms interprets the text as a series of acts, all to be performed by an individual woman at various stages of a single pregnancy (1948:198-99). More sensitive to performance contexts, L. M. C. Weston (1985) has argued that what is generally edited as a single charm is actually a catalog of charms to aid various problems related to pregnancy and childbirth: to protect against a miscarriage, to guard against stillbirth or “lame-birth,” to help a mother carry her child to term, or to help a nursing mother increase her milk supply.¹² When we look at the text as an aid to performance rather than an ultimate product in itself, the debate becomes more a problem of editing than of performance, where completeness of any kind is illusory.

If we expand our analysis of the childbirth charms to include those in other manuscripts and without incantations, the dichotomy between performance and print is broken down even further. In a non-metrical charm for a woman *bearn eacenu* (“big with child”) the mother does not *recite* incantations; instead she binds to her foot a wax tablet with an inscription recounting the pregnancies of Mary, who gave birth to Christ, and of Elisabeth, who gave birth to John the Baptist (Storms 1948:283; emphasis mine):¹³

¹² Catalogs of this sort are not at all unprecedented in Anglo-Saxon poetry. Such collections of proverbs are found in two manuscript texts now known as *Maxims I* (*Exeter Book* manuscript) and *Maxims II* (MS Cotton Tiberius). See further Howe 1985.

¹³ This charm appears in MS Junius 85, p. 17.

Maria virgo peperit Christum Elisabet sterelis peperit Iohannem baptistam.
 . . . **Writ dis** on wexe de næfre ne com to nanen wyrce, and bind under
 hire swidran fot.

The virgin Mary gave birth to Christ. Barren Elisabeth gave birth to John
 the Baptist. . . . **Write this** on wax that has not been used for any other
 purpose, and bind it under her right foot.

Written inscriptions and poetic incantations are equally valid rituals enabling the performer to tap into healing power. The interplay among various verbal and nonverbal elements is thus essential to understanding of the charms as a genre, as inconsistent as these reflections may be in their current forms.

Poetry (Superstition)/Science

A second challenge to our understanding of the charms involves the contemporary distinctions sharply contrasting the categories of poetry and science, with the poetic aspects of the charms often relegated to the realm of “superstition” rather than medicine. Titles of books collecting and analyzing the charms illustrate how easy our print culture makes it for us to separate components that would be inseparable in performance: *Anglo-Saxon Medicine* (Cameron 1993), *Anglo-Saxon Magic* (Storms 1948), *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems* (Dobbie 1942), and the well-known *Leechdoms, Wortcunning, and Starcraft* (Cockayne 1864-66)—all of which include a number of the same remedies—are just a few of the works whose titles suggest the rigid boundaries of classification. To come closer to understanding these texts in their performance contexts, we must return to the charms’ curative function and place science and so-called superstition on more equal terms.

M. L. Cameron (1993) convincingly argues that although the charms have been dismissed by many as superstitious rituals void of any medical merit, the remedies often do include elements with curative functions that modern medicine recognizes even today. Onions, saliva, and garlic used extensively in the charms have all been shown to have important antibiotic properties (119). A charm for an enlarged spleen helps illustrate the healing power of iron, a common component in Anglo-Saxon healing rituals (Cockayne 1864-66, ii:256).¹⁴

¹⁴ This remedy appears in MS Regius 12 D xvii.

acele ðu wealhat isen þonne hit furþum sie of fyre atogen, on wine oððe
on ecede sele þæt drincan.

Cool a very hot iron when it is just taken from the fire in wine or in
vinegar; give it to drink.

Cameron explains that an enlarged spleen often results from an iron deficiency caused by such illnesses as malaria (1993:18). Plunging hot iron into wine or vinegar would—in addition to any ritual function—create an iron acetate and thus provide much-needed iron for patients whose diets were often lacking in this essential nutrient.¹⁵ In many ways, this picture runs counter to much scholarship surrounding the Old English charms. Storms, for instance (1948:76), attributes the “magic power of iron” and its vital role in Anglo-Saxon remedies to its relative scarcity and to connections with mythic smiths such as Wayland rather than considering any additional medical properties iron might have had.

