

Old English in the Irish Charms

By Deborah Hayden

Abstract:

This article presents a reassessment of the evidence provided by the extant medieval Irish medical manuscripts for ritualized healing charms, focusing on a group of blood-staunching incantations preserved in a substantial, but hitherto largely unstudied, medical remedy book written primarily by the sixteenth-century Irish medical scribe Conla Mac an Leagha (fl. 1496–1509). It is argued that some of the charms in question may have been composed in the early medieval period, and reflect currents of intellectual exchange between ecclesiastical centers in Ireland and southern England, especially Canterbury, prior to the twelfth century. The apparently obscure lexical items in one of these blood-staunching charms may point to the participation of Irish literati in broader European trends relating to esoteric writing and “hermeneutic” vocabulary, and to its potential for articulating the concerns of the educated elite regarding the perceived exclusivity of literate knowledge.

The title of the present contribution takes its cue from an article published by Howard Meroney in this journal over seventy years ago, entitled “Irish in the Old English Charms.” The aim of that discussion was to analyze the linguistic features of several charms preserved in the extant corpus of early English medical sources, and to offer a more rigorous examination than had previously been attempted of what appeared to be Irish or Celtic elements in the “foreign-looking incantations” that they contained.¹ Meroney underlined the fact that this material had been largely overlooked by a number of earlier scholars who had dealt with the vernacular medical sources of early medieval England, including Oswald Cockayne, who first edited the vernacular Old English medical tracts in the 1860s, but left

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¹ Howard Meroney, “Irish in the Old English Charms,” *Speculum* 20/2 (1945): 172–82. It ought to be acknowledged from the outset that, since the publication of Meroney’s article, there has been much discussion among scholars—mainly those of other literary traditions—concerning the semantic range of the term *charm*, which historically has been applied to various types of ritual practices. I have used the term frequently in this article in an effort to avoid confusion with the predominant mode of discourse that has been applied thus far to the study of ritual remedies and verbal incantations found in Irish sources; however see below, n. 32, for references to some relevant literature on this topic.

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many parts of the charm incantations untranslated.² To an extent, Cockayne's approach might be understood to reflect a wider view that the lexical components—Irish or otherwise—of many such incantations were simply corrupt or unintelligible, and therefore unworthy of much notice. When publishing a fresh edition of the early English charms in 1909, for example, Felix Grendon grouped several examples into a category designated “gibberish charms,” which he characterized as follows: “These conjurations . . . are crude, formless pieces, destitute of literary merit. Their distinguishing feature is a meaningless formula composed of a jumble of more or less obscure words. Occasionally a Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Gaelic, or Anglo-Saxon word appears, and a few words appear to have had their origin in one or another of these languages; but the derivation of a majority of the words is not ascertainable.”³

Meroney observed that Grendon, having been “aware that the material contained Irish elements, but unaware of their extensiveness and unable to advance their interpretation, . . . discounted their importance; as a consequence, he unwittingly made nonsense out of sense by rearranging the word-order of the Irish charms so as to give them a pseudo-metrical air.”⁴ A similarly dismissive stance toward the foreign lexical borrowings in early English charm incantations was taken some four decades later by Godfrid Storms, who stated that, because such borrowings often appeared in a distorted form, the result in several cases was “a mere mass of jingling nonsense.”⁵ What few attempts had been made by contemporary Celtic philologists to interpret Irish words found in the early English medical charm corpus—an endeavor that might in theory provide insight into the extent to which the composers of those charms actually understood the meaning of the foreign words on which they drew—also went largely unacknowledged in the aforementioned studies. Meroney saw this neglect to be symptomatic of a broader state of affairs in which writers on the history of early English medicine had been underestimating the extent to which their sources had been influenced by Irish material; in support of this claim he cited, among other examples, Charles Singer's statement that “From such [Irish] phrases [as one finds in the early English charms] we can argue no intimate contact between the two peoples.”⁶

² Oswald Cockayne, ed., *Leechdoms, Wortcunning, and Starcraft of Early England: Being a Collection of Documents, for the Most Part Never Before Printed, Illustrating the History of Science in this Country Before the Norman Conquest*, 3 vols., *Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi Scriptores* 35 (London, 1864–66).

³ Felix Grendon, “The Anglo-Saxon Charms,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 22/84 (1909): 105–237, at 124.

⁴ Meroney, “Irish in the Old English Charms,” 172.

⁵ Godfrid Storms, *Anglo-Saxon Magic* (The Hague, 1948), 5. For a more extensive discussion of earlier views on the “gibberish” language of early English charms, see Ciaran Arthur, “Charms”, *Liturgies, and Secret Rites in Early Medieval England*, *Anglo-Saxon Studies* 32 (Woodbridge, UK, 2018), 169–214.

⁶ Meroney, “Irish in the Old English Charms,” 173, citing Charles Singer, *From Magic to Science: Essays on the Scientific Twilight* (New York, 1928), 158. For other studies of the early English charms published by Celtic scholars, see, e.g., Heinrich Zimmer, “Ein altirischer Zauberspruch aus der Vikingerzeit,” *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung* 33 (1895): 141–53; Rudolf Thurneysen, “Grammatisches und etymologisches. 6. Ir. *marbu* ‘ich töte,’” *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 13 (1921): 101–8, at 106; and idem, “Irische und britannische Glossen: A. Irische Glossen,” *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 21 (1940): 289–90.

To challenge such views was, of course, a key motivation for Meroney's study, and indeed, since the publication of his article in 1945, some further progress has been made in elucidating the Irish forms found in the early English charms on which his discussion focused.⁷ In a similar vein, we now have a more nuanced understanding of the Irish affinities of some of the early English medical texts first edited by Cockayne, in particular the intriguing collection of remedies, charms, and prayers known as the *Lacnunga*, preserved in a manuscript dated to about the year 1000.⁸ Despite these advances in scholarship, however, it remains the case that most of the dialogue concerning what medical texts, and healing charms in particular, might tell us about intellectual exchange between Ireland and England during the medieval period has continued to be conducted almost exclusively on the basis of manuscript evidence deriving from the matrix of England and English scribal centers.

With a view to rebalancing the scales somewhat, the following discussion aims to turn the comparatively well studied phenomenon of Irish linguistic borrowings in the early English charms on its head, and consider some analogous evidence provided by Irish-language medical writing for the nature of apparently obscure language in healing charms for which Irish is the matrix language. The principal focus of the study will be the contents of a large collection of herbal remedies, charms, and prayers compiled by an Irish medical scribe who, although working around the turn of the sixteenth century, appears to have been drawing on at least some written material of a much earlier date. It is argued that this little-studied source is indicative of the potential for the very substantial, yet largely neglected, corpus of vernacular Irish medical writing to shed further light on our understanding of intellectual and linguistic exchange across the Irish Sea region during the medieval period.

RE-EVALUATING THE IRISH EVIDENCE FOR RITUAL HEALING TEXTS

Before turning to consider the contents of the medical text in question, it is worth placing this work in the context of modern scholarship on Irish medical texts and healing charms more generally. Here we must bear in mind two primary considerations. First is the fact that, although the extant Irish medical manuscripts comprise more than a fifth of the surviving evidence for Irish-language writing prior to the

⁷For example, David Stifter, "Gono míl und gweint mil maurem," in *Iranistische und indogermanistische Beiträge in Memoriam Jochem Schindler (1944–1994)*, ed. Velizar Sadovski and David Stifter, *Sitzungsberichte der Philosophisch-Historischen Klasse 832, Veröffentlichungen zur Iranistik 51* (Vienna, 2012), 377–402; idem, "A Charm for Staunching Blood," *Celtica* 25 (2007): 251–54 (on which see also the discussion below); and Jacqueline Borsje, "Celtic Spells and Counterspells," in *Understanding Celtic Religion: Revisiting the Pagan Past*, ed. Katja Ritari and Alexandra Bergholm (Cardiff, 2015), 9–50, at 34–35.

⁸London, British Library, Harley MS 585, fols. 130r–193r. The most recent edition of the *Lacnunga* is Edward Pettit, ed. and trans., *Anglo-Saxon Remedies, Charms, and Prayers from British Library MS Harley 585: The Lacnunga*, 2 vols., *Mellen Critical Editions and Translations 6A–6B* (Lewiston, 2001); see especially his discussion of "charms and the Irish connection" (1:xxix–xxxii) and his list of charms that contain Old Irish words, p. xxx n. 13. Observations concerning the broader Insular context of the *Lacnunga* are also found in the discussion of this text by Emily Kesling, *Medical Texts in Anglo-Saxon Literary Culture*, *Anglo-Saxon Studies* 38 (Woodbridge, UK, 2020), 95–129.

mid-seventeenth century,⁹ research in this area has generally lagged far behind that devoted to other Irish literary genres, such as religious, narrative, historiographical, or legal material. A corollary of this is that nearly all scholarship on Irish healing charms published to date concerns material drawn from texts in those other genres. For example, several studies have been devoted to a relatively small corpus of seven Irish charms, first edited in the early twentieth century, that are found in two early medieval manuscripts as marginal additions to texts of a religious nature.¹⁰ Other scholarly discussions have focused on aspects of a collection of nine healing charms that had “been utilized to fill up vacant spaces, occasionally marginal, by the principal scribe of certain law tracts” in a late medieval composite manuscript (Dublin, Trinity College, MS H 3. 17), and which were first brought to light by R. I. Best in a brief article published in 1952.¹¹ Even the most recent collection of essays to be published on the subject of Irish charms, although it contains a number of chapters concerned with medieval sources, has none that deal specifically with evidence from the extant medical manuscripts.¹²

The tendency of much past scholarship on medieval Irish healing charms to focus on sources such as those noted above is complicated by the fact that most discussions of Irish medical manuscripts published to date have placed considerable emphasis on their inheritance from the scholastic teaching of the late medieval universities, while taking a generally dismissive stance vis-à-vis the extent to which those texts might preserve material that reflects more localized practices or learning of an earlier period.¹³ To an extent this is understandable, given that all of the surviving

⁹ Nessa Ní Shéaghdha, “Translations and Adaptations into Irish,” *Celtica* 16 (1984): 107–24, at 112.

¹⁰ The charms in question were first published by Whitley Stokes and John Strachan, eds., *Thesaurus palaeohibernicus: A Collection of Old-Irish Glosses, Scholia, Prose, and Verse*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, UK, 1901–10; repr. Dublin, 1975), 2:248–50. For subsequent discussions, see, e.g., Ilona Tuomi, “Parchment, Praxis and Performance of Charms in Early Medieval Ireland,” *Incantatio: An International Journal on Charms, Charmers and Charming* 3 (2013): 60–85, at 61; John Carey, “Téacsanna draíochta in Éirinn sa mheánaois luath,” in *Breis faoinár nDúchas spioradálta*, ed. Ruairí Ó hUiginn, Léachtaí Cholm Cille 30 (Maynooth, 2000), 98–117 (for an English translation of this article with updated bibliography, see John Carey, *Magic, Metallurgy and Imagination in Medieval Ireland: Three Studies*, Celtic Studies Publications 21 [Aberystwyth, 2019], 1–27); Jacqueline Borsje, “The Second Spell in the Stowe Missal,” in *Lochlann: Festschrift til Jan Erik Rekdal på 60-årsdagen / Aistí in ómós do Jan Erik Rekdal ar a 60ú lá breithe*, ed. Cathinka Hambro and Lars Ivar Widerøe (Oslo, 2013), 12–26; and eadem, “Medieval Irish Spells: ‘Words of Power’ as Performance,” in *Words: Religious Language Matters*, ed. Ernst Van den Hemel and Asja Szafraniec (New York, 2016), 35–53, at 39–43.

¹¹ R. I. Best, “Some Irish Charms,” *Ériu* 16 (1952): 27–32, at 27. For further discussion of some of the charms in Best’s collection, see, e.g., John Carey, “The Encounter at the Ford: Warriors, Water and Women,” *Éigse* 34 (2004): 10–24, and Ilona Tuomi, “Nine Hundred Years of the *Caput Christi* Charm: Scribal Strategies and Textual Transmission,” in *Charms, Charmers and Charming in Ireland: From the Medieval to the Modern*, ed. Ilona Tuomi, John Carey, Barbara Hillers, and Ciarán Ó Gealbháin (Cardiff, 2019), 51–64, at 57–59.

