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What is and is not Magic: the case of Anglo-Saxon Prognostics

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More than three dozen different texts in about three dozen Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, many surviving in multiple copies, have been labeled ‘prognostics’.¹ The category is convenient for bibliographical purposes but is conceptually vague; it includes a broad assortment of works in Latin and English ranging from lunar calendars noting good and bad days for bloodletting, childbirth, health, or the reliability of dreams, to lists of lucky and unlucky days in the year, to predictions (generally weather forecasts) for the year based on the day of the week on which January 1 falls or on the occurrence of thunder or sunshine or wind at a given time, to alphabetical dream glossaries, to divinatory devices for predicting the outcome of illness or generating an answer to a question through the casting of lots.

Many of these texts survive into the later medieval and early Modern periods under various names — the *Somniale Danielis*, the *Revelatio Esdrae* (“*Erra Pater*”), the *Sortes Sanctorum*, or the *Sphere of Pythagoras*. These later works have generally been well studied, but their earlier versions have received only perfunctory attention, and most available editions and studies are barely adequate and even misleading.² Thorndike’s *History of Magic and Experimental Science* is still occasionally cited as a sufficient account of their history; Cockayne’s *Leechdoms, Wortcunnings, and Starcraft of Early England*, a poor piece of work even by the standards of the 1860s, is still the only edition of some texts.

I suspect that the larger category into which the prognostics have been placed — “folklore” — has deterred any close study of their texts, context, history, or use.³ Max Förster’s series of articles in the 1910s and 20s, which serves as the only edition of most of these texts, bears the general title

What is and What is Not cont'd

Beiträge zur mittelalterlichen Volkskunde, even though the series itself was intended to prove that such texts were not *Volkskunde* at all but learned survivals from the late-classical world.⁴ To classify a particular text as “folklore” is to place it beyond (or beneath?) the scope of literary study and into the realm of anthropology or sociology. One does not “edit” folklore; its individual material contexts are irrelevant. The relative neglect of these texts in modern studies of monastic life and of the history of science seems to arise from the categories into which they have been placed, an unfortunate side-effect of the disciplinary differences that have shaped modern scholarship.

Even a glance at the manuscript context of the prognostics, however, makes it clear that they were regarded by their scribes and presumably by their original users as works of monastic science; they are found in collections such as London, BL Cotton Titus D. xxvi/xxvii, a book of computus texts and prayers written for Ælfwine, abbot of New Minster, Winchester in the 1030s; BL Cotton Tiberius A. iii, a late eleventh-century miscellany from Christ Church Canterbury which contains the Benedictine Rule and the *Regularis Concordia* (both glossed in English by the same hand that glossed the *Somniale Danielis* and the lunar calendars that follow these texts); and Oxford, St John’s College 17 (a lavishly-illustrated scientific anthology from Thorney Abbey c. 1110). Many early continental copies of these texts are found in computus manuscripts from the school of Abbo of Fleury.

To encounter these texts in their original manuscripts makes it clear that prognostics were deeply embedded in eleventh-century monastic life and treated as part of the science of computus and time-keeping; they are no more “folklore” than the Divine Office or the calendar. This fact does not, however, exclude them from a recent popular anthology of *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Magic*.⁵ I can only assume that it is their modern classification as “folklore” that makes prognostics eligible for inclusion in such a work; they are placed among charms and medical recipes, historically the domain of those seeking traces of “pagan” belief and “magical” practice in Anglo-Saxon England.⁶

But this is not simply another instance of the incongruity between modern and medieval ways of parsing the world; the generic categories and schemes of classification available to the Anglo-Saxons themselves were similarly imprecise. Laws and penitentials proscribed *diuinos*, *sortilegos*, and auguries of all sorts as forms of magic; vernacular homilies and laws naturally did the same, but English condemnations of augury and divination (the Latin terms were most commonly translated as *hwatung* or *wiglung*) are usually directed not just against the practice itself but against its cultural setting. The *Pseudo-Ecgbert Penitential* places the forecasts of lunar calendars on a par with the use of charms over medicinal herbs: “it is not permitted that any Christian man practice idle divination (*idela hwatunga*) like the heathens do, that is, they believe in the sun and the moon and the secrets of the stars, and seek divination of time (*tida hwatunga*) to begin their business;

