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NORTH AND MAGIC

**MYTHS, WISE WOMEN, SPELLS AND
WITCHES IN THE SCANDINAVIAN
AND GERMANIC WORLD**

a cura di

MARIA CRISTINA LOMBARDI

contributi di

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CARLA RIVIELLO, CONCETTA SIPIONE, LETIZIA VEZZOSI**





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MAGIC AND MAGICIANS IN OLD NORSE TRANSLATION LITERATURE

SIMONETTA BATTISTA

ABSTRACT: This paper has its origin in some passages on the origin of magic in Old Norse translation literature, in particular in *Stjórn*, a compilatory work which combines the contents of some books of the Old Testament with commentaries from the *Historia Scholastica*, *Speculum Historiale* and other Latin sources. By comparing these passages with occurrences in other contexts, an attempt is made to draw some parallels with the way in which the myth of the origin of magic and some representative figures of magicians are presented in different Old Norse contexts.

Old Norse translation literature, primarily represented by religious and hagiographic texts translated or adapted from Latin, plays a significant role in the corpus of Old Norse prose and accounts for approximately 25 per cent of the lexicographical material of *A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* (ONP). This literature was composed in the same environments and with the same target audience as other literary genres, and had a huge impact on the Icelandic texts, including the Sagas of Icelanders. Comparison with the sources, where available, makes it possible to trace the process of gradual interpretation and assimilation of

the universe of reference in the original texts that generally characterises the evolution of vernacular literature in translation.

A recently started project at the ONP consists in mapping and tagging the specific conceptual sphere of magic at the level of lemmas, articles, definitions or single quotations. Conducted by Johnny F. Lindholm and myself, the project aims to create a specialised dictionary of magic, and my part consists in the analysis of magic vocabulary in hagiographic literature in translation. A mapping of the vocabulary will be important for understanding this literature and the culture in which it was created. Moreover, most scholars have focused their attention on the pre-Christian aspects of Nordic magic, assuming that the sagas of the Icelanders capture the memory and legacy of ancient, local magical practices. However, in order to understand how magic was perceived in the period when these texts were put in writing, that is, several centuries after the introduction of Christianity, it is also useful to analyse texts in translation, in which Icelandic authors rendered Latin terms referring to exotic magic – which Nicolas Meylan has called Mediterranean⁽¹⁾ – drawing on the lexicon of indigenous (pagan) magic, thus relating the two phenomena.

I have investigated some significant passages in Old Norse translation literature, in order to find out how the perception of magic in Latin culture may have influenced Old Norse vocabulary and perhaps determined a change in the semantic content of words such as *ffolkynngi*, *ffolkunnigr* and other semantically related terms. Some hagiographic sagas, in particular the sagas of the apostles Matthew, Simon and Judas,

(1) MEYLAN N., “Magic and Discourses of Magic in the Old Norse Sagas of the Apostles”, *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 7 (2011), pp. 107-124.

Bartholomew, James, Peter, and Clement, present figures of magicians who are antagonists of the representants of the Christian god. Other works in translation give us the form that the origin of magic in the Latin sources took in Old Norse texts. This analysis will begin with some important passages in *Stjórn*.

The name *Stjórn*, which means ‘guidance, governance, rule’, refers to a collection of Old Norse translations of the Old Testament from Genesis to the 2nd Book of Kings, dating from the 14th century⁽²⁾. It consists of three parts, the first of which, *Stjórn I*, is highly compilatory. It covers Genesis to Exodus 18 and includes supplementary material from other sources, the most important being Vincent of Beauvais’ *Speculum Historiale*, which in turn draws extensively on Peter Comestor’s *Historia Scholastica* and other authors. As stated by Astås⁽³⁾:

Anvendelsen af fyldige kildeuddrag i *Stjórn I* virker så avstemt etter behovet at det er mest sannsynlig at kompilatoren hentet dem fra verker han hadde adgang til og oversatte fra etter behov.