¹² Tuomi et al., eds., *Charms, Charmers and Charming in Ireland*. Earlier scholarship in the field is summarized in a chapter of this volume by Jacqueline Borsje, “European and American Scholarship and the Study of Medieval Irish ‘Magic’ (1846–1960),” 5–15; for an important review of the volume, see David Stifter, “Charms, Charmers and Charming in Ireland,” *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 79 (2020): 81–90.

¹³ See, e.g., Francis Shaw, “Irish Medical Men and Philosophers,” in *Seven Centuries of Irish Learning: 1000–1700*, ed. Brian Ó Cuív (Cork, 1961), 75–86, at 75–86.

Irish medical manuscripts were written between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries—much later than the codices in which the early English vernacular medical texts are found, the oldest of which date to the mid-tenth century.¹⁴ There is also no doubt that the extant Irish medical corpus is a rich repository for translations and adaptations of Latin texts composed by learned authorities of the late medieval period; many of these were heavily influenced by the new, more philosophically sophisticated medical works that began to enter Western Europe from the Arabic-speaking world in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.¹⁵ This circumstance led the great scholar of medieval Irish law, D. A. Binchy, to remark that, with the exception of two Old Irish medico-legal texts and the aforementioned small corpus of marginal charms from two early medieval religious manuscripts, Ireland “do[es] not possess a single record of pre-Arabic medicine, whether indigenous or borrowed. We have nothing like the Anglo-Saxon Leechdoms to throw light on the theory and practice of the earlier medicine.”¹⁶ Binchy’s view was echoed some twenty years later in a discussion of healing miracles attested in Irish hagiographical and legal texts, this time with more specific reference to the surviving evidence for early Irish herbal remedies and charms:

I have also recently been struck by Professor Binchy’s emphasis, in his introduction to [the Old Irish law-tract on compensation due for injuries] “Bretha Déin Chécht,” on the absence of medical treatises from early Ireland; he added that late medieval Irish texts tend to reproduce Mediterranean material without much change: they were not visibly influenced by any native medical tradition. At a different intellectual level, it is also notable that there is no large collection of charms or herbal remedies: there is nothing to compare with the enormous corpus of late Saxon medical lore—a little local, much borrowed—with its hundreds of remedies and charms, selecting from and knowingly adapting a wide range of Greek and Latin medical learning. These are puzzling omissions for one might expect to find traces of some early native tradition among the rich and varied collection of early written texts to come from Ireland.¹⁷

¹⁴ On the date of the earliest vernacular English medical texts, see, e.g., Richard Scott Nokes, “The Several Compilers of Bald’s *Leechbook*,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 33 (2004): 51–76, at 52; Stephanie Hollis, “Scientific and Medical Writings,” in *A Companion to Anglo-Saxon Literature*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano and Elaine Treharne (Malden, MA, 2001): 188–208, at 194–205; and N. R. Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* (Oxford, 1957), 332–33. For a useful, if now rather dated, overview of the extant medieval Irish medical manuscripts, see Aoibheann Nic Dhonnchadha, “Medical Writing in Irish,” *Irish Journal of Medical Science* 169 (2000): 217–20 (repr. from *2000 Years of Irish Medicine*, ed. J. B. Lyons [Dublin, 1999], 21–26). Many of the Irish medical manuscripts are available to view on the *Irish Script on Screen* database (<https://www.isos.dias.ie>), while digital editions of most of the published Irish medical texts can be accessed through the CELT (Corpus of Electronic Texts) database, <https://celt.ucc.ie/irllist.html#scimed> (last accessed 7 October 2020).

¹⁵ On this aspect of the Irish tradition, see Francis Shaw, “Medieval Medico-philosophical Treatises in the Irish Language,” in *Féil-sgríbhinn Eóin Mhic Néill: Essays and Studies Presented to Professor Eoin MacNeill, D. Litt., on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday, May 15th 1938*, ed. John Ryan (Dublin, 1940), 144–57. For a summary of key developments in Western European medical learning during the late eleventh and twelfth centuries, see, e.g., Nancy G. Siraisi, *Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine: An Introduction to Knowledge and Practice* (Chicago, 1990), 13–16.

¹⁶ D. A. Binchy, “Bretha Déin Chécht,” *Ériu* 20 (1966): 1–66, at 5. References to “Old Irish” in modern scholarship generally refer to the period c. 700–900 CE.

¹⁷ Wendy Davies, “The Place of Healing in Early Irish Society,” in *Sages, Saints and Storytellers: Celtic Studies in Honour of Professor James Carney*, ed. Donnchadh Ó Corráin, Liam Breatnach, and Kim McCone, *Maynooth Monographs* 2 (Maynooth, 1989), 43–55, at 43.

It might be argued, however, that both of these statements have yet to stand the test of a wealth of manuscript evidence still unexamined. Indeed, it is worth highlighting the fact that, although the Old Irish medico-legal tract in reference to which Binchy made the above claim (*Bretha Déin Chécht*) has been dated on linguistic grounds to as early as the seventh century, the only complete copy of this text survives in Dublin, National Library of Ireland (hereinafter NLI), MS G11—a fifteenth-century medical compendium that otherwise constitutes “a representative medical library” of the late medieval period, and includes many charms and prayers, some of which have been described as being “of native origin.”¹⁸ At the same time, the G11 copy of *Bretha Déin Chécht* features glosses that were probably added around the first half of the fourteenth century, pointing to continued engagement with its contents over a period of several hundred years.¹⁹ It is clear that at least some of the material preserved in the extant Irish medical manuscripts readily attests to the multifaceted and chronologically complex processes of not only translation but also reworking, glossing, interpolation, and compilation that characterize works in many other premodern Irish literary genres—nearly all of the evidence for which is likewise preserved exclusively in late medieval or early modern codices.²⁰ In light of this, one might well wonder whether other, as yet unstudied, texts that form part of the corpus of Irish medical writing, including the remedy book to be examined below, might similarly be found to contain at least some material that derives from much earlier written sources, and justifiably be considered in relation to previous and current scholarship on early English or other contemporary vernacular traditions of medical writing.

The significant volume of work that has yet to be done on healing charms preserved in the extant premodern Irish medical manuscripts has recently been highlighted in an Utrecht RMA thesis by Menna Rempt, who compiled a database of 296 such charms, more than a hundred of which are found in manuscripts that predate the eighteenth century—many of them wholly or entirely medical in content.²¹ Even this figure is not fully representative of the surviving evidence, however, since Rempt’s database only takes into account charms that are noted in published catalogues of Irish

¹⁸ Nessa Ní Shéaghda, *Catalogue of Irish Manuscripts in the National Library of Ireland*, fasciculus 1, MSS. G 1–G 14 (Dublin, 1967), 66, 85. The seventh-century date of *Bretha Déin Chécht* [Judgments of the (Mythological Healer-figure) Dían Cécht], which belongs to a much larger collection of Old Irish legal tracts known as the *Senchas Már* [Great Tradition], has been argued by Liam Breatnach, *The Early Irish Law Text Senchas Már and the Question of its Date*, E. C. Quiggin Memorial Lectures 13 (Cambridge, UK, 2011).

¹⁹ Michael Dolley, “The Date of Some Glosses on *Bretha Déin Chécht*,” *Celtica* 8 (1968): 167–73.

²⁰ On the compilatory activity of medical scribes, see, e.g., Ní Shéaghda, “Translations and Adaptations,” 111–15, and Aoiheann Nic Dhonnchadha, “The Medical School of Aghmacart, Queen’s County,” *Ossory, Laois and Leinster* 2 (2006): 11–43, at 18. On the reworking of medieval Irish texts in other genres, see, e.g., Edgar M. Slotkin, “Medieval Irish Scribes and Fixed Texts,” *Éigse* 17/4 (1978–79): 437–50. For a discussion of the historical circumstances surrounding the loss of many early medieval Irish manuscripts and the survival of most Old Irish texts in much later codices, see Richard Sharpe, “Books from Ireland, Fifth to Ninth Centuries,” *Peritia* 21 (2010): 1–55, and Donnchadh Ó Corráin, “What Happened [to] Ireland’s Medieval Manuscripts?” *Peritia* 22–23 (2011): 191–223.

²¹ Menna Rempt, “‘And Straightaway the Fountain of Her Blood Dried Up’ (Mark 5:29): Constructing a Template for Late Medieval Irish Obstetric Charms” (RMA thesis, Utrecht University, 2019). I am grateful to the author for sharing a copy of this work with me.

manuscripts. It therefore omits a number of examples, including several charms found in the treatise discussed below, which is one of numerous Irish medical texts that still await full editions, translations, and in-depth analyses in light of current scholarship on other medieval European medical traditions.

RITUAL HEALING REMEDIES IN A SIXTEENTH-CENTURY IRISH MEDICAL TREATISE

The particular medical text to be considered in detail here is a substantial compilation consisting, in the main, of over 920 herbal remedies, charms, and prayers for ailments affecting all parts of the human body.²² As is typical of many remedy collections and therapeutic manuals produced during both the classical and medieval periods, the material in this text is broadly arranged in a *capite ad calcem* order, with larger script or rubricated initials used to mark out the beginning of individual chapters devoted to each part of the anatomy. The main scribe of the collection was one Conla Mac an Leagha (fl. 1496–1512), who is known from several extant manuscript sources to have belonged to the hereditary family of medical practitioners of that name that was primarily active in the region of north Connacht during the late medieval and early modern periods, and possibly long before.²³ References to members of the Mac an Leagha family and the written works they produced were first documented by Paul Walsh, who demonstrated, using the evidence of scribal notes in the extant manuscripts associated with the family, that Conla was the brother of Máel Eachlainn Mac an Leagha, an *ollamb* [professor] in medicine to the Mac Donnchaidh lords based in Ballymote and Tirerrill, Co. Sligo.²⁴ Conla himself is known to have been a practicing physician working for the Mac Diarmada family in the nearby lordship of Magh Luirg, located in what are now the baronies of Boyle and Frenchpark, Co. Roscommon; he appears to have moved around to several different locations in that area while compiling his remedy book, apparently for his own use.²⁵

In a recent codicological study of the manuscript that contains this remedy collection, Aoibheann Nic Dhonnchadha demonstrated that some of the leaves on which the text is written became separated from their original codex at an unknown point in its transmission, with the result that the thirty-two vellum leaves comprising the majority of the remedy collection are still found in their original location (Dublin, Royal Irish Academy [hereinafter RIA], MS 24 B 3 [445], pp. 33–[90], 90a, 90b,

²² As it is sometimes difficult to tell where one remedy starts and another finishes in the text, it is possible that the total number of recipes is slightly higher than this. I am grateful to Dr Siobhán Barrett for providing me with the above figure, which is based on her draft transcription of this collection, prepared as part of the MIMNEC project.

²³ As noted by Ní Shéaghdha, “Translations and Adaptations,” 112 n. 22, the fact that the name Mac an Leagha literally means “son of the leech” [< Ir. *liaigh*, leech] may indicate the early origin of the family, although most attestations of the name are found in reference to medical practitioners active in the late medieval period.

²⁴ Paul Walsh, “An Irish Medical Family—Mac an Leagha,” in *Irish Men of Learning*, ed. Colm Ó Lochlainn (Dublin, 1947), 206–18, at 210.