nor the gathering of plants with charms, except with the *paternoster* and the *credo* or with some prayer pertaining to God.”⁷ Archbishop Wulfstan condemns divination among pagan practices involving unauthorized places of worship: “take no notice of spells and empty divination, nor prognostication nor witchcraft (*ne gyman ge galdra ne idelra hwata, ne wigelunga ne wiccecrafta*); and do not honor wells nor trees of the forest, because all such empty things are the devil’s deceptions.”⁸ Divination is generally associated with pagan survivals or practices of popular religion — charms over herbs, cursing of cattle, abortion and infanticide, offerings at stones and trees and wells. This context is vividly invoked in the *Canons of Edgar* 16: “It is right that each priest zealously teach the Christian faith and extinguish all heathenism among all people, and forbid the worship of springs and necromancy, and divination and spells (*wyllweordunga, and licwigelunga, and hwata, and galdra*), and the worship of trees and stones, and the devilish practice in which a child is dragged through the earth, and the error which is practiced on New Year’s night with various spells and in meeting-places and elder trees, and many various delusions which men perform far more than they should.”⁹

In effect these official responses to divination and prognostication also treat such practices as “folklore,” survivals of popular practices and symptoms of incomplete conversion. Many modern scholars, including Valerie Flint, seem to concur with this assessment; Flint suggests that prognostics and related texts were “controlled compromises” and deliberate accommodations of

What is and What is Not cont'd

Christianity to pagan “magical” practices; she argues that “the monks made their rather simpler efforts in the direction of astrological divination ... primarily to make friends, and indeed Christians, of the people in the countryside in which they settled, and among whom the old magic persisted in so many of its forms.”¹⁰ Such a characterization is almost entirely incorrect, and not simply because it maintains an implicit and unsupported distinction between “high” and “low” culture, “inside” and “outside” practices. Manuscript evidence indicates that these practices were widespread, and in fact were spread from the monasteries at the very heart of the tenth-century monastic reform — Winchester’s New Minster, Christ Church Canterbury, Glastonbury and Worcester. Ælfric, writing in the decade before 1000, repeatedly condemned all forms of *wiglung* ‘divination’, but the evidence of surviving manuscripts supports Malcolm Godden’s argument that he was preaching not against lay practices but clerical ones.¹¹ There is little evidence that prognostics were directed outward towards the laity at all; they are seldom found among texts which seem to have been used in pastoral care, in manuscripts with known non-monastic provenance, or even in medical manuscripts, where one might expect works dealing with illness and health to be found. The agricultural and meteorological concerns of many prognostics were as important to monks as to laymen. Even if these texts were employed in a pastoral setting, or recommended as an alternative to other unauthorized practices, their primary use seems clearly to have been

within the cloister itself. They should be regarded as part of the revival of monastic learning in tenth-century England, not part of the conversion of the English to a more ‘complete’ or orthodox Christianity.

The problem, for the Anglo-Saxons as for us, seems to be primarily a terminological one: categories like ‘folklore’, ‘divination’, or ‘magic’ are not primarily descriptive but prescriptive. The anonymous copyist of one prognostic text, a calendar of unlucky days found in London, BL Cotton Caligula A.xv, fol. 130v, takes pains to assert that such observance is not *wiglung*: “Now concerning the moon be very careful not to let blood when the moon is four or five nights old, as books tell us, before the moon and the sea are in harmony. We have also heard a certain man say that no one could live who had blood let on All Saints’ Day, even if he were wounded. This is no sorcery, but wise men have discovered it through holy wisdom (*Nis þis nan wiglung, ac wise menn hit afunden þurh þone halgan wisdom*), as God almighty directed them.” The difference between *wisdom* and *wiglung* may well have depended on who was acting, where a practice was acted, or how it was transmitted. Acts which seem to us clearly to deserve the name “divination” — for example, calculating a sick person’s chance of survival by manipulating the letters in his name, as the *Sphere of Pythagoras* requires — may not have been considered to be so by those who practiced them. Perhaps they imagined *wiglung* as something done by others, in the countryside, alongside other forbidden practices like the worship of trees and wells; within the monastery, in the company of learned

Latin texts, under the rubric of *computus* and science, they would not have regarded their acts as heterodox, marginal or dangerous. Yet, notably, the scribe of the passage just quoted felt it necessary to defend it; clearly the cultural space inhabited by the prognostics was a complex and not entirely stable one.