The tendency to dismiss the possibility of actual curative power is even greater in scholarship addressing the so-called metrical charms. The metrical portion of a charm “Wið færstice” (“Against a Sudden Stitch”) has received much attention for its poetic value, but the portions that do not lend themselves to literary analysis have led some to challenge the text’s unity.¹⁶ Among the elements problematic for the poem’s textual unity are instructions on either side of the twenty-six-line alliterative incantation (Dobbie 1942:122-23):¹⁷

Wið færstice feferfuiġe and seo reade netele, ðe ðurh ærn inwyrð, and
wegbrade; wyll in buteran. . . [incantation] Nim þonne þæt seax, ado on
wætan.

Against a sudden stitch, feverfew and the red nettle, that grows through a
house, and plantain; boil in butter. . . [incantation] Take then the knife;
plunge it into the liquid.

¹⁵ On Anglo-Saxon diet and disease, see Cameron 1993:5-18.

¹⁶ Howell Chickering’s analysis (1972) of the metrical charm, for instance, recommends separating the first eighteen lines, which he considers “a masterpiece” (95), from the remainder of the remedy on the grounds that “as modern readers we bring only an aesthetic appreciation to the charm, not a real belief” and thus “can only perceive the literary force of its verbal magic” (104).

¹⁷ MS Harley 585.

The role of the knife dipped into a liquid is reduced to one of “sympathetic magic” by Chickering (96-97),¹⁸ and Grendon asserts that the knife was “apparently to be used on some dummy representing evil spirits” (1909:207). Cameron explains, however, that all three herbs mentioned in the first line have been recommended for muscular and joint pains “when applied as a salve to the aching parts” and assumes that the knife would have been used in applying such a salve (1993:143-44). Examination of this charm in the context of other non-metrical charms suggests that even the seemingly “superstitious” incantation may have had practical value and should not be relegated to a purely literary realm.

Cameron notes that prior to watches and clocks, the recitation of prayers or other incantations could serve the function of a time-keeping device. For example, a remedy for a carbuncle (a painful infection of the skin) asks the healer to recite the “Our Father” three and nine times respectively at different stages of a potion’s preparation (Cockayne 1864-66, ii:358; Cameron 1993:38-39):

. . . þonne hit wealle, sing iii pater noster ofer, do eft of, sing þonne viiii
siþum pater noster on. . . .

. . . sing three paternosters when it boils, remove again, then sing the
paternoster nine times over it. . . .

The incantation in “Wið færstice” also follows instructions to boil a potion and could likewise serve as a timekeeping method. Additionally, the incantations are believed to have instilled confidence in patients and to have established the authority of the physician—again, not an entirely foreign concept even by modern standards.¹⁹ The poetic merits noted by Chickering

¹⁸ Chickering (1972) does allow for the possibility that if the knife were used to apply the liquid that the heat would have had medicinal value, but because “we are not told what else is done with the mixture and the knife” he recommends that we limit our analysis to the literary portion, in essence taking the poem out of context. Hauer (1978) argues for the poem’s unity on thematic grounds, again taking the metrical portion out of its performance context. Weston suggests that we look at the text as a whole as “practical poetry” but still views the remedy as “non-physical” (1985:186).

¹⁹ Cameron notes (1993:157) that “today the physician imparts confidence in his ability to heal by his white coat, his professional detachment, the atmosphere of his consulting room and the framed diplomas on its walls. These are as much a non-rational part of the healing process as was the intoning of charms.”

and countless others need not be separated from the charm's curative function.

Poetic and curative functions are perhaps even more intertwined in the metrical Old English bee charm. Poetic incantations and practical ritual actions here complement and reinforce one another (Dobbie 1942:125).²⁰

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 wiððon forweorp ofer greet, þonne hi swirman, and cweð:
 Sitte ge, sigewif, sigað to eorþan!
 Næfre ge wilde to wuda fleogan.
 Beo ge swa gemindige mines godes. . . .

Take earth; throw it with your right hand under your right foot, and say, "I catch it under my foot; I find it. Lo! Earth has power against every creature. . . ."

And throw dirt over bees when they swarm and say, "settle, victorious woman, sink to the earth, never fly wild to the wood. Be as mindful of my well-being. . . ."

