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Up on the Roof: Understanding an Anglo-Saxon Healing Practice

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[An excerpt from my forthcoming study on women as witches in Anglo-Saxon England]

In her book *Fearless Wives & Frightened Shrews*, Sigrid Brauner argues that in the fifteenth century it is “the rise of a gender-specific imagery that stereotyped women as witches.” Clearly, the institutionalization of misogynist imagery during that period had horrific and far-ranging results. However, there is much evidence in Old English texts to suggest that a gendering of magic occurred much earlier in Anglo-Saxon England, particularly as evidenced by contemporary law texts and penitentials. Although various condemned heathen practices might have been performed by either sex, the fact that specific magical practices were already associated with women shows a concern about such acts which suggests a more watchful eye on their practitioners. In particular, drawing attention to the sinful nature of certain forms of healing practices and sexual magic helped reinforce the marginal status of women in the Christian patriarchy. A peculiar incident recorded in an Anglo-Saxon penitential will demonstrate the nature of these healing practices that clergy read as magic.

The image of Anglo-Saxon women as more free than their successors has been recently revised. Stephanie Hollis has shown that the writings of the church in the eighth and ninth

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centuries in England already codify a lesser status for women's position in the culture (even within the church), heretofore reckoned to be a change taking place at the time of the Norman invasion. While women's rights in England take a distinct turn for the worse from the twelfth century onward, their position remains somewhat enigmatic to us due to the lack of records during this time. Women's sphere—like that of all who are non-royal, non-ecclesiastical, and non-military—remains interstitial and invisible until they transgress the law of the visible hegemonic powers and become a threat, a danger, or at the very least, a problem. Thus the daily lives of most women in the Anglo-Saxon world are invisible until they endanger men or society. The texts that encode these transgressions give us a glimpse into the world of these invisible women—albeit through the eyes of men.

The laws and penitentials of this time also show this focus on women as problems. These rules sought to circumscribe the behavior of women, particularly within spheres of healing and sex. The clergy sought greater control over women's healing practices which had always been part of their family role. And as for sex—well, women had long been seen by the clergy as the root of all sexual wrongdoing, leading men into sin. The process of penance sought to re-establish masculine control of the sexual act. As Jacqueline Murray writes,

Confession and penance was in itself a singularly androcentric sacrament. Evolving as a means by which to reconcile the believer, separated by sin, with the forgiving god, confession took as its particular focus the presumably sexless soul. Yet confession had also evolved in the peculiarly masculine monastic environment of the early Middle Ages...[so] whenever women enter the discussion it was as a marked category, a signal of difference, exception or emphasis. (81)

The particular sins of women had to be highlighted and halted.

Compounds like *þa mihtigan wif*, *hægtis*, *sigewif* and the *cwidol wif* of the Old English charm *Æcerbot* (which seeks to return fertility to a field) suggest a particularly gendered sense of magic, although Jane Crawford argues that the inclusion of the parallel *cræftig man* in that charm “suggest[s] that as yet the Anglo-Saxons were without the concept of especially evil women magicians” (106). Likewise she decides against the use of *wicca* [witch] as a specifically female term, particularly in Alfred's usage of it in his well-known law based on Exodus xxii 18: [as rendered in the medieval Vulgate bible] “Maleficos non patieris vivere.” However it is notable that King Alfred changed the biblical injunction to a rule specifically for women, “þa fæmnan þe gewuniap anfon galdorcræftigan & scinlæcan & wiccan, ne læt þu þa libban,” which Audrey L. Meaney interprets as conveying the desire that “the women who are accustomed to receive” such

folk as enchanters, magicians and witches are to be condemned (1989 20).¹ I find it telling that Crawford's own reading (although differing slightly from Meaney's in grammar) emphasizes the role of women as practitioners themselves; Alfred's law seems to likewise keep those activities as part of the particular practice of women. While Meaney finds the lack of punishment for the practitioners “a puzzle” (2006 131), it does fit the pattern of emphasizing the part women play as facilitators in the episode. Meaney's additional connection with the practice of magical house-cleansing, although tentative, nonetheless implies an additional tie to the domestic sphere of women.