However we choose to classify them, texts like these offer much insight into the psychology of the monastic life, seen through its perception of a relationship between a closely-measured sense of time, the closely-regarded motions of the heavens, and the closely-observed movements of the body’s mental and physical currents. Texts we regard as marginal are generally badly edited, barely studied, indefinable and indescribable in modern terms; they slip into the cracks between modern disciplines and conceptual categories and elude the deceptively clear labels we try to apply to them. They have no place here or there, yet are found everywhere, and I believe they have much to tell us about the interior landscape of the early Middle Ages. At any rate I hope my difficulties in sorting out the categories, modern and medieval, into which these texts have been consigned, and in finding the appropriate modern perspective from which to regard them (some scholarly no-man’s-land between charms, prayers, science, religion, magic, folklore, superstition, and classical learning) might be of some use to others who work on similar material, and I would be grateful for the advice and assistance of members of the *Societas Magica* in helping me pick my way through the conceptual and methodological minefield that surrounds them.

What is and What is Not cont'd

1 A partial list, already badly in need of a supplement, can be found in my "Anglo-Saxon Prognostics in Context: a Survey and Handlist of Manuscripts," *Anglo-Saxon England* 30 (2001), 180-230, from which some of the present essay is adapted. That essay also contains the originals of most of the quotations given here in translation.

2 The exceptions are noteworthy; a partial list would include L. T. Martin, *Sommiale Danielis: An Edition of a Medieval Latin Dream Interpretation Handbook* (Frankfurt, 1981), C. Weisser, *Studien zum mittelalterlichen Krankheitslunar*, Würzburger medizin-historische Forschungen 21 (Würzburg, 1982), E. A. Matter, "The 'Revelatio Esdrae' in Latin and English Traditions," *RB* 92 (1982), 376-92, and Linda Voigts, "The Latin Verse and Middle English Prose texts on the Sphere of Life and Death in Harley 3719," *Chaucer Rev.* 21 (1986), 291-305.

3 The classification of "folklore" is found, e.g., in the subject index of N. R. Ker's *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* (Oxford, 1957), and in Karen and Kenneth Quinn's *Manual of Old English Prose* (New York, 1990).

4 See the description of Förster's work in Stephanie Hollis and Michael Wright, *Old English Prose of Secular Learning* (Annotated Bibliographies of Old and Middle English Literature IV; Cambridge, 1992), 261. Förster's clearest statement on this point appears in "Die Kleinliteratur des Aberglaubens im Altenglischen," *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 110 (1903), 346-58, at p. 358.

5 ed. Bill Griffiths (Hockwold-cum-Wilton: Anglo-Saxon Books, 1996).

6 The scholarly study of such texts has developed considerably since such works as G. Storm's *Anglo-Saxon Magic* (The Hague, 1974); a lively and polemical history of the study of Anglo-Saxon

medical practices can be found in A. van Arsdall, *Medieval Herbal Remedies: the Old English Herbarium and Anglo-Saxon Medicine* (New York, 2002), esp. pp. 35-67.

7 *Die Altenglische Version des Halitgar'schen Bussbuches (Sog. Poenitentiale Pseudo-Egberti)*, ed. J. Raith. Bibliothek der angelsächsischen Prosa xiii (1933; 2nd ed. Darmstadt, 1964), 2.23.

8 *The Homilies of Wulfstan*, ed. D. Bethurum (Oxford, 1957), pp. 183-4.

9 *Wulfstan's Canons of Edgar*, ed. R. Fowler, EETS 266 (London, 1972), p. 5.