²⁵ Walsh, “An Irish Medical Family,” 214, and Aoibheann Nic Dhonnchadha, “An Irish Medical Treatise on Vellum and Paper from the 16th Century,” in *Paper and the Paper Manuscript: A Context for the Transmission of Gaelic Literature*, ed. Pádraig Ó Macháin (Cork, 2019), 111–25, at 113.

and 91–93), while a further eight paper leaves are now bound up as part of a second, composite codex, namely RIA MS 23 N 29 (467), fols. 1–4 and 6–9.²⁶ These have been collated by Nic Dhonnchadha as follows:

- RIA MS 24 B 3 (445), pp. 33–70
- RIA MS 23 N 29 (467), fols. 1–4
- RIA MS 24 B 3 (445), pp. 71–4
- RIA MS 23 N 29 (467), fols. 6–9
- RIA MS 24 B 3 (445), pp. 75–93²⁷

The text preserved on these pages is a significant survival for a number of reasons, one being that it is a unique example, in an Irish medical context, of a prosimetrical work: some forty-three didactic medical poems, ranging in length from one to twenty-three quatrains, are found scattered throughout various sections of the text.²⁸ While the treatise as a whole is clearly a compilation drawing on a range of different sources, many of them of classical or late antique origin, it is also of particular interest for its numerous allusions to wider early Irish literary tradition, including the attribution of several cures to the authority of the mythological healer-figure Dían Cécht (with whom the aforementioned seventh-century medico-legal tract is associated) and his children, Míach and Airmed.²⁹ Conla Mac an Leagha's remedy collection is also significant from a lexicographical perspective, since many terms used in the text are not well attested in published dictionaries of the Gaelic languages, and yet may provide insight into the compilatory complexity of the work on both a synchronic and diachronic level. For example, some terms referring to ingredients or vessels appear to reflect the translation of medical material directly from other contemporary vernaculars, such as Anglo-Norman or English.³⁰ At

²⁶ Nic Dhonnchadha, "An Irish Medical Treatise," 111; this article contains a diagram of the structure of the relevant quires in both manuscripts (pp. 114–15), drawing in part on the conservation report of Dublin, Royal Irish Academy [hereinafter RIA], MS 24 B 3 produced by John Gillis in May 2017 (my thanks to Sophie Evans in the RIA Library for sharing a copy of his report with me). Descriptions of both RIA MSS 24 B 3 and 23 N 29 can be found in Kathleen Mulchrone et al., *Catalogue of Irish Manuscripts in the Royal Irish Academy*, vol. 2, *Fasciculi VI–X* [MSS 253–483] (Dublin, 1931–33), 1183–85 and 1220–22, although that source does not recognize the fact that the two codices contain sundered parts of what was once a single text.

²⁷ This collation was first noted in print by David Stifter, "Zur Bedeutung und Etymologie von altirisch *sirem*," *Die Sprache* 45/1–2 (2005): 160–89, at 161 n. 2, citing a personal correspondence with Nic Dhonnchadha.

²⁸ The prosimetrical content of the treatise was first noted by Aoibheann Nic Dhonnchadha, "Early Modern Irish Medical Writings," *Scéala Scoil an Léinn Cheiltigh / Newsletter of the School of Celtic Studies* 4 (1990): 35–39, at 36. For further discussion of the didactic poetry in the collection, as well as editions and translations of three poems, see Deborah Hayden, "Three Versified Medical Recipes Invoking Dían Cécht," in *Fir fesso: A Festschrift for Neil McLeod*, ed. Anders Ahlqvist and Pamela O'Neill, Sydney Series in Celtic Studies 17 (Sydney, 2018), 107–23. Three other poems have been published separately, in Deborah Hayden, "Attribution and Authority in a Medieval Irish Medical Compendium," *Studia Hibernica* 45 (2019): 19–51, at 32–34; eadem, "A Versified Cure for Headache and Some Lexicographical Notes," *Keltische Forschungen* 8 (2019): 7–22; and eadem, "Medieval Irish Medical Verse in the Nineteenth Century: Some Evidence from Material Culture," *Irish Historical Studies* 45/168 (2021), 1–19.

²⁹ On these and other attributions, see Hayden, "Attribution and Authority," and Siobhán Barrett, "The King of Dál nAraidi's Salve," *Ériu* 69 (2019): 171–78.

³⁰ Aoibheann Nic Dhonnchadha, "Michael Casey's Medical Transcripts in Gilbert MS 147," *Éigse* 40 (2019): 43–114, at 82–83, has noted the examples of *róitse* [roach], probably from Anglo-Norman, *Speculum* 97/2 (April 2022)

the same time, many ailments, parts of the body, and plants are referred to using words that occur only infrequently in contemporary Irish translations or adaptations of Latin medical texts, but were clearly already current in the Irish language from as early as the eighth century—thus possibly pointing to the presence of older layers of material in the compilation.³¹

One further important facet of this remedy collection is the fact that a relatively large number of the cures included in it feature ritualized or apotropaic elements such as verbal incantations, prayers, and instructions for making textual amulets, falling into the broad category of what are often referred to in modern scholarship as “charms.”³² Ritual remedies of this kind often invoke practices associated with the Christian liturgy, such as prayers (e.g., the Paternoster, Creed, various litanies) or the use of liturgical objects (e.g., the eucharist or holy water); this characteristic of the genre has received detailed attention in some recent studies of the early English medical sources and has been shown to add a considerable layer of complexity to the common association of the word *charm* with aspects of magic, paganism, occultism, and superstition.³³ A definitive count of remedies in Conla Mac an Leagha’s collection that incorporate one or more of the ritual elements noted above still awaits a full edition and detailed study of the text, an objective which is rendered difficult by the fact that the treatise as a whole is both lexically challenging and written in a heavily abbreviated script, as well as by the fact that the headings given for ritualized cures and non-ritual herbal prescriptions are often identical.³⁴

as well as four words that are apparently borrowed from English sources: *daictile* [dactyl, date], *fuinél* [funnel], *pota* [pot], and *uertigris* [verdigris].

³¹ A list of several such terms is given in Nic Dhonnchadha, “Michael Casey’s Medical Transcripts,” 81 nn. 78, 79. For further discussion of the lexicography and etymology of some of these, see Stifter, “Zur Bedeutung”; David Stifter, “Old Irish *lobur* ‘Weak, Sick,’” *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 66 (2019): 177–78; Deborah Hayden, “The Lexicon of Pulmonary Ailment in Some Medieval Irish Medical Texts,” *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 66 (2019): 105–29; and Deborah Hayden and David Stifter, “The Lexicography and Etymology of OIr. *eclas*,” *North American Journal of Celtic Studies* 6/2 (forthcoming, November 2022).

³² The methodology of classifying such remedies is complex and has naturally been subject to varying approaches by modern scholars. As observed above (n. 1), a key issue in such debates has been the semantic range of the English word *charm* itself: on this, see, e.g., Lea T. Olsan, “Charms in Medieval Memory,” in *Charms and Charming in Europe*, ed. Jonathan Roper (Basingstoke, 2004), 59–88, at 60, and Don C. Skemer, *Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages* (University Park, PA, 2006), 18.

³³ See, e.g., Karen Louise Jolly, *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context* (Chapel Hill, 1996), 96–131, and Leslie K. Arnovick, *Written Reliquaries: The Resonance of Orality in Medieval English Texts*, Pragmatics & Beyond New Series 153 (Amsterdam, 2006), esp. chapters 3–5 (61–151). The most recent work to explore the semantic range of the word *charm* in relation to Old English sources is Arthur, “Charms”, *Liturgies, and Secret Rites*.

³⁴ For example, many headings consist merely of a concise statement of the purpose of the cure, such as “against toothache” or “against epilepsy.” On the standard syntactical format and components of medieval medical remedies, see, e.g., Tony Hunt, *Popular Medicine in Thirteenth-century England* (Cambridge, UK, 1990), 2–3, 16–24, and Jerry Stannard, “Rezeptliteratur as Fachliteratur,” in *Studies on Medieval “Fachliteratur”: Proceedings of the Special Session on Medieval Fachliteratur of the Sixteenth International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, Michigan (U. S. A.), May 10, 1981*, ed. William Eamon, Scripta 6 (Brussels, 1982), 59–73. On the similarity of this format with that of charms, see, e.g., Lea Olsan, “The Inscription of Charms in Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts,” *Oral Tradition* 14 (1999): 401–19, at 402–3. For discussion of some other examples of “ritual remedies” in this text, several

A few clues in this regard are provided by the scribe of the text, however, who explicitly refers to several cures using the term *obaid*—a word defined in the historical dictionary of the Irish language (*eDIL*) as “a spell, charm (both of incantations and of amulets, etc. applied externally).”³⁵ In my analysis of the full text of Conla Mac an Leagha’s collection, I have thus far noted eighteen separate remedies that contain this term either as part of their heading or in the body of the remedy, in addition to a further four cures that are described using the term *aráit* (defined in *eDIL*, s.v. *oráit*, as “a prayer [prob. a ritual prayer rather than an extempore one],” and clearly a borrowing from Latin *oratio*, “speech, language, discourse”). Cures that are identified in the text using these terms thus constitute just over 2 percent of the total number of remedies in the collection. However, most of the remedies that are designated as either an *obaid* or an *aráit* appear to contain a verbal incantation of some kind, and it may be that the terms were employed by the scribe with this specific distinction in mind. It is therefore possible that the total number of ritual or apotropaic remedies in the treatise is in fact much larger, and that the contents of the work can be considered broadly comparable to that of various early English medical remedy collections that likewise feature a significant proportion of ritualistic or oral elements.³⁶

Bearing this broader textual framework in mind, it is noteworthy that one of the few modern scholarly studies to have shed any light at all previously on the contents of Conla Mac an Leagha’s remedy collection is a short article by James and Maura Carney that includes editions of eight “charms,” all containing verbal incantations, found on pages 53–57 of RIA MS 24 B 3—the portion of the treatise that consists of remedies for afflictions of the eyes, nose, and teeth.³⁷ Apart from a general remark that the manuscripts on which they drew for their study contained “material of a medical nature,” however, the authors did not discuss the wider context of these charms in detail, and made no mention of the fact that the remainder of the same remedy collection also preserves copies of at least a dozen more comparable verbal cures for ailments ranging from impotence, childbirth, and podiatric problems to

of which find parallels in other vernacular medical traditions, see Deborah Hayden, “Téacs leighis ó thuaisceart Chonnacht: Comhthéacs, foinsí agus struchtúr,” in *Téamaí agus Tionscadail Taighde*, ed. Eoghan Ó Raghallaigh, Léachtaí Cholm Cille 50 (Maynooth, 2020), 60–84; eadem, “A Sixteenth-century Collection of Remedies for Ailments of the Male Reproductive Organs,” *Celtica* 33 (2021), 248–76; and eadem, “The Context and Obscure Language of Medical Charms in a Sixteenth-century Irish Remedy Book: Four Case Studies,” in *Obscuritas in Medieval Irish and Welsh Literature*, ed. Chantal Kobel (Dublin, forthcoming).

³⁵ See *eDIL: Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language*, ed. Gregory Toner, Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, Sharon Arbuthnot, Marie-Luise Theuerkauf, and Dagmar Wodtke, s.v. *epaid*, *aupaid*, <http://www.dil.ie/20176> (last accessed 20 March 2021). For the etymology of the term, see David Stifter, “Old Irish ²fén ‘bog’?,” *Die Sprache* 40/2 (1998): 226–28, at 227 n. 2.

³⁶ As a point of comparison, Audrey L. Meaney, “Extra-medical Elements in Anglo-Saxon Medicine,” *Social History of Medicine* 24/1 (2011): 41–56, at 55, has argued that the percentage of so-called “extra-medical elements” (amulets, incantations, rituals, and special exotic ingredients) included in the various Old English vernacular medical texts ranges from nearly 6.5 to 28, with the largest proportion of “magical” or “ritual” cures being found in the *Lacnunga*.

³⁷ James Carney and Maura Carney, “A Collection of Irish Charms,” in *Saga och Sed: Kunliga Gustav Adolfs Akademiens Årsbok* (Uppsala, 1960): 144–52.

erysipelas, madness, and insomnia.³⁸ Nevertheless, the preface to the Carneys' edition does contain two observations of relevance to the remainder of this discussion. One is their statement that "it is possible that at least one of [the charms they edited] might go back ultimately to the Old Irish period, and all of them seem much older than the terminal date of the MSS."³⁹ The particular example to which they referred (VI in their collection) is a blood-staunching charm drawn from page 55 of RIA MS 24 B 3, which forms part of a chapter of cures for ailments affecting the nose. The Carneys noted that this charm had "every appearance of belonging to an early period," but they offered little in the way of further comment on the matter, observing only that the incantation it contained is "roughly rhythmical with either two or four stresses to the line," and that the charm as a whole "has no Christian features and savours of native paganism."⁴⁰

More compelling evidence for the early date of the blood-staunching charm in question was subsequently advanced by David Stifter, who offered a substantially different analysis of its metrical structure and meaning.⁴¹ Of importance for the purposes of this discussion, Stifter noted the similarity between the central word of the charm's oral incantation *ar-gairim*, "I hinder," repeated three times, and some of the apparently garbled Irish forms identified by Meroney from an early English charm preserved in two separate manuscripts of the tenth and eleventh centuries, one of which consists exclusively of medical remedy collections.⁴² Thus, not only does Stifter's interpretation support the Carneys' suggestion that some of the charms edited in their article may be much older than the manuscript witnesses in which they are preserved (their principal source being Conla Mac an Leagha's sixteenth-century remedy book), but it also offers a more convincing argument for analyzing other charms in that collection with an eye to comparable material from the early English manuscript tradition.