[The use of extensive source excerpts in *Stjórn I* seems so finely tuned to the need that it is most likely that the compiler took them from works he had access to and translated them as needed.]

(2) The collective title *Stjórn* was given by C.R. Unger, who edited the texts in 1862: C.R. UNGER (ed.), *Stjorn. Gammelnorsk Bibelhistorie fra Verdens Skabelse til det babyloniske Fangenskap*, Kristiania 1862. A new edition edited by Astås was published in 2009: R. ASTÅS (ed.), *Stjórn. Tekst etter håndskriftene*, *Norrøne tekster* 8, 2 vols., Oslo 2009.

(3) R. ASTÅS (ed.), *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. xx.

The narrative follows the biblical story of creation, using some episodes as a starting point for digressions into related themes. After the episode of the Tower of Babel and the confusion of tongues, the three sons of Noah went in different directions and populated the three known regions of the world: Sem in Asia, Cham in Africa and Japhet in Europe. This episode is the occasion for a long geographical digression, beginning with a description of Asia (which includes Persia). Here we find a passage from the *Speculum Historiale* on the Persian origin of the *ars magica*, referred to as *ffolkynnigislist* (the only occurrence of the lemma in ONP)⁽⁴⁾:

J Persida uar fyrst fundin ffolkynnigislist. Þat land tok Nemroth [*var. +: risi B*] ser til bygðar eptir tungnaskiptit. ok kendi þi folki sem þar bygði þann atrunat at dyrka elld ok sol. hallda flestir solina fyrir gud i þeim haalfum ok kalla hana elld upp aa sina tungu.

In Perside primum orta est ars magica, ad quam Nembroth gygas post confusionem linguarum abijt, ibique Persas ignem colere docuit. Nam omnes in illis partibus Solem colunt, qui ipsorum lingua Hel dicitur.

[The art of magic was invented in Persia. (The giant) Nemroth settled in that land after the confusion of tongues and taught its inhabitants the false belief that they should worship fire and the sun. Most people in that part (of the world) consider the sun to be a god and call it fire in their own language.]

(4) UNGER, *op. cit.*, p. 73. The Latin text is quoted from the 1624 Douay edition of the *Speculum Historiale*, p. 25a (l 65). In this paper, the orthography of Old Norse follows that of the critical editions of the quoted texts. The normalised terminology (including the titles of the cited works) adheres to ONP praxis. All the English translations of the Old Norse texts are my own.

After the description of Asia, Europe and Africa, the compiler considers it appropriate to return to the point from which he had digressed (the three sons of Noah) in order to continue the historical narrative. Here we find a chapter which in one of the manuscripts (AM 227 fol, ca 1350, B in Unger's edition) has the title: *fra þeim feðgum Belo ok Nino ok þar meðr Zoroaster ok skurðguda villa hofz* 'About the father and son Bel and Ninus, Zoroaster and the origin of idolatry'. As stated by the author, part of the chapter derives from the *Speculum historiale*, which in turn quotes Comestor, the Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitiones* (book 4, chapters 27-28) and other sources. Here follows the passage about Zoroaster⁽⁵⁾:

Speculum historiale. Ninus sigradi Cham födurfedr sinn. er þa lifdi enn sua sem hann hofz til rikiss. huerr er fyrstr segiz at galldra 'list [*var.* fiqlkyngi B] hafi kunnat. Hann kendi syni sinum er Stráám het galldra 'fiolkyngi [*var.* list B]. er til illz eina uar fundin. af huerium er kyn Egiptiorum. Babiloniorum ok Persarum er komit. fyrir huern skyllid er menn kalladu hann Zoroastrem. ok af þi sama nafni uaru um eina stund margar bokr af þeirri somu kunnastu. Þessi Cham uiliandi synaz gud manna i milli ok hafandi sina aastundan opt ok iduliga til himintungla gangz ok þeirra natturu. syndiz hann meðr sinum gördum af stiörnunum nockura geisla edr gneista gefa edr ut leida. til þess at þadan af skyllidi hann unga menn ok uuitra leida ok locka þat at undraz sem nóckura iartegn. En sua lauk hans lifdögum. at hann uar brendr um siðir af þeim sama fianda. sem hann het optaz aa ok treysti bezt. huerium er þeir menn sem aa hans trölldom ok fiolkyngi trudu.