Marie Nelson has argued that the methods used here are probably "as likely to prevent swarming as those [methods] used by modern beekeepers" (1984:58). Annie Betts of *Bee World* offers a beekeeping perspective, explaining that throwing gravel over bees has been used as an effective way to prevent swarming by many cultures throughout history (1922:140). Again, we should be careful not to dismiss the incantation as mere superstition. The physical act of throwing dirt under the foot parallels the verbal act of saying "I catch it under my foot"; the physical act of throwing dirt over the bees parallels the verbal act of commanding the *sigewif* to sink to the earth. This verbal reinforcement of an effective physical act would likely aid in the ritual's transmission. John Miles Foley and Barbara Kerewsky Halpern have observed that orality often "works as a vital means of preservation and transmission" (1978:903) in healing charms. As with "Wið færstice," the verbal and nonverbal elements must be seen as a consistent whole. Through the mutual reinforcement of physical and verbal elements, the charm provides what modern science would accept as a valid

²⁰ MS 41 Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. See Nelson 1984 on the structural parallels between the physical and verbal acts involved in this charm.

means of controlling bees while at the same time providing a way of reestablishing order in the natural world through the poetic incantation.

In her recent translation of the *Old English Herbarium*, Anne Van Arsdall further demonstrates that Anglo-Saxon healers were aware of genuine curative functions. Rather than translating Latin remedies blindly, these medic-scribes translated with an eye toward healing herbs native to England—in much the same way that Latin poetic texts were often translated into traditional Anglo-Saxon idiom (2002:75ff.).²¹ Further, compilations varied from one manuscript to the next with substitutions of herbs depending on availability, indicating that each medic could vary a given remedy to fit the specific circumstances. Such patterns are similar to those we see in the transmission of oral traditions more widely: scribes are not confined to a fixed text; any given remedy can exist in multi-forms; and, most importantly, illustrations and instructions often appear incomplete because, as Van Arsdall reminds us, healers familiar with the traditions would “not require detailed instructions” (85). Any given remedy is complete only in performance.

By recognizing parallels between the charms and features of oral traditions more widely, we can better appreciate connections between metrical and non-metrical charms as well as between verbal and nonverbal portions of a single charm. We should thus be very careful not to dismiss the incantations of Old English charms (even those that may appear to be gibberish or nonsense) as superstition, peripheral to the healing process. Rather, a performance-centered approach requires us to appreciate them as essential elements in the performance and transmission of these healing remedies. As Niles succinctly states, “healers were singers, it seems” (1999:27).

Verbal/Nonverbal

Where science dismisses the poetic elements as superstition, literary scholarship tends to disregard any remedies that are *not* poetic. The metrical charms have been well-studied, but parallels across the wider tradition have not been as amply noted. Thus, a third set of dichotomies that a performance-centered approach can help unravel involves the traditional

²¹ On “indexed translation” see Foley’s discussion of *Andreas* (1995:181-207). See also Garner 2001 on the adaptation of *Judith* from its Latin source for an Anglo-Saxon audience. On native ingredients in Anglo-Saxon remedies, see further Voigts 1979.

hierarchy implicit in the study of the charms: metrical over non-metrical, verbal over nonverbal—distinctions that are far more ours than the Anglo-Saxons’.

The publication of *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems* was arguably the most significant event influencing scholarship on Old English charms. In this volume, Elliot Van Kirk Dobbie included twelve charms selected on the basis of the “sufficient regularity to warrant their inclusion in an edition of Anglo-Saxon poetry” (1942:cxx), twelve charms that have come to be highly privileged in Old English scholarship.²² While Dobbie certainly cannot have been expected to include all charms in this anthology of Anglo-Saxon poetry, the inadvertent consequences of his choices for inclusion can scarcely be overestimated; the vast majority of scholarship analyzing specific charms focuses on those classified as metrical, the non-metrical charms generally being considered only in exclusively historical or medical terms.

Scattered throughout five separate manuscripts,²³ these twelve charms do not, however, seem to have held any special status during the Anglo-Saxon period. The placement of the charms in a range of manuscripts suggests that the charms now classed as metrical were not valued solely on the basis of their alliterative meter nor were they viewed as the exclusive domain of medical instructions. (In fact, several of the metrical charms, which we tend to think of as most important, were inscribed in the margins of manuscripts.) The scribes apparently did not feel any need to group the “metrical” charms in one place within the body of medical texts or to isolate them from the larger body of metrical works.²⁴ Turning our attention to performance contexts and considering these charms alongside other remedies without metrical incantations—perhaps even without incantations at all—can lead to a more complete understanding both of the metrical charms themselves and the larger tradition of Anglo-Saxon healing

²² On methods of classification in other major collections, see Garner 2000:30-41.