³⁸ Carney and Carney, "A Collection of Irish Charms," 144. The concluding sentence of this article (p. 152) states that "James Carney transcribed these charms as part of a collection for publication. The other contributor [Maura Carney] is responsible for any comment or translation." However, no such larger collection of charms ever appeared, and it is unclear whether or not the authors were aware that the manuscript material on which they drew (pp. 53–57 of RIA MS 24 B 3) was in fact only part of a much larger text (see above).

³⁹ Carney and Carney, "A Collection of Irish Charms," 144.

⁴⁰ Carney and Carney, "A Collection of Irish Charms," 150–51.

⁴¹ Stifter, "A Charm for Staunching Blood." See also *idem*, "Zur Bedeutung," for another re-analysis of one of the charms from RIA MS 24 B 3 first edited by the Carneys (I in their collection).

⁴² Stifter, "A Charm for Staunching Blood," 253, referring to the discussion in Meroney, "Irish in the Old English Charms," 178–79. The English manuscripts in question are Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Auctarium F. 3. 6, dated to the first quarter of the eleventh century (see Helmut Gneuss and Michael Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts: A Bibliographical Handlist of Manuscripts and Manuscript Fragments Written or Owned in England up to 1100*, Toronto Anglo-Saxon 15 [Toronto, 2014], 429), and London, British Library, Royal MS 12 D XVII. The latter is the manuscript that contains the Old English medical texts known as "Bald's Leechbook" and "Leechbook III"; according to Hollis ("Scientific and Medical Writings," 196), it "was written by a single scribe, presumably at Winchester (Old Minster)" in the mid-tenth century.

“GIBBERISH” WORDS IN OLD IRISH AND EARLY ENGLISH
BLOOD-STAUNCHING CHARMS

The second relevant observation made in the preface to James and Maura Carney’s study of Irish healing charms relates to the apparently obscure linguistic forms that occur in some of the examples they published. Although the authors seem not to have noticed the similarity of one of the words in the aforementioned Irish blood-staunching charm to the garbled linguistic forms attested in one of the early English charms discussed by Meroney, they did explicitly acknowledge the significance of Meroney’s work as a point of comparison: “The magical words of the magician and practitioner of charms are the more potent for being unintelligible to the hearers. This may be one reason why early Irish words had a currency beyond Ireland in the language of charms. The occurrence in Old English charm formulae of corrupt Old Irish (and even archaic Old Irish) forms has been well recognized, and a comparatively recent study by an American scholar, Howard Meroney, has contributed to the formidable task of interpreting them.”⁴³ This statement would seem to imply that the Carneys were aware of the wider cross-cultural context for the foreign linguistic borrowings in the charms they included in their contribution. Yet, although they transcribed the full text of the verbal incantations that formed part of those charms, they did not attempt to translate or otherwise comment on the individual lexical elements that comprised those incantations, suggesting that they considered them to be nonsensical and therefore unworthy of further comment. For example, charm IX in their collection, which is also for staunching blood and is drawn from the same section of Conla’s text as the apparently “Old Irish” charm (VI) discussed above, incorporates the metrical conjuration *Asdud bota bota bolgnaid/asduth crucrinmail spirnit*; these words are represented in the Carneys’ accompanying translation simply as “Asdud, etc.”⁴⁴ A third blood-staunching incantation from this same page of the remedy book (VII in the Carneys’ collection) is dealt with in a similar way: the editors transcribed in full the incantation *aluta abnis tola* (recte *tota*) *aluta beta nel nua pacit bel til tolab*, but only translated it as “Aluta, etc.”⁴⁵ Here, however, the authors did acknowledge that the “gibberish words” of this third incantation “have a similarity” to forms attested in a charm from an English context—specifically, a cure for fever found among various prescriptions for textual amulets in a manuscript produced at the Benedictine Priory at Durham Cathedral around the early twelfth century.⁴⁶

⁴³ Carney and Carney, “A Collection of Irish Charms,” 144.

⁴⁴ Carney and Carney, “A Collection of Irish Charms,” 152.

⁴⁵ Carney and Carney, “A Collection of Irish Charms,” 151; cf. RIA MS 24 B 3, p. 55.15–18 (beginning “Obaid ar gach siled”).

⁴⁶ Durham, Cathedral Library, MS Hunter 100, fol. 118r. On the contents and provenance of this manuscript, see Faith Wallis, “Albums of Science in Twelfth-century England,” *Peritia* 28 (2017): 195–224, at 198 n. 8. Skemer has observed that the English charm in question occurs in “what is essentially a booklet, which originally was probably used as a separate manuscript, containing herbal remedies and other medical treatments drawn from Anglo-Saxon and ancient sources” (*Binding Words*, 80). The apparently Irish “gibberish” words in this charm, which is headed “contra febres,” were first noted by Thurneysen, “Irische und britannische Glossen,” 289–90. In a subsequent discussion of the charm and its parallels, Jacqueline Borsje (“Celtic Spells and Counterspells,” 34–35 and 49

Even a cursory glance at the lexical elements in the two incantations just mentioned reveals that both examples exhibit features, such as repetition and alliteration, archaic or obsolete foreign words, non-lexical items, code-switching, and neologisms that are characteristic of the kind of “ritual language” or *voces magicae* often found in medieval healing remedies, spells, curses, and oaths, and which have been studied in detail with regard to various other linguistic traditions.⁴⁷ Alderik Blom has described such language as belonging to “a technical register, which in both appearance and context (the ritual domain) is radically different from ordinary speech, and does not allow for the same type of analysis,” and noted that the degree to which participants in the ritual might have understood that register could vary.⁴⁸ Thus, while the word *pacit* in the incantation beginning *aluta abnis* . . . might be associated with a form of the Latin verb meaning “to pacify, soothe, subdue,” the function of that particular lexical element in the overall syntax of the phrase—which is clearly constructed at least in part on the basis of rhythmical and alliterative patterns—is not immediately apparent, and one might therefore reasonably assume that its meaning was not expected to be fully grasped by the audience upon whom the verbal cure was to be enacted. Indeed, it is probable that the efficacy of the verbal remedy in fact depended to an extent on the recipient’s unfamiliarity with such foreign words. Here one might consider Karen Jolly’s observation, in relation to “gibberish” language in the early English charms, that “words had power whether or not they were intelligible . . . Charms containing garbled, untranslatable foreign language words relied on the sound of the words—their mystery and assonance—to achieve some connection with spiritual powers.”⁴⁹ In support of this argument, she cites the example of the fourth-century Archbishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom, who defended the singing of Latin hymns by the laity ignorant of Latin on the grounds that the sounds of the praise were just as significant: “Even though the meaning of the words be unknown to you, teach your mouth to utter them meanwhile. For the tongue is made holy by the words when they are uttered with a ready and eager mind.”⁵⁰ In a similar vein, Leslie Arnovick has described the “gibberish” utterances of early English charm incantations as a kind of “spirit code,”

n. 159) follows Thurneysen in giving the relevant passage as “Telon. Tecula. Tilolob. Tecon. Tilo. Leton. Patron. Tilud.” Thus, the similarity between the “gibberish” words in the “Aluta” blood-staunching incantation from Conla Mac an Leagha’s text and those found in the Hunter 100 remedy is really only apparent in the correspondence between the forms *til tolub* in the former and *tilolob* in the latter; however, the occurrence of the form *tilalup* in a third Irish charm against impotence found in a separate manuscript suggests that this is not simply coincidental (on which, see Borsje, “Celtic Spells and Counterspells,” 32–36).

⁴⁷ See, e.g., H. S. Versnel, “The Poetics of the Magical Charm: An Essay in the Power of Words,” in *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World*, ed. Paul Mirecki and Marvin Meyer, Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 141 (Leiden, 2002), 105–58, and Haralampos Passalis, “From the Power of Words to the Power of Rhetoric: Nonsense, Pseudo-nonsense Words, and Artificially Constructed Compounds in Greek Oral Charms,” *Incantatio* 2 (2012): 7–22.

⁴⁸ Alderik Blom, “*Linguae sacrae* in Ancient and Medieval Sources: An Anthropological Approach to Ritual Language,” in *Multilingualism in the Graeco-Roman Worlds*, ed. Alex Mullen and Patrick James (Cambridge, UK, 2012), 124–40, at 125, 139.

⁴⁹ Jolly, *Popular Religion*, 117–18.

⁵⁰ John Chrysostom, *From the Exposition of Psalm XLI* (PG 55:155–59), trans. Oliver Strunk, *Source Readings in Music History*, vol. 1, *Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (New York, 1965), 69; cited in Jolly, *Popular Religion*, 117–18, 201 n. 55.

intended to be used in ritual circumstances where human language was deemed insufficient.⁵¹

This is not to say, however, that all of the so-called “gibberish” elements of charm incantations were simply selected at random from other languages: indeed, many foreign lexical items found in what otherwise appear to be deliberately obscure passages can be shown, upon close analysis, to bear a clear semantic relationship to the purpose of the remedy in which they occur. One might argue, for instance, that the meanings “soothes” or “subdues” that could be evoked by the form *pacit* in the example cited above are not altogether inappropriate to the context of a healing remedy. Similarly, Meroney suggested that the phrase written variously as *struth fola* and *struht fola* in a blood-staunching charm from two early English remedy books should be understood as minor corruptions of Old Irish *sruth fola* [stream of blood].⁵² A comparable illustration from an Irish manuscript context is provided by the second of the three aforementioned incantations edited by the Carneys, which incorporates two variant spellings of the Irish word *astud*, meaning “holding back, detaining, keeping (in place).”⁵³ It is not difficult to link this concept with an effort to prevent the flow or release of blood and other substances from the body, which is the precise purpose indicated by the opening rubric of the remedy in which that incantation is found (namely *Toirmesc ar fhuil ⁊ ar fhail ⁊ ar sceth* [Prevention of bleeding and hiccough and vomiting]).⁵⁴

One other blood-staunching charm included in the Carneys’ collection (VIII), which was drawn from the same page of Conla Mac an Leagha’s remedy book as the three already discussed above (VI, VII, and IX), likewise offers some insight into the semantic significance of the apparently mysterious lexical items in the charms edited by those scholars, and can similarly be illuminated by reference to early English textual tradition. However, the cross-cultural connection is not immediately clear from the editors’ presentation of the text: “Ar toirmesc gach fola siles .i. egor egor memor memor tap tap cep cep a cur fo thri [r]isin ordoig ⁊ a tumma ris fo tri ⁊ coiscid” [For the prevention of every flow of blood. Egor, etc. Set it thrice on the thumb and plunge it thrice against it, and it checks [it]].⁵⁵ Here the Carneys have transcribed in full the words of the verbal incantation, namely, *egor egor memor memor tap tap cep cep*, but again offered no interpretation of their meaning in the accompanying translation—suggesting that they considered them to either be incomprehensible or deliberately nonsensical, and therefore unworthy of further note.

⁵¹ Arnovick, *Written Reliquaries*, 58.

⁵² Meroney, “Irish in the Old English Charms,” 178 (no. IV); see also the discussion above.

⁵³ See *eDIL*, s.v. *astud*; the copy of the incantation in RIA MS 24 B 3 (p. 55.29–30) gives the spellings *asdud* and *asduth*, respectively.

⁵⁴ This charm is also briefly discussed by Edward Pettit, “Míach’s Healing of Núadu in *Cath Maige Tuired*,” *Celtica* 27 (2013): 158–71, at 170. Pettit remarks only that “The words of this charm mostly resist interpretation—they are perhaps deliberately mystificatory”; however, his article is primarily concerned with the motif of using a bulrush [*boigsimin*] tied around various parts of the body to hinder the flow of material.