The use of the term *wiccan* in Alfred's law is particularly suggestive. While Crawford focuses on the fact that the word can encompass “either men or women” (108), it is clear that Alfred aims this particular law at a practice habitual of women, that of receiving enchanters. A century or so later, the prolific cleric Ælfric clearly refers to women by that term in his sermon

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Correction

We regret that on page 9 of our last newsletter (Issue 17), in the review of *Magic and the Classical Tradition*, the article “Deceiving the Senses in the Thirteenth Century: Trickery and Illusion in the Secretum philosophorum” was mistakenly attributed to Charles Burnett. The true author is Robert Goulding (as correctly cited in the book's table of contents on page 2).

Roof cont'd

"De Auguriis" where he cautions his audience "we ought to seek, if we be afflicted, restoration from God, not from the cruel witches" (Skeat 377). As Meaney points out, "whenever Ælfric uses a pronoun for a 'witch' it is always feminine" (1989 18). Elsewhere in the homily he warns his listeners against the "fulan wiccan" (373), she who brings prophecy from the devil and teaches men to leave offerings at stones, trees and springs. For Ælfric, too, the concept of the "wiccan" encompasses the perception of the woman healer as well as the worker of magic—perhaps suggestive that healing was coded not only as female but, all too often for his tastes, as magical. That much of this magic seems to have been taking place in the home—brewing love philters, healing family members, even "receiving" enchanters, magicians and other witches adds a special tone. The province of the home is at once familiar, and yet because of its interiority, remains secret. Anglo-Saxon writers looked at that hidden realm with a growing

anxiety and a desire to control it.

Penalties against the usage of blood and other bodily fluids in charms suggest the particular anxiety surrounding the typically flesh-bound perception of women in the medieval Christian world. One of the best sources of these anxious attempts to control women are penitentials, guidebooks for the correcting of one's flock. Penitentials are especially useful because of their practical intent. As Murray states in "Gendered Souls in Sexed Bodies,"

because they had this practical intent, the manuals also take into account and, to an extent, reflect the values of lay society... consequently, they present both the spiritual norms of sex and gender that the Church sought to impose, and the secular norms of sex and gender that it expected to encounter (82).

Because we do not have a direct access into the cultural experience, we can use the penitentials to provide a window into the observable phenomenon

produced as discourse from that level.

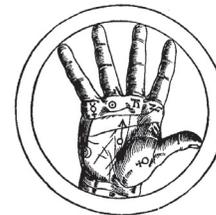
Perhaps the earliest of these in England is the Penitential of Theodore. The Latin versions may date as early as the late seventh century, but flourished in the ninth, although the earliest English version dates to the early tenth. In the following discussion, my observations are based on the Latin version translated by McNeill and Gamer. As Allen J. Frantzen notes in his study *The Literature of Penance*, women figure specifically and more prominently than in its Irish precursors: "The penances of widows are distinguished from those of girls; female homosexuality is penalized as is masturbation; and women are linked with certain magical practices" (66-67). The handbook is divided into various sections addressing major topics of penitence. An early catch-all section deals with several incidents of blood pollution, primarily among animals, but also among humans, for "he who drinks blood or semen shall do

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We are also looking for smaller pieces for our notes and queries column. News about dissertations in progress or completed, manuscript discoveries, or other such items are all welcomed.

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penance for three years" (190), a fairly serious offence. The misuse of women's bodily fluids arouse particular anxiety in the handbook, as the sections on women will show.

Of particular interest is section XIV, "On the Penance for Special Irregularities in Marriage" which deals largely with the dangerous and usually magical behavior of women. That women are subsumed into discussion of the institution, rather than dealt with as a subject in themselves betrays the construction of gender in Anglo-Saxon England. Murray, who focuses on later penitentials, nonetheless identifies a phenomenon apparent at this earlier time; that from the tripartite sexual division of virgin, matron, widow, the penitential reduces them "almost

exclusively as matrons, discussed in connection with sexual intercourse and childbirth" (83). At the center of these sins lie the fluids that define women.