²³ Four are inscribed in the margins of the Corpus Christi College Cambridge MS 41: Charms 8 (“For a Swarm of Bees”), 9 (“For Theft of Cattle”), 10 (“For Loss of Cattle”), and 11 (“A Journey Charm”). For further information on this manuscript, see Olsan 1999 and Dobbie 1942:cxxx. Other metrical charms are to be found in MS Cotton Caligula A.Vii. British Museum, the Manuscript of the Saxon *Heliand* (Dobbie 1, “For Unfruitful Land”) and Royal MS 4A.xiv (Dobbie 12, “Against a Wen”).

²⁴ For a thorough discussion of meaning we can glean from manuscripts regarding Old English poetry, see O’Keeffe 1990.

remedies. Two pairs of charms are examined below to illustrate these possibilities.

Juxtaposition of two separate charms for the same purpose—one a metrical incantation lacking ritual instructions, the other a ritual ceremony without any instructions for incantation—illustrates the dual ways that the charms function to translate the supernatural realm into the human and thus gain power over afflictions. A charm in Harley 585 (189a), mentioned earlier, says that to cure a *wen*, a woman must go to a spring and fill a cup with water, empty the water into another vessel, then fill and empty it again until three vessels are filled (Grendon 1909:215):

Gif wænnas eglia mæn æt þære heortan, gange mædenman to wylle þe rihte east yrne, and gehlade ane cuppan fulle forð mid ðam streame, and singe þæron Credan and Paternoster; and geote þonne on oþer fæt, and hlade eft oþre, and singe eft Credan and Paternoster, and do swa, þæt þu hæbbe þreo. Do swa nygon dagas; sona him bið sel.

If wens afflict one at the heart, let a maiden go to a spring which runs east and draw one cup full, moving forth with the stream, and sing on it the Creed and a Paternoster and then pour it into another vessel and afterwards draw again, and sing again the Creed and a Paternoster, and do so, until you have three. Do so for nine days; soon it will be well for that one.

The process of pouring the water from one vessel to another, diminishing the water in the original vessel to nothing with each repetition, parallels the verbal simile in the metrical charm for the same purpose in which the *wen* is told to “weorne alswa weter on anbre” (“to shrink as water in a pail”) (Dobbie 1942:128):²⁵

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,
under earnes clea, a þu geweornie.
Clinge þu alswa col on heorþe,
scing þu alswa scerne awage,
and **weorne** **alswa weter on anbre. . . .**

Wen, wen, little wen, here you must not build, nor have any dwelling, but you must go north to the nearby hill where you have, miserable, one

²⁵ This remedy appears in Royal MS 4A.xiv.

brother. He must lay a leaf at your head. Under the foot of a wolf, under the wing of the eagle, under the claw of the eagle, ever may you diminish. Shriveled as a coal on the hearth, shrink as muck in the wall, and **diminish as water in a pail**. . . .

As they present themselves in the surviving texts, the two charms appear to offer two equally valid means of tapping into the same source of power, one a verbal description and the other a dramatic enactment symbolizing the desired reduction. To use J. L. Austin's speech-act theory, the first is a "performative sentence" (1962:6-7) that, in the proper context, is understood by speaker and audience to function in the same way as corresponding ritual acts.

Similar connections can be seen between the well-known, metrical "Nine Herbs Charm" and a non-metrical charm protecting travelers. The non-metrical charm opens thus (Grendon 1909:191):²⁶

Wip miclum gonge ofer land, þylæs he toerige: mucgwyr̥t nime him in hand, oþþe do on his sco. . . .

Against much traveling over land, lest he tire: let him take mugwort in his hand, or put it in his shoe. . . .

This charm has several parallels with the opening stanza of the metrical "Nine Herbs Charm" (Dobbie 119):²⁷

Gemyne ðu, mucgwyr̥t . . .
 þu miht wip III and wið XXX,
 þu miht wip attre and wið onflyge,
 þu miht wip þam laþan ðe geond lond færð.

Remember, Mugwort . . . you have power against three and against thirty; you have power against poison and against infection; you have power against the hateful things that go throughout the land.

The phrase "Wip miclum gonge ofer land" in the non-metrical charm parallels the final lines addressed to Mugwort in the metrical charm: "wið

²⁶ The remainder of the charm includes the following incantation to be recited over the herb: "Tollam te artemesia ne lassus sim in via" ("I will pick you up, Artemisia, so that I not tire along the way"), MS Regius 12D xvii, 57a.