⁵⁵ Carney and Carney, “A Collection of Irish Charms,” 151. Two other copies of this charm, both of which may be derivative of, or at least contemporary with, the one found in Conla’s remedy book, occur in RIA MS 23 M 36, p. 19 l. 35, and Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Adv. 72. 1. 2, fol. 56r.

However, it is surely of some interest, at least as a point of comparison with the other three Irish blood-staunching charms discussed thus far, that three of the four lexical elements in question—namely *egor*, *tap*, and *cep*—are not only uncorrupted borrowings from English but also words that bear a direct semantic relationship to the purpose of this ritual remedy. The meaning of the first term has been discussed in some detail by Alan K. Brown, who notes that *egor* is mainly attested in literary contexts as the first element of compound words, in circumstances where reference is being made either in a very general sense to “the sea” or “water,” or in a more specific one of “a flood.”⁵⁶ In keeping with this observation, David Stifter has suggested to me that the simplex form *egor* might be interpreted as a suffixal derivative of the Indo-European word for “river,” deriving from pre-Germanic *h₂ek^w-r^ó- (from the same root as Lat. *aqua*) and Proto-Germanic **agra*- [flood]; it would thus be cognate with Dutch *agger* [sea-swell during low tide].⁵⁷ Stifter’s analysis of the first word of the incantation would appear to support the tentative connection made by Brown between Old English *egor* and a later English word spelled *eagre* or *eager*, which “is used of the tidal bores of such rivers as the Severn or the Trent and is thoroughly well attested in that sense since the twelfth century.”⁵⁸

The use of a word meaning “river” or “flood” in the context of a blood-staunching charm typifies the kind of imagery found in many comparable ritual cures from both Irish and other European traditions, where references to bodies of water, natural physical rhythms, and flowing liquids are commonly invoked on the principle of sympathetic correspondence. A relatively early example of this from an English milieu is found in London, British Library, Royal MS 2 A XX (the so-called Royal Prayerbook), probably written in or around Worcester in the first half of the ninth century.⁵⁹ This manuscript contains three charms that incorporate a Latin stanza drawn from Caelius Sedulius’s abecedarian hymn *A solis ortus cardine* evoking Christ’s healing of Beronice, a woman afflicted by the flux of blood: namely, “Riuos cruoris torridi/contacta uestis obstruit, fletu rigante supplicis/arent fluenta sanguinis” [By the touch of his garment he impeded streams of hot blood; by the flowing tears of the suppliant the floods of blood dry up].⁶⁰ The same Latin stanza is invoked in an Irish charm for excessive menstrual bleeding preserved in NLI MS G11, the aforementioned fifteenth-century Irish medical compendium that contains the sole surviving copy of a seventh-century legal tract on injuries—an indication not only that this manuscript might contain other material that ultimately derives from the

⁵⁶ Alan K. Brown, “Bede, a Hisperic Etymology, and Early Sea Poetry,” *Mediaeval Studies* 37 (1975): 419–32, at 428–31. For the dictionary entries, see *Dictionary of Old English: A to I online*, ed. Angus Cameron, Ashley Crandell Amos, and Antonette diPaolo Healey et al. (Toronto, 2018), s.v. *ēgor*, www.doe.utoronto.ca (last accessed 2 September 2019), and the digital edition of the *Bosworth-Toller’s Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, <http://bosworthtoller.com> (last accessed 2 September 2019).

⁵⁷ Personal communication, 8 October 2019.

⁵⁸ Brown, “Bede, a Hisperic Etymology,” 431.

⁵⁹ Jennifer Morrish, “Dated and Datable Manuscripts Copied in England during the Ninth Century: A Preliminary List,” *Mediaeval Studies* 50 (1988): 512–38, at 519, has argued that the manuscript was probably compiled between 818 and 830.

⁶⁰ For discussion of these charms and their wider manuscript context, see Patrick Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature in Western England, 600–800*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 3 (Cambridge, UK, 1990), 282–302, and Rebecca M. C. Fisher, “The Anglo-Saxon Charms: Texts in Context,” *Approaching Methodologies* 4 (2012): 108–26, esp. 111–16.

early medieval period, but also that some of the material in question may inform our understanding of Irish influence on early English prayerbooks more broadly.⁶¹ Similar aquatic or fluvial imagery is also found in the popular “Flum Jordan” charm for staunching blood, well attested in later Irish folklore tradition, where a narrative formula focusing on Christ’s baptism in the River Jordan “informs us, or implies, that the waters of the river ceased to flow on this occasion, thus presenting a sequence of events from the past which is invoked by the charm in an effort to arrest the flow of blood in the present in a similar manner.”⁶² However, the specific technique of borrowing a word from another vernacular in order to evoke the image of a river or a flood, as is the case with the use of *egor* for the fourth blood-staunching charm from Conla’s text illustrated above, finds a more direct parallel in the occurrence of the garbled Irish words *sruth fola* [stream of blood] in one of the early English charms studied by Meroney.⁶³

The other two English words in our fourth Irish blood-staunching charm, namely *tap* and *cep*, are likewise clearly not random or nonsensical *vores magicæ* but are semantically significant in the context of the incantation as a whole. Thus *tap* is most likely the second-singular imperative form of the Old English verb *tæppian*, which makes its first appearance in the literary record around the eleventh century as a reference, in a guide to monastic sign language from a manuscript written in Canterbury, to a hand gesture by which one might request “dripped wine” (i.e., from a cask).⁶⁴ Its modern English derivative “to tap” is well attested with the comparable meanings “to draw liquid from (any reservoir),” and, in a more specifically surgical context, “to pierce the body-wall (of a person) so as to draw off accumulated liquid; to drain (a cavity) of accumulated liquid.”⁶⁵ Indeed, the *Oxford English Dictionary* even cites one nineteenth-century example of the verb *tap* with the meaning “to draw blood from the nose,” which seems particularly apposite in light of the fact that the Irish blood-staunching charm in which the word occurs forms part of a collection of remedies for ailments relating to this part of the body.⁶⁶ Even if only taken in a more general sense, however, *tap* still offers a fitting semantic parallel for the first word of the

⁶¹ NLI MS G11, p. 394b24–31; an edition and translation of the charm is given in Rempt, “Constructing a Template for Late Medieval Irish Obstetric Charms,” 76–79, 106–7. On Irish influence in early English prayer books, see Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 296–301.

⁶² Bairbre Ní Fhloinn, “The Cure for Bleeding: Charms and Other Cures for Blood-Stopping in Irish Tradition,” in *Charms, Charmers and Charming in Ireland*, ed. Tuomi et al., 131–44, at 137. Ní Fhloinn’s discussion focuses on blood-staunching charms attested in later Irish folklore, and does not note the existence of any of the examples considered here from Conla Mac an Legha’s remedy book or NLI MS G11.

⁶³ See the discussion above.

⁶⁴ www.bosworthtoller.com, s.v. *tæppian*, which cites F. Techmer, ed., *Internationale Zeitschrift für allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft*, vol. 2 (Leipzig, 1885), 118–29, at 125, line 18; for a more recent edition of this text, see Debby Banham, ed. and trans., *Monasteriales Indicia: The Anglo-Saxon Monastic Sign Language* (Pinner, UK, 1991), 40–41 (§84). The tract is preserved in London, British Library, Cotton MS Tiberius A III, compiled at Christ Church, Canterbury according to Gneuss and Lapidge, *Handlist*, 285. On the significance of Canterbury as a possible point of origin for the use of the word *egor* in this incantation, see the section on “Cryptic Language in Medieval Irish Literature and the Canterbury Connection” below.

⁶⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, www.oed.com, s.v. *tap* v.1 (last accessed 29 October 2020).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

incantation, *egor*, insofar as the concept of liquid flowing from a reservoir was no doubt considered, like that of a “flood,” to evoke the image of blood flowing from a wound or bodily orifice.

Just as the first and third words of the “*egor*-incantation” constitute a semantic pair, so are the second and fourth lexical items, *memor* and *cep*, semantically linked with one another: for *memor* is probably the Latin adjective meaning “mindful” or “heedful,” a sense echoed in the imperative form of the late Old English verb *cēpan*, meaning “to observe, keep, notice.”⁶⁷ The interlocking word order applied to the semantic content of the four distinct lexical items in the passage also stands in balanced contrast to their formal arrangement, whereby the first and second words (*egor* and *memor*) constitute one rhyming pair, and the third and fourth (*tap* and *cep*) another. This apparently purposeful opposition between the ordering of the words on a formal and semantic basis is then underscored by the repetition of each of the four individual lexical elements. Taken as a whole, therefore, not only can the words of this incantation for staunching blood be seen to carry meaning apposite to the purpose of the remedy, but their structuring also reflects the kind of deliberate stylistic artistry that is typical of the sort of ritualistic utterances that often form part of charm-texts—the semantic domain of which has been shown to partly overlap with that of song, sound, and singing.⁶⁸

“HERMENEUTIC” LANGUAGE IN MEDIEVAL RITUAL TEXTS

The use of Old English words in a medical charm for which Irish is the matrix language naturally raises questions about the multilingual awareness and learned background of the individual who first composed this incantation, as well as that of the audience toward which it might have been directed. Should one necessarily assume, on analogy with past interpretations of the Irish elements in early English charms, that the forms *egor*, *tap*, and *cep* were incorporated into our charm incantation simply because it was thought that their “foreignness” would serve to augment the mysteriousness, and therefore magical efficacy, of the cure in the eyes of a patient? Or does the analysis offered above of the semantic significance and stylistic arrangement of these words suggest that they were not thought of as mere “gibberish”?

Definitive answers to such questions are ultimately difficult to prove, of course, but a closer examination of the first word in the incantation, which is consistently spelled *egor* in all three extant Irish manuscript copies of the charm, may shed more light on the circumstances and motivations underlying the composition of this passage. Of particular significance here is the fact that the element *egor*(-), in either its simplex form or as part of a compound, occurs very rarely in the extant written record. Just a handful of attestations of the simplex form have been identified, and all of these are confined to two particular types of sources: the first being glosses on the

⁶⁷ See <https://bosworthtoller.com/41597> (s.v. *cēpan*), as well as the remarks on the etymology of the word in www.oed.com, s.v. *keep*, *v.* (both sites last accessed 4 March 2021).

⁶⁸ Rosanne Hebing, “The Textual Tradition of Heavenly Letter Charms in Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts,” in *Secular Learning in Anglo-Saxon England: Exploring the Vernacular*, ed. László Sándor Chardonnens and Bryan Carella, *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur Älteren Germanistik* 69 (New York, 2012), 203–22, at 207–8. On repetition in Irish charms, see Borsje, “Medieval Irish Spells,” 41; on their rhetorical strategies more generally, see Versnel, “Poetics of the Magical Charm.”

works of Aldhelm copied in Canterbury around the late tenth century, and the second being a number of early medieval Latin–Old English glossaries, several of which survive in manuscripts likewise associated with Canterbury. Thus the inflected form *egores* is found as an interlinear gloss on Latin *cataclismi* in a description of a tidal wave from the copy of Aldhelm’s *De laudibus virginitatis* in London, British Library, Royal MS 6 A VI, a codex compiled at Christ Church, Canterbury, during the last quarter of the tenth century; it has been argued that both the text of Aldhelm’s work in this source and the majority of its glosses were written by the same scribe.⁶⁹ An inflected form of the word *egor* also occurs as a gloss in three copies of Aldhelm’s *Epistola ad Eabfridum*, one of them found in the aforementioned Royal 6 A VI manuscript, where it is spelled *eogra*. The same spelling is found in a copy of the *Epistola* from Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Digby 146, a tenth-century manuscript long thought to have been produced at Abingdon but more recently argued to be a Canterbury production, while the form *eogora* is given in the copy of this text from London, British Library, Cotton MS Domitian A IX, a manuscript written at Christ Church, Canterbury, in the tenth or early eleventh century.⁷⁰

The remaining attestations of the simplex form *egor*, this time always in the nominative case but with some slight variations of spelling, all occur in Latin–Old English glossary-texts. There the word is consistently equated with Latin *dodrans*—an inflected form of which is, perhaps not insignificantly, also the lemma for the aforementioned gloss in the Canterbury copies of Aldhelm’s *Epistola*.⁷¹ As Alan K. Brown has demonstrated, *dodrans* is itself something of a rare word, and one that is principally found in texts that predate the Carolingian period, where it seems to have undergone a semantic development from the meaning “three quarters (of any unit)” —the sense attested in the Bede’s treatise *De temporum ratione*, completed in 725—to that of “a flood,” “tide,” or sometimes “sea.”⁷² The latter usage seems to derive specifically from early Insular, and particularly Hiberno-Latin, sources: for example, it occurs in works such as the A-text of the *Hisperica famina*; the hymn *Altus prosator*, commonly attributed to the Irish saint Columba; and in Aldhelm’s aforementioned letter to Heahfrith, a scholar just returned from Ireland.⁷³ Bede had

⁶⁹ Brown, “Bede, a Hisperic Etymology,” 430–31, and Arthur S. Napier, *Old English Glosses, Chiefly Unpublished*, Anecdota Oxoniensia: Mediaeval and Modern 11 (Oxford, 1900), 159; cf. also his “Old and Middle English Notes,” *The Modern Language Quarterly* 1/2 (1897), 51–53, at 51. For the view that the scribal hand responsible for the text and most of the glosses in this manuscript was one and the same, see Scott Gwara, “Unpublished Old English Inked Glosses from Manuscripts of Aldhelm’s *Prosa de Virginitate*,” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 95/3 (1994): 267–71, at 268–69, and idem, “A Record of Anglo-Saxon Pedagogy: Aldhelm’s *Epistola ad Heahfridum* and Its Gloss,” *The Journal of Medieval Latin* 6 (1996): 84–134, at 90–91.