(5) UNGER, *op. cit.*, pp. 100-101. *Speculum Historiale*, p. 37a (I 101).

gordu sem einum guds uin meðr klokskap sua skapada gróf eðr leiði meðr einnar áár flytian ok fulltingi. at þat syndiz allt saman flytiaz ok upp hefiaz til himins. huadan er hann feck þat nafn einkanliga eptir sinn dauða. at hann uar kalladr Zoroastres. þat er upp i norrænu at segia sem lifanda himintungl.

Comestor [...] Ninus vicit Cham, qui adhuc viuebat, & regnauit in Bactria* & dicebatur Zoroastres inuentor magicæ artis [...]

Ex libro Clementis quarto. Cham filius Noe, cuidam ex filijs suis qui Mefraim appellabatur à quo Ægyptiorum & Babyloniorum, & Persarum ducitur genus, male compertam magicæ artis tradidit disciplinam, hunc gentes, quæ tunc erant, Zoroastrem appellauerunt, cuius nomine libri super hoc plurimi habentur. Hic volens apud homines videri Deus, multum & frequenter astris intentus velut scintillas quasdam ex stellis producebat, vt rudes in stuporem miraculi traherentur, tandem ab ipso dæmone, quem importunus frequentabat, succensus est, cui extruxerunt sepulchrum tanquam amico Dei vehiculo fulminis ad cælum subleuato, vnde & hoc nomen post mortem sortitus est Zoroastres, tanquam viuens astrum.

[Ninus defeated his grandfather (?) Cham, who was still alive when he came to power and who is said to have been the first to master the art of magic. He taught his son Stram the art of magic, which was invented only for evil, and from whom the race of the Egyptians and Babylonians and Persians have descended. For which reason he was called Zoroaster, under whose name many books on the same magic art existed for a time. Wishing to appear as a god among men, and frequently and

assiduously observing the movement and nature of the stars, this Cham made it appear by his actions that he could produce or draw beams and sparks from the stars, in order to lead and deceive the young and ignorant to be astonished as if by some miracle. His life ended in such a way that he was eventually burned to death by the same demon he had most summoned and trusted. To him people who believed in his witchcraft and magic art built, with list, a tomb or sepulchre as to a friend of God, so made that with the movement and support of a stream it all seemed to float and be lifted to heaven. Therefore, after his death, he was given the particular name of Zoroaster, which in Norse means living star.]

The passage reports the attribution of the invention of magical arts to Zoroaster (i.e. Zarathustra), who is identified with Cham, son of Noah. Here we find the terms *galdráffólkyngi*, *galdralist* and the more generic *kunnasta*, in this case used in reference to *male compertam magicæ artis (tradidit) disciplinam*.

As for the strange image of the stream of water supporting the movement of the tomb towards the sky, it is obvious that the translation in *Stjórn* must be based on a corrupted version of the *Speculum Historiale*, where the original *fulminis* by metathesis has been misread or wrongly transcribed as *fluminis*. In fact, the image of the living star fits the text better if we think of *fulminis* instead of *fluminis*.

The text goes on with a passage quoting Saint Augustine⁽⁶⁾:

(6) UNGER, *op. cit.*, p. 101. *Speculum Historiale*, p. 37a-37b (I 101). The reference to Saint Augustine is to *De civitate dei*, XXI, 14.