²⁷ MS Harley 585 ff. 160a-63a.

onflyge, þam laþan ðe geond lond færð.”²⁸ In the non-metrical charm, the phrase comprises part of the ritual instructions requiring the traveler to pick the herb mugwort. In the metrical charm, the phrase forms part of an incantation spoken directly to the herb itself. The physical ritual and the verbal ritual again tap into the same power, multiforms of the same protective charm. Viewing the two together reinforces the connection between the herb mugwort and travelers. Additionally, the juxtaposition of the two suggests that the opening phrase “Wiþ miclum gonge ofer land” of the non-metrical charm would likely have indexed a wide range of specific dangers that travelers face, such as the *attre* and *onflyge* (poison and infection) referred to specifically in the “Nine Herbs Charm.” This kind of metonymic meaning is typical of oral traditional art,²⁹ which relies on audience awareness of traditional associations to convey meaning.

Such patterns can also be understood in terms of the parataxis or adding style long recognized as a meaningful characteristic of Anglo-Saxon poetry. Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur, for instance, offers an extended discussion of the tendency in Old English poetry toward “a double or multiple statement of the same concept of idea in different words. . .” (1959:40). Lines 350-53 from *Beowulf* serve as an example. In this passage four noun phrases all refer to Hrothgar and thus evoke different aspects of his role as leader:

. . . “Ic þæs wine Deniga,
freaan Scyldinga frinan wille,
beaga bryttan, swa þu bena eart,
þeoden mærne ymb þinne sið. . . .”

“As you desire, I wish to ask the friend of the Danes, the prince of the Scyldings, the giver of rings, the renowned ruler, about your journey. . . .”

More recently Fred C. Robinson has described the style of *Beowulf* and the wider body of Old English poetry as “appositive” (1985). The constructions in this style, which generally lack explicit logical connections between apposed elements, Robinson observes, are “especially rich in implicit meaning” (4). Such implicit connections created through indexed associations are natural to an oral traditional style of composition, an art that

²⁸ Cf. also “The Journey Charm”: “wið eal þæt lað þe in to land fare” (“against everything hateful that goes into the land”; l. 5).

²⁹ See Foley 1991:10.

depends on an audience to complete the meaning-making process. Composition and reception both require active participation. If we expand the concept of apposition or variation to include nonverbal as well as verbal ways of creating meaning and embodying the charms' power, then the charms with and without incantations, with and without a recognizable meter, need not be seen as wholly separate elements in the healing tradition. We must attune ourselves more sensitively to traditional associations in order to participate in the meaning-making process.

“Pagan”/Christian

A fourth binary rendered meaningless in performance concerns the distinction between Christian and Germanic elements in the remedies. As Olsan reminds us, the tradition of the charms “both absorbed Christian motifs and rituals and became a part of Christian practices” (1999:403, n. 5). The field remedy charm, for instance, involves incantations that appeal to Christian figures including Christ and the Virgin Mary and requires the names of the four gospel authors to be written on sticks. Yet the ritual also includes an incantation, “Erce, erce, erce, eorþan modor” (“mother of earth”), with *Erce* generally understood as an ancient Celtic deity.³⁰ A performance-centered approach allows us to accept the charm in all its seeming ambiguity and to recognize the genuine syncretism of traditions inherent in the remedy.

Likewise the Nine Herbs Charm (discussed above) includes explicitly Germanic and Christian references in its incantation. The power of the Nine Herbs is attributed ultimately to the Germanic god Woden (Dobbie 1942:120):³¹

ða genam Woden VIII wuldortanas
 sloh ða þa næddran, þæt heo on VIII tofleah

 Nu magon þas VIII wyrta wið nygon wuldorgeflogenum. . . .

³⁰ See Duckert 1972. See also Dobbie 1942:208 on Erce as “a Germanic goddess of fertility.” Niles has suggested the possibility that the phrase may be a corruption of “Ecce, ecce, ecce, eorðe modor,” which would render the line “Hearken, hearken, hearken, mother earth” (1980:55). Regardless of its specific origins, the line offers strong evidence of syncretism.

³¹ MS Harley 585 ff. 160a-63a.

For Woden took nine glory-twigs and slew the nine snakes so that they flew into nine pieces. . . . Now these nine herbs have power against nine who have fled from glory. . . . (lines 32-33; 45)

Later in the same incantation we are told that “Crist stod ofer adle ængan cundes” (“Christ stood over diseases of every kind”; line 58).