⁷⁰ Napier, *Old English Glosses*, 180 (no. 13/1), and idem, “Old and Middle English Notes.” On the date of the three manuscript copies of Aldhelm’s letter, see Gneuss and Lapidge, *Handlist*, 253–54, 471–72. Gwara, “Record of Anglo-Saxon Pedagogy,” 98, has argued in favor of associating Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Digby 146 with Canterbury rather than Abingdon on paleographical grounds, against, e.g., Gneuss and Lapidge, *Handlist*, 471. For Aldhelm’s letter to Heahfrith, see Aldhelm, *Aldhelmi Opera*, ed. Rudolf Ehwald, MGH Auct. ant. 15 (Berlin, 1919), 486–94.

⁷¹ See Aldhelm, *Aldhelmi Opera*, ed. Ehwald, 489 (*dodrantium*).

⁷² Brown, “Bede, a Hisperic Etymology,” 420.

⁷³ For the first of these, see Michael W. Herren, ed. and trans., *The Hisperica Famina: A New Critical Edition with English Translation and Philological Commentary*, vol. 1, *The A-Text*, Studies and Texts *Speculum* 97/2 (April 2022)

tersely criticized the “hisperic” usage of *dodrans* to mean “flood” in *De temporum ratione* IV (*de ratione unciarum*), but it is clearly this particular meaning of the word that was understood by the compilers of the following Latin–Old English glossary texts:⁷⁴

1. The “Épinal-Erfurt Glossary,” the archetype of which is commonly assigned to the late seventh century (*dodrans* gl. *ægur*);⁷⁵
2. The “Corpus Glossary” in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 144, a manuscript produced in southeast England around the eighth or early ninth century and owned by St. Augustine’s, Canterbury (*dodrans* gl. *egur*);⁷⁶
3. The first and second of the three glossaries preserved in London, British Library, Cotton MS Cleopatra A III, produced at St. Augustine’s Canterbury around the middle of the tenth century (*dedrans* gl. *egor* and *detrans* gl. *egor*);⁷⁷
4. The composite “Harley Glossary,” possibly a product of Worcester; most of this text, which is dated to the tenth or eleventh centuries, survives in London, British Library, Harley MS 3376 (*dodrans .i. malina* gl. *egur*).⁷⁸

of the Pontifical Institute 31 (Toronto, 1974), 94–95 (line 402), 102–3 (line 491), and 180. An edition of the hymn *Altus prosator* is included in Thomas Owen Clancy and Gilbert Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* (Edinburgh, 1995), where the word *dodrans* occurs on p. 46; for discussion of the poem, see Jane Stevenson, “Altus prosator,” *Celtica* 23 (1999): 326–68. On attestations of the word *dodrans* in Hiberno-Latin sources, see also Jacopo Bisagni, “A New Citation from a Work of Columbanus in BnF lat. 6400b,” *Peritia* 24–25 (2014): 116–22. All of the citations given under the headword *dodrans* (*dodra*) in the online version of the *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*, <http://www.dmlbs.ox.ac.uk/web/online.html> (last accessed 4 December 2020) derive either from the works of Aldhelm or from Latin–Old English glossaries.

⁷⁴ The relevant passage from Bede is discussed by Brown, “Bede, a Hisperic Etymology,” 419–20, who summarizes attestations of the term *egor* in Latin–Old English glossaries on p. 429 n. 46.

⁷⁵ The entry for *dodrans* in this text is only found in the late-eighth/early-ninth-century manuscript Erfurt, Stadtbücherei, Codex Amplonianus, fol. 42, while the version of the glossary preserved in Épinal (Vosges), Bibliothèque municipale, MS 72 (2) has a lacuna at this point: see J. D. Pfeifer, ed., *Old English Glosses in the Épinal-Erfurt Glossary* (Oxford, 1974), 18, 80. On the dating of the Épinal-Erfurt Glossary, see idem, “Early Anglo-Saxon Glossaries and the School of Canterbury,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 16 (1987): 17–44, at 18.

⁷⁶ Gneuss and Lapidge, *Handlist*, 54, and W. M. Lindsay, ed., *The Corpus Glossary* (Cambridge, UK, 1921), 59 (D343). This glossary contains a nearly complete copy of the Épinal-Erfurt Glossary derived independently from the same archetype as that used by the compilers of the Épinal and Erfurt manuscripts. The entry in question is found on fol. 23v of the manuscript, which has been digitized by the *Parker Library on the Web* project: see <https://parker.stanford.edu/parker/catalog/mz111xq7301> (last accessed 4 March 2021).

⁷⁷ See Thomas Wright, *Anglo-Saxon and Old English Vocabularies*, vol. 1, *Vocabularies*, ed. Richard Paul Wülcker, 2nd ed. (London, 1884), 386, 474, and Philip Rusche, “The Cleopatra Glossaries: An Edition with Commentary on the Glossaries and their Sources” (PhD diss., Yale University, 1996), 1 (on the dating of the text), 249, and 456 (for the lemmata and glosses). For the provenance of the manuscript, see Gneuss and Lapidge, *Handlist*, 246. The entry for *dedrans* gl. *egor* occurs on fol. 30r of the manuscript, while that for *detrans* gl. *egor* is found on fol. 87r; the entire manuscript has been digitized and can be viewed at http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Cotton_MS_Cleopatra_A_III (last accessed 4 March 2021).

⁷⁸ Two further folios of the glossary are now found in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Lat. misc. a. 3, fol. 49, and Lawrence, University of Kansas, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, MS Pryce P2A:1, respectively. For the text, see Wright, *Anglo-Saxon and Old English Vocabularies*, ed. Wülcker, 225/11; Gneuss and Lapidge, *Handlist*, 359; Robert T. Oliphant, ed., *The Harley Latin–Old English Glossary, Edited from British Museum MS Harley 3376*, *Janua Linguarum Series Practica* 20 (The Hague, 1966), 192–247; and Jessica Cooke, “Worcester Books and Scholars, and the Making of the Harley Glossary (British Library MS. Harley 3376),” *Anglia* 115/4 (1997): 441–68. The entry for *dodrans*

With the possible exception of the last item, all of these glossaries can, like the manuscripts of Aldhelm's works that contain inflected forms of Old English *egor* as a gloss on the Latin text, be connected in some way with southeast England, and Canterbury in particular. It has been argued that the earlier two—namely, the Épinal-Erfurt and Corpus glossaries—derive from a collection of “Glossae collectae” assembled in southern England (Kent or Canterbury) c. 675, although the Épinal-Erfurt collection has also been associated with Aldhelm's school at Malmesbury, while both the “Corpus” and Cotton Cleopatra A iii glossaries have been traced to the Benedictine Abbey of St. Augustine in Canterbury.⁷⁹

The inclusion in these glossaries of the word *dodrans* with the “hisperic” meaning “flood” can no doubt be set within a much broader picture of Irish influence on the earliest Latin–Old English glossary texts, where a number of lemmata have been shown to consist of Old Irish words with Latin endings or to be influenced by Hiberno-Latin traditions of orthography.⁸⁰ Several batches of entries in these sources have been traced to Hiberno-Latin works of the early medieval period, including the Irish hymn *Altus prosator*, the *Hisperica famina*, and the protective prayer known as the *Lorica* of Laidcenn, all of which seem to have been excerpted for their difficult words.⁸¹ Indeed, Michael Lapidge has suggested that the compiler of the so-called Épinal-Erfurt Glossary may have drawn the Latin word *dodrans* from the text of *Altus prosator*.⁸²

Such evidence for cross-cultural borrowing is hardly surprising, of course, when one considers Aldhelm's statement in his letter to Heahfrith concerning the many Irishmen who were in attendance at Theodore's Canterbury school as early as the seventh century.⁸³ Aldhelm is in fact the source for much of our information concerning contacts between scholars from Ireland and southern England during this period: he may himself have studied under an Irishman by the name of “Maeldub” while in Malmesbury, and even spent a period of time in Ireland prior to joining the school of Theodore and Hadrian in Canterbury c. 670—a point evidenced by his close personal connections to the learned Northumbrian king Aldfrith, who both had an Irish mother and apparently studied at Iona under the tutelage of the Irish

occurs on fol. 60v of London, British Library, Harley MS 3376, which has been digitized: see http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Harley_MS_3376 (last accessed 4 March 2021).

⁷⁹ See Michael W. Herren, “Scholarly Contacts between the Irish and the Southern English in the Seventh Century,” *Peritia* 12 (1998): 24–53, at 45–46, citing the discussions by Michael Lapidge, “The School of Theodore and Hadrian,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 15 (1986): 45–72, at 53–67, and J. D. Pheifer, “Early Anglo-Saxon Glossaries.”

⁸⁰ For specific examples, see Herren, “Scholarly Contacts,” 46–48, and also the discussions by Otto B. Schlutter, “Some Celtic Traces in the Glosses,” *The American Journal of Philology* 21 (1900): 188–92; J. D. Pheifer, “Early Anglo-Saxon Glossaries,” 29–30; and Michael Lapidge, “The Career of Aldhelm,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 36 (2007): 15–69, at 41–48.

⁸¹ Herren, “Scholarly Contacts,” 48–52. On the *Lorica* of Laidcenn and the *Hisperica famina* texts, see Michael W. Herren, ed. and trans., *The Hisperica famina*, vol. 2, *Related Poems* (Toronto, 1987), 76–89, and idem, ed. and trans., *The Hisperica famina*, vol. 1, *The A-Text*.

⁸² Lapidge, “Career of Aldhelm,” 46.

⁸³ Aldhelm, *Aldhelmi Opera*, ed. Ehwald, 493. Translation in Michael Lapidge and Michael Herren, trans., *Aldhelm: The Prose Works* (Cambridge, UK, 1979), 163.

scholar Adomnán.⁸⁴ It has been suggested, moreover, that Aldhelm may even have been responsible for adding the Latin word *dodrans* to the Épinal-Erfurt Glossary, and that he could also have been the source of many of the Old English definitions in that collection.⁸⁵ However, if the composer of our Irish charm incantation drew the word *egor* directly from one of the Latin–Old English glossaries listed above, it seems unlikely that the source text in question was the Épinal-Erfurt collection itself, given that this witness preserves the earlier spelling *ægur*. Rather, the form of the word found in all three copies of the Irish charm bears a closer similarity to that found in the three later glossaries, and a direct correspondence only to the entries in two of the three glossaries from the Cotton Cleopatra A iii manuscript, which was copied at St. Augustine’s, Canterbury, around the middle of the tenth century.