The first reference is rule 15 of this section, which states "A woman who commits adultery shall do penance for three years as a fornicator. So shall she do penance who makes an unclean mixture of food for the increase of love" (196). The unclean mixture was no doubt either blood or semen, both of which were strongly objectionable not only because of the magic intent of the potion, but also because of the anxieties surrounding these fluids. Semen is particularly objectionable because sex should only be for procreation according to Augustinian thought. According to Murray, thus using semen removes it from its divinely intended repository—the

womb—but also suggests that the woman was stepping outside her nature as the inherently passive receiver of sexual congress. Again, this mixture brings up the danger of secrecy in the private realm of the home, and combines unwholesome magic with the wholesome activity of food preparation.

The following rule adds to that anxiety both about fluids and food preparation in the home, once again tainting them with magic, for "A wife who tastes her husband's blood as a remedy shall fast forty days, more or less" (197). The lesser penance situates this rule in the grey area between healing and magic. Julie Ann Smith in *Ordering Women's Lives* offers the explanation that "it was possible to rehabilitate

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Notes and Queries

Dissertation In Progress

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Jews, Christians, and the
Myth of Sorcery in the
Middle Ages:
Magic and Cultural
Exchange along
the Northwestern
Mediterranean

In this dissertation, I will use surviving traces of medieval European practices and beliefs about magic in order to reveal a mode of cultural interaction between Jews and Christians

that lay behind the anti-Semitic stereotype of Jews as diabolical sorcerers. The connection between imagination and persecution has been treated by historians such as R. I. Moore, who argued that "the apparatus for the persecution of Jews in Europe was fully worked out during the thirteenth century and the image of the Jew so firmly associated with it was established."¹ By focusing on Latin and Hebrew manuscript evidence, I will demonstrate that there was significant cultural exchange between Christian and Jewish magic, and that the stereotype of Jewish sorcery, which remains so distant from any historical reality, developed in spite of—perhaps even on account of—this shared

Cultural Exchange cont'd
interest in magic.

I am predominantly interested in texts originating in Provence, Languedoc, and the contiguous regions stretching along the Mediterranean coast into Spain and Italy—that is, from along the Mediterranean pathway where Jews migrated back and forth from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries due to the exigencies of regional expulsions. The sources relevant to this project span a range of genres, including prayer books, magical treatises, mystical and philosophical writings, medical and scientific works, talismans and amulets, works of so-called practical

Kabbalah, astrological treatises, and anthologies of texts, which will each contribute to the analysis by clarifying the different roles of magic in Jewish and Christian culture, and by delineating the means and contexts of exchange between Christians and Jews.

One of the main goals of this project is to revisit Joshua Trachtenberg's thesis on the myth of Jewish sorcery. In particular, I wish to reexamine the formation and cultural significance of the stereotype. Trachtenberg argues that "the magic which Christendom laid at the door of the Jew had very little relation to the magic current in Jewish circles; it was a reflection of beliefs and practices current

among Christians."² It is my hope that this project will provide a more nuanced look at the extent to which Christians in the region under consideration were aware of contemporary Jewish practices, and that it will shed light on the ways in which Christian understandings of Jewish magic were appropriated, distorted, or ignored in forming the myth of Jewish sorcery.

Endnotes

¹ *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950-1250* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), pp. 44-5.

² *The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and Its Relation to Modern Antisemitism* (Yale University Press, 1943), p. 59.

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pre-Christian healing methods by replacing unacceptable verbal elements" (90). In fact in a later rule (198) we are warned of the penance for a woman who "performs diabolical incantations or divinations." Remove the speaking of heathen incantations, and you were safe—blood, however, remained objectionable.