This type of syncretism is evidenced throughout living oral traditions. Larry Evers and Felipe Molina explain, for example, that over the past four and one-half centuries since their conquest by the Christian Spanish, the Yaqui—a Native American tribe living in what is now Arizona—have developed a verbal art that absorbs Christian beliefs into traditional Yaqui culture (1987:40):

It includes not only the formal Latinate prayers, litanies, and sermons . . . but a large body of apocryphal Biblical narratives as well. In these stories the pantheon of the Jesuits walk the Río Yaqui country. The stories demonstrate dramatically how Yaquis have made the Catholicism given them into something distinctly their own. Stories tell how *Dios*, God the Father, created the cow, the horse and tobacco; how *eva*, Eve, organized the first pahko; how *jesucristo*, Jesus Christ, himself, roamed through Yaqui lands creating mountains and pointing out medicinal herbs to the Yaqui people.

Likewise, in the Mande *Epic of Son-Jara*, told by Fa-Digi Sisoko and translated by John William Johnson (1992), the Mande hero’s genealogy is intertwined with that of Islamic leaders. In fact, the hero’s ultimate power derives largely *from* the combination of native occult practices within Islamic tradition. Like these living traditions, the Old English charms as a genre seem to have been flexible enough to accommodate the shifting cultural forces and to translate powers from multiple traditions into potential healing power.

The syncretism we see in the field remedy and the “Nine Herbs Charm” is not limited to the verbal realm. Rather these metrical charms reflect a larger pattern deeply embedded in the tradition as a whole. For instance, many charms against influence of elves—a concept that predates Christianity (Jolly 1996:133-38)—include explicitly Christian elements in the healing ritual. A charm in Harley 585 (xxix II) against *ælfside* (“elf-influence”) requires the healer to write on a Eucharist dish a Latin biblical story of Jesus teaching in Galilee (Grattan and Singer 1952:108). The syncretism we saw in the oral and poetic incantation is here manifested in a physical act of writing and the use of Christian implements (Jolly 1996:140-41).

A recipe for a salve against *ælfcynne* even more explicitly expresses a belief in elves and other *nihtgengan* (“night-goers”) as supernatural beings coexisting with humans. And, again, the healing ritual incorporates distinctly Christian elements. After mixing the ingredients, the healer is told to set the salve under the altar, sing nine masses over them as they boil in butter (again, a possible time-keeping mechanism), add holy salt (*haliges sealtas*), strain them through a cloth, and throw the herbs into running water. The final instructions require the sign of the cross to be made over the man being treated with the salve (Storms 1948:245).³² Christianity did not supplant belief in other supernatural influences. Rather, Christian ritual provided an additional means of coping with afflictions attributed to elves and other such beings. At a very deep level, the Anglo-Saxon world-view synthesizes Christian and native belief structures. The metrical and non-metrical charms alike reflect the syncretism inherent in the healing tradition. In poetic incantations, in ritual actions, in written inscriptions, Christian and Germanic elements are inseparable components of healing rituals.

Conclusion

Traditional Anglo-Saxon wisdom tells us that “Lef mon læces behofað” (“A sick man needs a leech”; Dobbie 1942:157). Expressing a need for healing remedies in alliterative verse, this maxim embodies the dualities inherent in the charms’ performance. Science and superstition, physical and verbal, poetry and prose, Christian and Germanic are all inseparable in performance. As the charms for black blains and childbirth help illustrate, viewing any single remedy in isolation provides an incomplete view of the healing tradition. The myriad forms in which the charms were recorded attest to their ultimate oral provenance and the complexities of ritual that no text is adequate to convey. Charms such as those against swarming bees, a sudden stitch, and a swollen spleen all help elucidate the connections between medicine and what modern science often dismisses as superstition. Examination of metrical and non-metrical charms for the same purpose—such as the pair of charms against wens examined above—diminishes apparent gaps between poetry and prose, between spoken word and ritual action. And the coexistence of Christian and Germanic elements in “The Nine Herbs Charm,” the “Æcerbot,” and the elf charms reflects the deeply rooted syncretism of beliefs in the Anglo-Saxon

³² MS Regius 12 D xvii, f. 123ab.

oral tradition. As healing rituals, the body of texts that we know collectively as “charms” depended on performance context for healing power, and it is only by an awareness of performance that we can understand these often cryptic texts with anything like the competence of their original audiences.³³

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