Af þessum sama Zoroastre segir einn uiss madr Solinus. at hann hlo þegar leid sem hann uar fæddr. i gegn þi sem aull onnur börn gráta. huert eitt ok eitt er i uerolldina uerdr fætt. Huar til er suarar hinn heilagi Augustinus i hinni fyrstu bok ok.xx. de ciuitate dei [...] huers sem eins barns burðr ok fæðing er skipadr «ok byriaz» af grát enn eigi hlátri. utan þat er menn segja. at einn saman Zoroastes hafi þat górt at hlæia aa sinum burdartima. Ok eigi bendi sa hin skyrtiligi ok hinn hrædiligi hlátr nóckut gott fyrir. þiat allt at eins uard hann af Nino Serkia konungi sigradr i bardaga ok yfirstiginn. at hann fyndi fyrstr galldra folkyngi. ok uæri þar medr formadr þeirra þioda sem bygdu i Baktria.

De eodem Zoroastre dixit Solinus, quòd mox vt natus est riserit.

Augustinus de ciui. Dei libro 21 [...] non risu, sed à fletu ordinatur, hanc lucem quid malorum ingressa sit nesciens prophetat quodammodo. Solum quando natus est ferunt risisse Zoroastrem, nec boni aliquid monstruosus risus ille portendit, nam licet Magicarum artium inuentor, à Nino tamen rege Assyriorum cum esset ille Bactrianorum Rex, bello superatus est.

[Of this same Zoroaster, the wise man Solinus says that he laughed instead of crying when he was born, in contrast to the fact that all other babies cry, every single one who comes into the world. To which Saint Augustine comments in book XXI of *De civitate dei* [...] the birth and delivery of every child is characterised and introduced with weeping and not with laughter. Except for what people say that only Zoroaster did, that is to laugh at the moment of his birth. And this portentous and terrible laughter did not

bode anything good, as he was defeated in battle by Ninus, the king of the Assyrians, even though he was the one who invented the art of magic and was therefore the ruler of the people who lived in Bactria (the Bactrians).]

As already mentioned, in addition to the *Historia Scholastica*, the *Speculum Historiale* also draws on Clement and Augustine for the passages translated in *Stjórn*. We read that Zoroaster was the only human being who laughed instead of crying when he was born. This information goes back to Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia* (VII, 15), who also reports that his brain pulsated so strongly that it repelled hands laid upon it, a presage of his future wisdom. Following Augustine, *Stjórn* interprets Zoroaster's laughter as an unnatural omen that does not bode well for him, and which seems to foreshadow his demonic nature.

The chapter continues, is anticipated in the title, with the story of the origins of idolatry (*skurðgoða villa*), corresponding in content to the *Speculum historiale*. The same tradition can be found in the *Elucidarius* (written by Honorius Augustodunensis around 1100), which was well known in Iceland and is also the source for a passage in the *Hauksbók* (AM 544 4to) with the title *Her segir huaðan blot skur guða hofust* 'Here is told how the sacrifice to idols began'⁽⁷⁾. It is significant to observe how the origin of magic is linked to the origin of idolatry, both being based on deception and false beliefs.

As for the inventor of magic, Zoroaster, he appears in two other places in Old Norse literature. The first is an

(7) EIRÍKUR JÓNSSON & FINNUR JÓNSSON (eds.), *Hauksbók udgiven efter de Arnarnagæanske håndskrifter no. 371, 544 og 675, 4^o samt forskellige papirshåndskrifter*. København 1892-1896, p. 170.

encyclopaedic text on the ages of the world (*Heimsaldrar*), contained in the manuscript AM 194 8° (1387)⁽⁸⁾:

Thare ... lifdi CC vetra oc V vetr. Aa hans [dogum] fanz kyngi. Sa het Zoroastes, er þat fann fyrst, hann var konungr af Bactria, hann hlo fyr enn hann greite, þa er hann var alinn.