10 Valerie Flint, *The Rise of Magic in early Medieval Europe* (Princeton, 1991), p. 142, 145.

11 M. R. Godden, "New Year's Day in Late Anglo-Saxon England," *N&Q* n.s. 39 (1992), 148-50.

Notes and Queries

Some Further Manuscripts containing Copies of the *Liber Visionum* of John of Morigny.

Claire Fanger and Nicholas Watson

Written between 1304 and 1318 by a monk named John at the Benedictine monastery of Morigny, the *Liber visionum* is a compilation of prayers addressed to the Virgin, God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the nine order of Angels, comprising a ritual system for the acquisition of knowledge. Loosely modeled on the well known and widely condemned ritual text, the *Ars notoria* of Solomon, the *Liber visionum* was, by John's own account, delivered to him by the Virgin and, unlike its Solomonic predecessor, was pleasing to God and free of demonic corruption.

Since the publication of a list of a dozen manuscripts known to contain

the text of John of Morigny's *Liber visionum* or extracts thereof in issue 9 (summer 2002) of the *Societas Magica Newsletter*, four new manuscripts have come to light, two in Austria and two in Britain. The manuscripts are as follows:

Austria

Klagenfurt, Studienbibliothek
Cart. 1

Klosterneuberg, Stiftsbibliothek
MS 950

Britain

Manchester, Chetham's Library
MS A.4.108

Oxford, Bodleian MS liturg. 160

Both the Klagenfurt and Klosterneuberg copies of the text preserve versions of the text similar to that found in Graz, Universitätsbibliothek, MS 680 (the text on which we are basing our edition). While we have not yet had a chance to consult Oxford, Bodleian MS

Liber Visionum cont'd

liturg.160 it appears from the catalogue entry also to contain a copy substantially similar to the Graz version. Of these four manuscripts, the one in Manchester (Chetham's Library MS A.4.108) is probably most important inasmuch as it disrupts our prior notions of the text's patterns of distribution and transmission. Most of the manuscripts hitherto known originated in Austria, with scattered texts also originating in Germany, Northern Italy, and Poland. While several other copies of the *Liber visionum* are now housed in British libraries, the Chetham's manuscript is the first known actually to have been made in Britain: it was copied in 1522 by a scribe named Jacob Smith. It is thus not only the first manuscript of British provenance, but also the latest – the only copy we have discovered so far to date from the sixteenth century.

Another significant feature of the Chetham's manuscript is that the version of the text it preserves (a version which has been considerably reworked from the copy we believe to have come from John's hand) is found so far only in two other manuscripts: 1. Hamilton, Canada, McMaster University Library, MS 107, and 2. Wien, Österreichische

Nationalbibliothek, MS 13859. The Chetham's text is a clean and complete copy, apparently deviating in fairly insignificant ways from the McMaster text. It should be noted that the McMaster text is acephalous, missing the long and important first prayer and some additional front matter that appears in the Chetham's text. Since the version preserved in the Austrian National Library is so idiosyncratic (with many expansions, glosses, and odd developments of its own) it would be impossible to have any clear idea what the first prayer of the McMaster version looked like without the Chetham's copy. It is probable that Chetham's preserves something fairly close to the original text of the McMaster manuscript; however a good deal of further work will be necessary to determine the precise details of the relationship of these three manuscripts.

Manuscripts of Magic as Teaching Tools

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Several years ago, inspired by Tom Cohen at York University (Toronto), I began experimenting in my teaching with various kinds of group

projects involving primary sources. The pattern of most of these group assignments has been the same. Groups of undergraduates read a primary source, decide what needs to be investigated in more detail, and assign each member a research project. This research forms the basis of their individually graded papers. The groups use the research done by their members to develop a general perspective on the source, which they then present to the class. Focusing on a single source allows students to achieve a level of historical understanding not possible in completely independent research. It's also fun.

Last year I began using this approach with manuscript sources. In a third-year seminar on medieval and renaissance magic I had my students transcribe a short sixteenth-century manuscript. (Naturally, I had to employ a manuscript written largely in English.) We began at the start of term with a brief lesson in paleography and divided up the work. I entertained questions about the hand at the beginning of each class. Three weeks before the end of term they were required to have their transcription complete and to have had it checked over by me. In the next week they annotated their section. (Who are those saints?)