There is other contextual evidence to support the hypothesis that the word *egor* may have been borrowed into our Irish incantation from a Latin–Old English glossary copied at this somewhat later stage of the early medieval period. One key point in this regard is that the production of the Cotton Cleopatra A iii manuscript in the tenth century coincided with a renewed interest in Aldhelm’s works among scholars in Canterbury, who studied and glossed both his treatise on virginity and his letter to Heahfrith, as well as other works such as the *Aenigmata*, because they considered them to be prime examples of “hermeneutic” Latin—a style of writing that has been described as featuring an “ostentatious parade of unusual, often very arcane and apparently learned vocabulary,” replete with archaisms, neologisms, coinages, loanwords, obscure compounds, and poeticisms.⁸⁶ The influence of this style on texts written in Canterbury that were specifically concerned with cryptic or arcane language has recently been considered by Ciaran Arthur in relation to the contents of London, British Library, Cotton MS Caligula A XV, a codex largely comprising scientific works, which was produced in Christ Church, Canterbury, in the late eleventh century.⁸⁷ Arthur analyzed a number of “ritual texts” in this manuscript that bear comparison

⁸⁴ Herren, “Scholarly Contacts,” 29–31, 39–40, and Barbara Yorke, “Aldhelm’s Irish and British Connections,” in *Aldhelm and Sherborne: Essays to Celebrate the Founding of the Bishopric*, ed. Katherine Barker and Nicholas Brooks (Oxford, 2010), 164–80, at 178. On Aldfrith’s Irish connections, see also Colin Ireland, “Aldfrith of Northumbria and the Irish Genealogies,” *Celtica* 22 (1991): 64–78, and idem, “Aldfrith of Northumbria and the Learning of a *sapiens*,” in *A Celtic Florilegium: Studies in Memory of Brendan O Hehir*, ed. Kathryn A. Klar, Eve E. Sweetser, and Claire Thomas, Celtic Studies Publications 2 (Lawrence, MA, 1996), 63–77.

⁸⁵ Lapidge, “Career of Aldhelm,” 46–48. On Aldhelm’s possible contribution to the Old English definitions in the glossary, see Michael W. Herren and Hans Sauer, “Towards a New Edition of the Épinal-Erfurt Glossary: A Sample,” *The Journal of Medieval Latin* 26 (2016): 125–98, at 142 n. 72, where the authors state that “The difficulty with the theory of Aldhelm as ‘general editor’ of the [Épinal-Erfurt Glossary] project is that [the glossary] contains a great many mistakes . . . whereas Aldhelm’s own Latinity is close to impeccable. We are inclined to assign him a role that does him greater credit, namely, as author of some, even many, of the Old English definitions, and in particular, those derived from Vergil.”

⁸⁶ Michael Lapidge, “The Hermeneutic Style in Tenth-Century Anglo-Latin Literature,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 4 (1975): 67–111, at 67, and Gwara, “A Record of Anglo-Saxon Pedagogy,” 86. A glossed copy of Aldhelm’s *Aenigmata* is found in Cambridge, University Library, MS Gg.5.35, a mid-eleventh-century manuscript associated with St. Augustine’s, Canterbury (see, e.g., Gneuss and Lapidge, *Handlist*, 25–28), indicating that glossatory interest in Aldhelm’s works continued for some time after the tenth century.

⁸⁷ Ciaran Arthur, “The Gift of the Gab in Post-Conquest Canterbury: Mystical ‘Gibberish’ in London, British Library, MS Cotton Caligula A. xv,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 118 (2019): 177–210.

in various ways with the Irish blood-staunching charms discussed above, such as the following cure for fever: “Wið gedrif. + In nomine domini nostri ihu xpi [Iesu Christi]. tera. tera. tera. testis. / contera. taberna. gise. ges. mande. leis. bois. eis. andies. mandies. / moab. lib. lebes. *Dominus deus* adiutor sit illi. illi. eax. filiax. artifex. amen.” It is evident from even a cursory glance at this passage that its author has made ample use of stylistic devices, such as alliteration, repetition and rhyme, similar to those that have already been highlighted in relation to the sort of “ritual language” evidenced across many other linguistic traditions. In addition, however, Arthur has argued that the obscure lexical items in this remedy “[encode] relevant references from scripture and perhaps at least one late antique source to counteract the harmful forces causing fever,” suggesting that the text as it stands in the manuscript witness does not simply represent a corrupted form of some earlier, misunderstood “pagan” or “folk” ritual first passed down through oral tradition, but rather is the deliberate product of a learned, Christian, and textually oriented milieu. This argument is further supported by Arthur’s observation that some of the forms in the passage appear to be Latin words that “have been deliberately altered, in similar fashion to other hermeneutic techniques employed in texts from Canterbury”—one example of this being the addition of the letter *-x* to forms such as the pronoun *ea* and the noun *filia* [daughter] to create the oral effect of rhyme with the word *artifex* [author, creator].⁸⁸

Similarly esoteric lexical forms are found in a separate tract in the Cotton Caligula A xv manuscript that belongs to the genre of the “Heavenly Letter,” where a passage of obscure Latin intended to address sickness opens with a statement that the letter containing this information was brought to St. Peter’s altar in Rome by an angel in Heaven.⁸⁹ Arthur argued that the use in that passage of rare words such as *pisticus* and *basileus* likewise points to a very learned and textually oriented compositional context, and in particular to familiarity on the part of its author with works such as the ostentatiously hermeneutic text *Breuilquium vitae Wilfredi* of Frithegod, a pupil of Archbishop Oda of Canterbury (archbishop 941–58), or perhaps with glossaries compiled in that center—suggesting that the scribes of the manuscript “turned to different sources that were available in their monastic libraries and used archaic or exotic content to deliberately obfuscate the meaning of the texts they were writing.”⁹⁰ Arthur’s assessment of the wider intellectual milieu that informs some of the ritual texts found in an eleventh-century Canterbury manuscript thus lends weight to the suggestion made above that the rare term *egor* in our Irish blood-staunching incantation could have been excerpted from a glossary compiled in Canterbury, and perhaps specifically from one of the glossaries preserved in the Cotton Cleopatra A iii manuscript (or a now-lost glossary in the same family as those texts), which ultimately derived from earlier productions from the school of Theodore and Hadrian. It may not be irrelevant that Cotton Cleopatra A iii was copied at St. Augustine’s abbey around the middle of the tenth century, a period

⁸⁸ Arthur, “Gift of the Gab,” 184–87, citing Lapidge, “Hermeneutic Style,” 80–81, who notes the creation of neologisms by replacing the masculine *-or* termination with the suffix *-rix*.

⁸⁹ Arthur, “Gift of the Gab,” 187–89. On the “Heavenly Letter,” see Hebing, “The Textual Tradition,” 203–22, at 203–12, and Skemer, *Binding Words*, 96–105.

⁹⁰ Arthur, “Gift of the Gab,” 179, 190–91.

when interest in the study and use of “hermeneutic” or obscurantist language is evident across other aspects of scholarly activity in that center of learning.

CRYPTIC LANGUAGE IN MEDIEVAL IRISH LITERATURE
AND THE CANTERBURY CONNECTION

The “hermeneutic” nature of some of the obscure lexical elements identified by Arthur in ritual texts from Cotton Caligula A xv also led him to make two further suggestions that have implications for our analysis of the Irish blood-staunching charms discussed above: first, that the manuscript in question was written for someone who was “a high-ranking ecclesiastic with competency in several languages,” and second, that it reflects a wider interest in the origins and power of languages, as well as in exotic or obscure writing systems and cryptography, that is manifest in written sources composed in both England and other parts of Europe between the ninth and eleventh centuries in particular.⁹¹ On the basis that Cotton Caligula A xv includes annals of Christ Church Cathedral, Arthur also argued that the manuscript dedicatee may have been someone who had a particular interest in the appointments and activities of archbishops of Canterbury—quite possibly even Lanfranc, who was archbishop of Canterbury when the manuscript was written in the 1070s.⁹² Lanfranc was a well-known figure in Irish ecclesiastical circles during the late eleventh and twelfth centuries, and a brief consideration of Canterbury’s influence across the Irish Sea may offer some insight into the broader intellectual and historical context in which ritual texts such as our Irish blood-staunching charms might have made their way into later Irish medical manuscripts.

Although relations between Canterbury and ecclesiastical and lay rulers in Dublin had evidently been established well before Lanfranc became archbishop, specific details concerning Canterbury’s involvement in Irish ecclesiastical affairs only come into focus around the time that he assumed this role in the last quarter of the eleventh century, when Gilla Pátraic (Patricius), a bishop elect of the see of Dublin who had been trained as a Benedictine monk in the Worcester community, presented himself to Lanfranc for consecration. This event was symptomatic of much wider developments in church reform across Britain and Ireland that were to take place in the ensuing decades, many of them centered on the issue of Canterbury’s assertion of primatial authority over the Irish church and the see of York.⁹³ However, the impact of these developments, and of Lanfranc’s authority as archbishop of Canterbury in particular, was seen not only in the realm of Irish political affairs but also in that of

⁹¹ Arthur, “Gift of the Gab,” 202–3, and references therein. For a recent discussion of cryptographic methods in the early medieval period, with a particular focus on glosses on Aldhelm’s *Aenigmata*, see Benjamin A. Saltzman, “*Vt bkskdxt*: Early Medieval Cryptography, Textual Errors, and Scribal Agency,” *Speculum* 93/4 (2018): 975–1009. The pedagogical context for medieval Irish engagement with European sources on cryptography is considered in Deborah Hayden, “Cryptography and the Alphabet in the ‘Book of Ádhamh Ó Cianáin,’” in *Grammatica, gramadach and gramadeg: Vernacular Grammar and Grammarians in Medieval Ireland and Wales*, ed. Deborah Hayden and Paul Russell, *Studies in the History of the Language Sciences* 125 (Amsterdam, 2016), 35–64.

⁹² Arthur, “Gift of the Gab,” 206.

⁹³ Marie Therese Flanagan, *Irish Society, Anglo-Norman Settlers, Angevin Kingship: Interactions in Ireland in the Late Twelfth Century* (Oxford, 1989), 8–9, 15.

contemporary Irish narrative literature composed in the vernacular. An example of this that informs some of the themes dealt with in the present discussion is the early Irish saga-narrative *Tochmarc Emire* [The Wooing of Emer], which recounts how the great Ulster hero Cú Chulainn woos his wife, Emer, and then proceeds to seek martial training at various locations both in Ireland and overseas. A later redaction of this text composed in an Irish ecclesiastical center during the Middle Irish period (c. 900–1200) portrays Cú Chulainn as having engaged in a markedly increased number of sexual liaisons during his travels. It has recently been argued that the author of this redaction may have been especially interested in exemplifying concerns felt by churchmen about marriage practices among the Irish nobility in the eleventh century, perhaps specifically in reaction to influence from the sphere of Canterbury: for Lanfranc himself had written letters on precisely this matter to prominent Irish figures such as Guthric, king of Dublin, and Toirdelbach ua Briain, king of Munster.⁹⁴

At the same time, *Tochmarc Emire* might also be viewed as a testament to the engagement of medieval Irish literati with the broader interest in obscure, mystical, or esoteric language that Arthur has identified as a prominent feature of the ritual texts from the Cotton Caligula A xv manuscript discussed above. This is evidenced by the fact that a key scene in the Irish narrative depicts how Cú Chulainn engages his love interest Emer in a cryptic dialogue, replete with kennings and arcane poetic vocabulary, that was intended not only to conceal their speech from bystanders but also to stage a mutual test of intelligence, education, and eloquence for each other as prospective partners.⁹⁵ It has been observed that this dialogue reflects wider European traditions of disputation, colloquy, and other expressions of formalized verbal testing.⁹⁶ In addition, however, it can be argued that the lovers' cryptic exchange serves to illustrate a fundamentally hierarchical concept manifest elsewhere in the very aristocratically oriented corpus of medieval Irish narrative literature, according to which "the social status of the learned classes was predicated upon the exclusive possession of certain kinds of esoteric knowledge."⁹⁷ In many medieval Irish texts, this concept is closely linked to that of proficiency in literacy and book-learning, and probably ultimately reflects the idea that knowledge of the divine scriptures should be the prerogative of only a select few because they sheltered celestial mysteries.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Ruairí Ó hUiginn, *Marriage, Law and Tochmarc Emire*, E. C. Quiggin Memorial Lectures 15 (Cambridge, UK, 2013), 39–40, citing Helen Clover and Margaret Gibson, ed. and trans., *The Letters of Lanfranc, Archbishop of Canterbury* (Oxford, 1979), 68–69, 70–74. On the different redactions of the Irish text, see also Gregory Toner, "The Transmission of *Tochmarc Emire*," *Ériu* 49 (1998): 71–88.