[Thare lived 205 years. In his days the art of magic was invented. The one who invented it was called Zoroaster, he was the king of Bactria, and he laughed before he cried, when he was born]

This event happened during the lifetime of Thare, Abraham's father, and marks the end of the second age of the world (which goes from Noah's flood to Abraham). It is interesting to note that in this short text, the only additional information given about Zoroaster, besides that he invented magical arts, is that he laughed instead of crying when he was born.

Zoroaster also appears in the longer version of the prologue to *Snorra Edda* found in the *Codex Wormianus*. This version of the Prologue is not a completely different redaction from the one found in other manuscripts – most notably *Codex Regius* (GKS 2367 4to), *Codex Upsaliensis* (DG 11) and *Codex Trajectinus* (Traj 1374^x) – but it has partly the same wording and structure, with three insertions: two longer and one shorter. As we know, the scope of the prologue is to place the Nordic lands in the frame of the world history. The migration of the Æsir from the east is

(8) Kr. KÅLUND (ed.), *Cod. mbr. AM. 194, 8vo*. STUAGNL 37, København 1908, p. 49.

treated in an eumeristic way, which sees Óðinn and Þórr as descendants of Troy. Compared to the standard content, most scholars, including Finnur Jónsson, who edited the text in *Codex Wormianus* in 1924, agree that the three new passages were added later in the longer version of the Prologue⁽⁹⁾. This – according to Wellendorf – makes the additions even more significant⁽¹⁰⁾. The first digression is about the episode of the building of the tower of Babel and the rise of idolatry. Zoroaster is mentioned as the one who erected the tower and one of the additional details about him is – again – that he laughed instead of crying when he was born⁽¹¹⁾:

þeir strídduz a sielfer ok með þí æyddiz qll þeira firættlan
i upp tekinni stopul smíð ok sa e<r> fremztr uar het
Zoroastres hann hlo fyr en gret er hann kom i uerolldína
[...] ok sem tungna skiptið uar orðit þa fiolguðuz sua
nofnin mannanna ok annarra luta. ok sia samí Zoroastres
hafði morg nófn ok þo at hann understædi at hans ofsi
uæri lægðr af sagðri smið þa færði hann sig þo framm

(9) FINNUR JÓNSSON (ed.): *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*. København 1931, p. xviii.

(10) According to Wellendorf the important fact about the longer prologue is that “it is found in one of the manuscripts, and it must have ended up there because someone included it on purpose – be it the scribe of W, his commissioner, or one of their predecessors. Since the text of W is not otherwise characterized by heavy deviations from the R and T texts of the prose Edda – except that some chapters of section 3 have been left out, seemingly on purpose – these additional parts of W become all the more important.” J. WELLENDORF, “Zoroaster, Saturn, and Óðinn: The Loss of Language and the Rise of Idolatry”, in: L. BOJE MORTENSEN and T.M.S. LEHTONEN, with A. BERGHOLM (eds.), *The Performance of Christian and Pagan Storyworlds. Non-Canonical Chapters of the History of Nordic Medieval Literature*, Brepols, Turnhout 2013, p. 152.

(11) FINNUR JÓNSSON (ed.): *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar. Codex Wormianus: AM 242, fól.*, København/Kristiania 1924, p. 3.

til ueralldligs metnaðar ok lét taka sik til konungs yfer mǫrgum þjóðum Assiríorum. Af honum hofz skurðgoða uilla ok sem hann uar blotaðr uar hann kallaðr Baal. þann kollum uer Bel. Hann hafði ok morg onnur nofn Enn sem nofnín fjölguðuz. þa tyndiz með þui sanleíkrinn.

[They quarrelled with each other, and their whole project of building a tower was ruined. And he who was the most prominent, whose name was Zoroaster, laughed before he cried when he came into the world [...] And when the confusion of tongues had taken place, then the names of men and of other things multiplied. This same Zoroaster had many names; and though he understood that his pride was humbled by the said building, yet he worked his way to worldly power and had himself made king over many nations of the Assyrians. From him arose the error of idolatry; and when he was worshipped, he was called Baal; we call him Bel; he also had many other names. But as the names multiplied, the truth was lost.]