The later penitential known as the *Scriftboc* (ca 950) continues these anxieties about women's magic. Among the prohibitions:

If a woman works witchcraft [dry-craeft (magic)] and enchantment [galdor (singing, chanting)] and uses magic philters [unlibban (generally poison)], she is to fast for twelve months or the three stated fasts or forty days, the extent of her wickedness being considered. If she kills anyone by her philters, she shall fast for seven years....(246)

While that may seem harsh, it's actually less severe, according to the *Scriftboc*, than if someone makes sacrifices to devils (i.e. pagan gods) of a "major sort"; this earns the perpetrator ten years penance of fasting. Yet the nature of the punishments is also shifting at this later time. For example, when a woman commits adultery, the church does not get involved, but rather "her punishment is in the hands of her husband" (247). While initially this may seem more humane, it also assumes a great deal more of the church's authority has passed to the male of the marriage partnership. The church hierarchy no longer need involve itself because the

populace has been trained in the correction of women. This is *before* women become "chattel" under Norman rule.

Additional rules about menses and childbirth exhibit a parallel concern to control women's reproductive abilities and their attendant fluids. Of course many of these can be traced to Old Testament injunctions (especially Leviticus) regarding menstruation and childbirth, but Theodore adds additional penalties to these "sins," requiring that "women shall not in the time of impurity enter into a church, or communicate [i.e. take communion]—neither nuns nor laywomen; if they presume [to do this] they shall fast for three weeks" (197). Likewise women should not enter a church until the forty days needed for purification after birth, or they will face the same penalties for polluting the church. A man polluted by having intercourse with such a woman also must do penance for a similar length of time. As Stephen Glosecki has speculated, "with Germanic as with many other tribal peoples, women were considered gifted in supernatural arts partly because of menstruation which connects them with the cosmic rhythm of lunar cycles" (100). It seems as if the fluids themselves carry a magical curse, if you will, that has the power to corrupt.

Not only were women's bodies to be feared—the domestic realm itself also became cause for anxiety, harboring evil within its

homey walls. The punishments for use of the house roof or oven in healing charms not only helped remove the practice of healing from the comfort of home, but also attempted to remove the mystery from the typically female sphere, where food preparation and magic became closely linked. As L.M.C. Weston argues, in the Anglo-Saxon world,

Where the men's hall occupies the cultural center and defines the "semblance of order," women and women's lives outside the hall in the places where they cooked the food, wove the cloth, and bore the children—all processes, as Sherry Ortner argues, transforming nature into culture—represent a potentially dangerous ambiguity... where does woman stand if not on the boundary between the human hall and the non-human wilderness...this liminality is constant. (284)

And, I would add, a source of the mystery regarding women's magic. The home remains a source of comfort but also—for the Anglo-Saxon men—a hidden place of women's inscrutability.

Perhaps the most interesting and enigmatic aspect of this mystery is in a strange injunction appearing first in the Penitential of Theodore. Section XV "Of the Worship of Idols" forbids a number of practices we are warned "if any woman puts her daughter upon a roof or into an oven for the cure of a fever, she shall do penance for seven years" (198). A serious offence, but an obscure one in our time. The important detail is that it

Roof cont'd

appears in the section about idol-worship. One suspects that it may be related to the kind of charges leveled more directly by the tenth-century Burchard of Worms, who in his *Corrector et medicus* cautions those women who “prepared the table in thy house and set on the table thy food and drink, with three knives, that if those three sisters whom past generations and old-time foolishness called the Fates should come they may take refreshment there” (McNeill and Gamer 338). Perhaps it is simply seen as the recurrence of particular heathen practices (if somewhat confused), connected to the visits of such deities, but the specificity of the roof seems important enough to question this simple answer.