⁹⁵ John Carey, "Obscure Styles in Medieval Ireland," *Mediaevalia* 19 (1996): 23–39, at 28–30.

⁹⁶ William Sayers, "Irish Evidence for the *De harmonia tonorum* of Wulfstan of Winchester," *Mediaevalia* 14 (1988): 23–38, at 25–26. See also idem, "Concepts of Eloquence in 'Tochmarc Emire,'" *Studia Celtica* 26–27 (1991–92): 125–54.

⁹⁷ Charles D. Wright, "From Monks' Jokes to Sages' Wisdom: The *Joca monachorum* Tradition and the Irish *Immacallam in dá Thúarad*," in *Spoken and Written Language: Relations between Latin and the Vernacular Languages in the Earlier Middle Ages*, ed. Mary Garrison, Arpad P. Orbán, and Marco Mostert, *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literature* 24 (Turnhout, 2013), 199–225, at 199–200, 211.

⁹⁸ The idea can be traced, for example, to the work of the seventh-century Irish scholar Virgilius Maro Grammaticus: see, e.g., his *Opera omnia*, ed. Bengt Löfstedt (Munich, 2003), 213, as well as the discussion in Vivien Law, *Wisdom, Authority and Grammar in the Seventh Century: Decoding Virgilius Maro Grammaticus* (Cambridge, UK, 1995), 83–95, and Hayden, "The Context and Obscure Language of Medical Charms" (forthcoming).

The central role of obscure language in “asserting dominance and exercising power” is also manifest, for example, in the ninth-century Irish text *Immacallam in Dá Thúarad* [The Dialogue of the Two Sages], where the rival protagonists Néde and Ferchertne vie for the rank of chief poet of Ulster by engaging in an enigmatic verbal exchange that features an abundance of kennings and opaque vocabulary.⁹⁹

In a comparable way, the obscure or arcane language of healing charm incantations may have been perceived not merely as a kind of secret code to achieve communication with spiritual powers in circumstances where ordinary language was deemed inadequate, as Arnovick has argued, but also as a deliberate method of censoring or concealing powerful knowledge from the uninitiated—an interpretation that inevitably reveals more about the scribes who composed and/or recorded such rituals than it does about their intended audience.¹⁰⁰ The incorporation into an Irish blood-staunching charm of a relatively arcane, yet semantically fitting, English word like *egor* would appear to support this supposition. The fact that this particular word is only rarely attested in either glossaries or in glosses on Aldhelm’s difficult Latin suggests that the composer of this incantation, who may have been an Irish scholar working at Canterbury, had a sufficiently learned background to allow access to the relevant sources (most likely Latin–Old English glossaries) in which the word was documented. By contrast, the same individual may have assumed that the person toward whom the incantation was to be directed would not possess a comparable familiarity with such sources, and would therefore have been unable to grasp the significance of the words of the incantation in the context of the ritual act—rather like the uninitiated bystanders in *Tochmarc Emire* who listened in awe as Cú Chulainn wooed his love interest, Emer, by engaging her in a cryptic dialogue of courtship.

From a comparative perspective, it may be of some relevance that the enigmatic passages in texts such as *Tochmarc Emire* and *Immacallam in Dá Thúarad* were heavily annotated by later copyists of the tales working in the Middle Irish period, in much the same way that Aldhelm’s difficult Latin was extensively glossed by scholars in tenth- and eleventh-century Canterbury. Indeed, a consciousness among Irish literati of the varying levels of rhetorical difficulty that characterized different Irish texts is reflected in contemporary metalinguistic comments concerning distinct speech or compositional registers. For example, the term *bérla na filed* [the language of the poets] was explicitly distinguished by some Irish scribes from *gnáthberla* [“customary” or “ordinary” language]—the latter of which seemingly refers to a type of speech that is “unmarked by its lexical or grammatical eccentricities, (apparent) age, or association with any particular ritual or professional context.”¹⁰¹ *Bérla na filed*, by contrast, appears to have been understood as a more rhetorically intricate linguistic

⁹⁹ John Carey, “Obscure Styles,” 24, 30. For the text of the *Immacallam*, see Whitley Stokes, ed. and trans., “The Colloquy of the Two Sages,” *Revue celtique* 26 (1905): 4–64, 284–85 (corrigenda).

¹⁰⁰ See the discussion under “‘Gibberish’ Words in Old Irish and Early English Blood-staunching Charms” above. Ciaran Arthur likewise builds on Arnovick’s arguments in suggesting that the consciously esoteric language of the ritual healing texts in the Cotton Caligula A xv manuscript might be understood to “reflect more about the composers and authorised performers of these rituals than it does about the effects it had on human and spiritual audiences” (“Charms”, *Liturgies, and Secret Rites*, 176).

¹⁰¹ Robin Chapman Stacey, *Dark Speech: The Performance of Law in Early Ireland* (Philadelphia, 2007), 99. See also the discussion by Calvert Watkins, “Language of Gods and Language of Men: Remarks on Some Indo-European Metalinguistic Traditions,” in *Myth and Law among the Indo-Europeans*:

register, and an Irish metrical tract that was probably first compiled in the tenth century stipulates that mastery of it should form part of the curriculum for the sixth year of study of a poet.¹⁰² On a broader level, Irish scholarly interest in obscure vocabulary and multi-lingualism more generally is evidenced in a large corpus of early Irish glossaries, many of which were first compiled in the seventh or eighth centuries but clearly reworked or added to for some time thereafter.¹⁰³

One might therefore situate the composition of the “*egor*-incantation” for staunching blood within the context of textual production and intellectual exchange between Ireland and England during the early medieval period, from the time of Aldhelm in the seventh century to that of Lanfranc in the eleventh. Its origins could well be traced more specifically, however, to learning cultivated at Canterbury in the latter half of this chronological spectrum. Although the three known copies of the incantation survive only in late medieval Irish manuscripts written by members of hereditary medical families, it is possible that the charm was first recorded in a manuscript, now lost, that made its way into an Irish ecclesiastical centre with connections to Canterbury, and that this was the source from which it eventually came to be incorporated into the remedy collection of our sixteenth-century north Connacht medical practitioner, Conla Mac an Leagha.¹⁰⁴ A passing reference elsewhere in Conla’s remedy book to a cure for pulmonary ailment derived from an unnamed “abbot of Bangor,” probably the head of the monastic foundation in Co. Down that was renowned as a major center of learning in the pre-Norman period, would appear to support the hypothesis that some, and perhaps even a great deal, of the medical knowledge preserved in Conla’s collection emanated from a much earlier ecclesiastical milieu.¹⁰⁵

CONCLUSION: A CASE FOR REVISITING THE IRISH MEDICAL MANUSCRIPTS

The foregoing discussion has sought to fulfill two principal aims: first, to offer a reassessment of the evidence for “charms” or “ritual remedies” extant in premodern

Studies in Indo-European Comparative Mythology, ed. Jaan Puhvel, Publications of the UCLA Center for the Study of Comparative Folklore and Mythology 1 (Berkeley, 1970), 1–17.

¹⁰² Liam Breatnach, “*Araile feilmac féig don mumain*: Unruly Pupils and the Limitations of Satire,” *Ériu* 59 (2009): 111–37, at 113–14. On the metrical tract in question, see R. Thurneysen, “Mittelirische Verslehren,” in *Irische Texte mit Wörterbuch*, ed. Wh. Stokes and E. Windisch, 4 vols. (Leipzig, 1880–1909), 3/1:1–182.

¹⁰³ The Irish glossary tradition has recently been the subject of extensive scholarly engagement. Key references can be found in the bibliography to Paul Russell, Sharon Arbuthnot, and Pádraic Moran, *Early Irish Glossaries Database* (Cambridge, UK, 2006–9), <http://www.asnc.cam.ac.uk/irishglossaries/> (last accessed 16 November 2021), and in Pádraic Moran, ed., *De origine scotticae linguae (O’Mulconry’s Glossary): An Early Irish Linguistic Tract, Edited with a Related Glossary, Irsan, Corpus Christianorum Lexica Latina Medii Aevi 7* (Turnhout, 2019).

¹⁰⁴ For the relevant manuscript witnesses of the charm, see above, n. 55.

¹⁰⁵ For this reference, see Hayden, “Attribution and Authority,” 37–38. Discussion of the connections between the learned families of late medieval Ireland and Irish ecclesiastical foundations of the early medieval period has hitherto focused almost exclusively on families who specialized in historical, legal, and poetic knowledge, and has largely ignored the question of how medieval Irish medical learning fits into this wider scheme: see, e.g., Proinsias Mac Cana, “The Rise of the Later Schools of *Filidheacht*,” *Ériu* 25 (1974): 126–46.

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Irish medical manuscripts; and second, to revisit the question of cross-linguistic borrowing in the vernacular medical traditions of medieval Ireland and England, as was first set out in detail by Howard Meroney in a contribution to this journal several decades ago. Much previous scholarship in these areas, from experts in both medieval English and Irish sources, has been somewhat one-directional in focusing primarily on the contents of early English medical texts, while the value of the surviving Irish-language medical manuscripts as a potential source of comparable evidence has simultaneously been dismissed or disregarded. The particular focus of this study has been a group of blood-staunching charms preserved in one substantial, but as yet little-studied, collection of Irish medical remedies from a sixteenth-century manuscript. Much of the language in the verbal incantations from these charms has previously been thought to consist of little more than corrupted, incomprehensible, or meaningless forms. It is argued here, however, that close analysis of such passages can not only reveal important semantic and stylistic nuances, but also shed light on the participation of Irish writers in wider scholarly trends concerning the power of languages, cryptography, and obscurantist vocabulary prevalent in Canterbury and elsewhere in Europe prior to the twelfth century. It is likely that the Irish blood-staunching charms in question were first composed in this much earlier period, and that the similarities between them and material extant in contemporary English manuscript sources reflects the active transmission of medical learning across the Irish Sea around the time when some of the earliest surviving English medical texts were being copied, and when political and cultural ties between ecclesiastical centers in Ireland and southern England were having an impact on many other aspects of the development of Irish-language literary tradition. While it must be acknowledged that, in the present state of research, there is still more evidence pointing to the use of Irish lexical elements in early English charms than to the reverse process, the examples highlighted above nonetheless open up intriguing questions about the potential for many as-yet-unexamined Irish medical texts to shed further light on the early transmission and circulation of medical knowledge in the Irish and English vernaculars.

As Máire Ní Mhaonaigh has pointed out in a recent study of literary links between Ireland and England in the eleventh century, the tide of scholarly attention has, over the course of the past few decades, begun to turn more firmly in favor of mining the rich and varied corpus of written material that survives from medieval Ireland for evidence of the extent to which that region “both engaged with and was influential in key European developments” in the early medieval period—a trend that has been gradually leading to “a reconfiguration of the place of Ireland within the literary landscape of medieval Europe.”¹⁰⁶ At the same time, other scholars have

¹⁰⁶ Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, “*Caraid tairisi*—Literary Links between Ireland and England in the Eleventh Century,” in *Adapting Texts and Styles in a Celtic Context: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Processes of Literary Transfer in the Middle Ages. Studies in Honour of Erich Poppe*, ed. Axel Harlos and Neele Harlos, *Studien und Texte zur Keltologie* 13 (Munster, 2016), 265–87, at 265. See also Michael Clarke and Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, “The Ages of the World and the Ages of Man: Irish and European Learning in the Twelfth Century,” *Speculum* 95/2 (2020): 467–500.

been bringing much thought-provoking evidence to bear on the question of what manuscripts and texts from the late medieval period can tell us about contemporary currents of literary and cultural exchange across the Insular world.¹⁰⁷ The Irish-language medical manuscripts have not yet formed a substantial part of either of these wider debates, but have much to add to the conversation.

¹⁰⁷ See especially the essays in Aisling Byrne and Victoria Flood, eds., *Crossing Borders in the Insular Middle Ages*, *Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe* 30 (Turnhout, 2019). The contributions to this volume are illustrative of recent progress in the field of literary translation across the late medieval Insular world, but while one chapter treats medical texts in Welsh translation, none deals specifically with Irish-language medical material.