Similarly, the second insert in the prologue tells how Saturn was so good at predicting the future and other skills that he was made king of the island of Crete⁽¹²⁾. The author assimilates the two figures of Saturn and Zoroaster⁽¹³⁾:

Þessi Saturnus uox upp i æy þeiri i Grikklandz hafí er Krít heiter. hann uar meirí ok sterkarí fríðarí enn aðrer menn sua bar uitrleíkr hans af ollum monnum sem adrar

(12) The tradition that Saturn was the King of Crete is also found in the *Hauksbók* homily, “On the Origin of Disbelief” (*Hauksbók*, p. 158) as well as in the Old English *De falsis diis* by Ælfric, from which it seems to be derived. WELLENDORE, *op. cit.*, pp. 164-165.

(13) *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar, op. cit.* 1924, p. 4-5.

naturugíafér hann fann ok margar lister þær sem aðr hofðu æigi fundnar uerit. hann uar ok sua mikill a þa iðrott er þítónsanda list héiter. at hann uissi fyrer uorðna lutí. hann fann ok rauða þann i iorðu er hann bles af gull ok af þesshaattar lutum uarð hann skiott ríkr. hann sagði ok fyrer arferð ok marga aðra læynda lutí ok af sliku ok morgu oðru toku þeir hann til hofðingia yfer æyna [...] af þessu ok morgu qðru usynilegu krapta laní er hann hafði truðu þeir hann guð uera ok af þessu hofz qnnur uilla millum Kritar manna ok Macedoniorum sua sem hín fyrrí meðal Assiriorum ok Challdéis. Af Zoroastre.

[This Saturn grew up on the island in the Greek Sea called Crete. He was bigger, stronger and more handsome than other men. He surpassed all men in wisdom and other natural gifts. He invented many crafts that had not been discovered before. He was also so great at the art called soothsaying that he had knowledge of things that had not yet happened. He also found the ore in the earth from which he smelted gold, and from such things he soon became very powerful. He also foretold harvests and many other secret things, and for these and many other deeds he was made chief of the island. [...] And because of this and many other secret gifts of power which he had, people believed him to be a god, and from this another error arose among the Cretans and Macedonians, like the one before mentioned among the Assyrians and Chaldeans of Zoroaster.]

In this passage the magic art called *fitónsandalist* ‘soothsaying, divination’, is mentioned in connection with Saturn. He is also said to possess the *fitónsandi* ‘pythonical

spirit' in *Kirjalax saga*: «Saturnus ok Jubiter voru menn... fullir med fiolkyngi ok Fitons anda»⁽¹⁴⁾ ('Saturn and Jupiter were men skilled in magic and divination'). And this skill, *fitónsandalist*, is also attributed to a character in the Old Norse romance (*riddarasaga*) from the late 14th century, *Adóníass saga*. In this saga, which is set in Syria, we meet the magician Zordastres, most probably a mixed-up form of Zoroaster. He is presented as someone who is skilled in *fitónsandalist*, and he is asked to prepare a potion of forgetfulness in order to help Duke Constancius submit Queen Semerana to his wishes and marry her⁽¹⁵⁾:

Hann kallar nu til sin þann mann «er» Zordastres hét.
hann kunne hardla mikid af fitóns andalist... seiger... «at»
Zordastres skal snúa hug drottningar til sins vilia. ef hann
þættizt nockura kunáttv til þess hafa.

[He summons the man called Zordastres, he knew much about the art of divination. He says that Zordastres must bend the queen's mind to his will, if he thinks he has some expertise in this]

It has also been suggested that the Zaroes who appears in *Matheuss saga postula* and in *Tveggja postula saga Símons ok Júðass* is another form of the name Zoroaster⁽¹⁶⁾. Although this theory is questionable, there are – apart from the similarity between the names – elements that could support the

(14) Kr. KÅLUND (ed.), *Kirjalax saga*, STUAGNL 43, København 1917, p. 44.