This section of the penitential is significantly gendered in its five parts. While some injunctions may be using the masculine pronoun as a general indicator of wrong-doers (“he who sacrifices to demons” and “he who causes grains to be burned where a man has died”), the two that speak specifically to women do so with specificity. In the case of the woman who “performs diabolical incantations or divinations,” the text explicitly varies from its canonical source which attacks “*he* who celebrates auguries, omens from birds or dreams, or any divinations” (emphasis added, McNeill and Gamer 198). The injunction regarding women, daughters, roofs and ovens seems quite specific, although Meaney has discovered a single example

with a son instead of a daughter in the later (and continental) Arundel Penitential (2006 152-3). However, the parallel case seems to nonetheless perceive the practice as one within the sphere of women; it also combines several other injunctions against heathen practices including drawing the child through an earthen hole or using a variety of “chants or secret marks or false lot-casting or some demonic art.” The lumping together of various practices suggests a more distant knowledge of the practice or perhaps less concern, yet the rule suggests again a connection with the particular habits of women.

Interpreting the roof remedy’s connection to “worship of idols” has proved somewhat mysterious. At heart, there seems to be an element of sympathetic magic, like curing like. While Meaney (1989) and Crawford both focus on the possible efficacy of this roof method to cure fever, Smith reasons there must be something more, for this technique “incorporated both physical and non-physical elements” but “it was the latter which was the focus of clerical concern” (91). That the stones of the oven may retain their heat and be transferred to a sick child—or that the roof may cool a fevered one—cannot be denied; however, it does not explain the placement of the prohibition in this section. This strange ban is repeated almost verbatim in the later English Scriftboc (Junius 121, 94a-b) under a similarly titled section, “De sacrificiis que demonis immolantur”: “Wif gif

heo [set ponit] hýre dohtor ofer hus oððe on ófen forðam þe heo wille feferadle [febricitos] men [homines] gehælan fæste heo vii winter” (Frantzen) which McNeill and Gamer render as “If a woman places her daughter on the house top or in the oven, wishing to cure her of fever sickness, she shall fast for seven years” (247). Not only the repetition of the injunction but that it is specifically a daughter seems significant—yet, obscure.

The immediate image that comes to mind is, of course, the roof-riding draugr Glam from *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, a close Norse analogue to *Beowulf*. The specificity of the roof location seems a promising parallel, but the ambience of the penitential scene varies significantly. While the roof-rider of Norse folktales may be a supernatural entity, it is probably too much of a stretch to see this analogue as the reason for the prohibition’s placement in the section on idol-worship. The roof-rider should be feared not venerated. However, I am grateful to Steve Long from the Old Norse Net for suggesting that the connection for the clerical author may be as simple as Old Testament verses translating English experience. In particular, he mentioned Jeremiah 19.13, which proclaims:

and the houses of Jerusalem, and the houses of the kings of Judah, shall be defiled as the place of Tophet, because of all the houses upon whose roofs they have burned incense unto all the host of heaven, and have poured out drink

Roof cont'd

offerings unto other gods.

That would certainly clarify the prohibition's placement in the section on idol-worship. Significantly though, there remains a strong sense of peculiarly women's magic to be winnowed out. If a woman were prone to being one of the "gramlican wiccan," the assumption that undesirable offerings may be at hand would make sense, particularly in the realm of prohibitions of exposure. Perhaps a cleric observing a not uncommon healing method, pondered his scripture for a solution (rather than ask the local folk?) to what he assumed to be the secret magic of women and the possible endangerment of the child. The presence of mother and daughter together might also have suggested a kind of secret domestic rite. While another woman may only have seen a long-standing cure for fever, the cleric may have seen yet another frightening example of the rituals and magic of women, visible as one mother passed her forbidden arts to her daughter.

While the outcome of these early English laws and prohibitions was not an organized attack on liminal women as occurred in much of Europe from the fifteenth century onward, it was surprisingly influential in its effect on the evolution (and further division) of gender roles. Specific magical practices became identified as sins particular to women as early as the ninth century and sparked an effort to control women's

behavior, power and bodily fluids.

Notes

¹ More recently (2006) Meaney has amended this further following Liebermann, rendering 'onfon' as both to receive and to assist (131) and suggests that "Alfred's women who 'receive sorcerers' may therefore have been those who wished for a spiritual cleansing of their abode" (132), once more emphasizing the role of the home as a site of magical practice.

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