The Societas Magica invites proposals for essays to run in future issues of the newsletter.



We are looking for essays of 1500-2000 words covering recent research in the history of magic and related topics. Essays may be bibliographic in orientation but need not be. Some of the topics we are considering for future issues include magic in tension or dialogue with other rhetorical and ritual constructions, for example, magic and the law, sorcery trials and accusations, medicine and magic, magic and religion.



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. Proposals for essays, smaller pieces, or notes on all topics of potential interest to members of the Societas Magica will be welcome. Please contact Lea Olsan at olsan@ulm.edu.

Teaching Tools cont'd

What is hyssop and why would one use it? What are those marks in the margin? What is the modern meaning of that word?) They submitted their annotated transcriptions before the next class; I collated and printed them. Our final three-hour session was devoted entirely to a discussion of the manuscript. They wrote a take-home final on the manuscript using their readings, our discussion, and knowledge gained from seminar presentations.

The exercise was a tremendous success in pedagogical terms. This was in large measure due to the fact that most of the students really enjoyed it. Learning the value of attention to detail was more or less painless. They had a firsthand sense of historical sources and what a professional historian does. They

also found themselves doing work which no one else had done before.

This year I used a similar approach in a second-year class, an introduction to classical, medieval, and renaissance studies. We transcribed and annotated a small sixteenth-century recipe book in the same way, although the class wrote papers on it rather than an exam. This assignment was ideal in an introductory and interdisciplinary course. It threw students in at the 'deep end' of historical research. It also allowed a wide variety of approaches, from codicology (Was it a *vade mecum*?) to natural philosophy (What is the humoral theory underlying the text?), and from literary analysis of versified charms to linguistic analysis (One student managed to demonstrate that it was probably written in Leicestershire!).

I have offered to assist students willing to take the time to create an on-line edition of this work, giving them a modest publication for their CVs.

The benefits to my own research have been numerous. It has kept my mind on my own sources through a period when it is difficult to write, much less do any primary research. It will result in publications, at least one a co-publication with a particularly bright student. Finally, in an environment where we are increasingly required simultaneously to publish and to seek innovative teaching methods, I have found this approach not only pedagogically effective but fruitful and efficient. I would be delighted to speak with anyone in more detail about this approach and hope some of you may find it useful.

Societas Magica Sessions at the 39th International Congress on Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo, May 6-9, 2004.

Session 1: Fourteenth-Century Legal, Theological, and Philosophical Perceptions of Magic

(co-sponsored with the Fourteenth-Century Society)

Hermes Trismegistus, Magic and Philosophy in the 14th Century - David Porreca, Wilfred Laurier University

Negotiating with the Theological Censure of Astrology in Later Medieval England - Hilary M. Carey, University of Newcastle

Canon Law, Charming Magic, and Chaucer's Spells - Henry Ansgar Kelly, UCLA

Session 2: Ritual Theory and Ritual Practice in Magic

Ex Opere Operato and The Location Of Divine Power - Ayse Tuzlak, University of Calgary

The Performativity of 'Amen' in Anglo-Saxon Magic Charms - Leslie K. Arnovick, University of British Columbia

The Appropriation of Liturgy for Healing Charms and Amulets - Lea Olsan, University of Louisiana at Monroe

Session 3: Magic that Works/Magic that Doesn't: Issues in the Efficacy of Magic

Fascination and Imagination: Medieval and Renaissance Reflections on the Efficacy of Magic - Jan Veenstra, University of Groningen

Illumination and Illusion: Lamp Experiments in Medieval Magical Literature - Robert Goulding, University of Notre Dame

Women's Healing Magic and the Efficacy of Ritual - Martha Rampton, Pacific University

Session 4: Magical Figures and Diagrams

Book Technology to the Nth Degree: the Magic of Indexes and Volveles in Ashmole 304 and Digby 46 - Katharine Breen, Northwestern University

Magical Figures and the Astrology Curriculum at the University of Cracow - Benedek Léng, Department of Philosophy, Technical University, Budapest

Practical Games: Geomancy and Divination in CLM 671 - Elizabeth Wade, University of Wisconsin Oshkosh