(15) A. LOTH (ed.), *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, vol. III, EA B 22, København 1963, p. 107.

(16) T. NÖLDEKE, *Ergänzungsheft zu Lipsius Die apokryphen Apostelgeschichten und Apostellegenden*, Braunschweig 1883-1890, p. 76.

confusion between the two figures: firstly, their origins in the East and their relationship to Persia; secondly, the fact that Zaroës – as we will see – is in the service of the king alongside Arphaxat, and has a higher rank than other magicians and soothsayers, which is also reflected in the terminology used to describe them.

There is a confusion of names and roles that could be misleading, but in fact different traditions account for different interpretations, which all were well known in the Middle Ages. We read in *Stjórn*, according to a tradition which goes back at least to Eusebius, that Zoroaster was the king of the Baktrians. He is identified with Cham (Ham), who was defeated by Ninus, king of Assyria, who was the son of Bel. The same Ninus had a statue of his father made after his death, and from this idolatry arose. According to patristic tradition (and Isidor's *Etymologies* in the chapter about "De diis gentium") Bel was also called Saturnus among the Greeks and the Assyrians⁽¹⁷⁾. The long prologue in *Snorra Edda* identifies Bel with Zoroaster, so the author tries through this correspondence to connect the two figures. As Wellendorf has pointed out, his account of the rise of idolatry deviates somewhat from the standard accounts, but he seems to deviate on purpose in order to be able to line up the stories of the three characters of Zoroaster, Saturnus, and Óðinn as essentially three versions of one and the same story⁽¹⁸⁾.

(17) Bel idolum Babylonium est, quod interpretatur vetus. Fuit enim hic Belus pater Nini, primus rex Assyriorum, quem quidam Saturnum appellant; quod nomen et apud Assyrios et apud Afros postea cultum est, unde et lingua Punica Bal deus dicitur. Apud Assyrios autem Bel vocatur quadam sacrorum suorum ratione et Saturnus et Sol. *Etymologiae* VIII, xi, 23. (<thelatinlibrary.com/isidore/8.shtml>).

(18) WELLENDORF, *op. cit.*, pp. 166-167.

Regarding the provenance of the content on Zoroaster, it is also relevant to mention that the *Codex Wormianus* was produced in the monastery at Þingeyrar (in northern Iceland), i.e. in the same scriptorium and possibly by the same author as the *Hauksbók* and AM 227 fol, which is one of the main manuscripts containing *Stjórn* I (manuscript B in Unger's edition from 1862, and the main manuscript in Astás' edition from 2009).

Without venturing into further detail, it is important to note how the myths narrated in the Latin sources and related in *Stjórn* are incorporated into the prologue of *Snorra Edda*, the text that describes the origin of Norse mythology par excellence.

To Zoroaster, Saturn and Óðinn we can compare the magicians in the Sagas of the Apostles. Zaroos and Arphaxat, who appear in *Matheuss saga postula* and *Tveggja postula saga Simons ok Júðass*, are presented as two *ffolkunnigir menn* (lat. *magi*), who intentionally cause harm to people, and when they beg them for healing, they make the cessation of their torments appear as healing⁽¹⁹⁾. The two magicians are accompanied by dangerous dragons (lat. *dracones*, isl. *drekar* or *flugdrekar*, in the various versions), which the apostle Matthew renders harmless by putting them to sleep, and which they

(19) Tveir fiolkungir menn voru a Blandi, Zaroos ok Arfaxath [...] guðs postoli eyddi öllu illu, því er hinir fiolkungu menn gerðu monnum. En þeir grönduðu þeim, er þeir mattu, unz hinir siuku baðu ser heilsu af þeim, oc synduz þeir þa grøða, er þeir letu af at kvelia. *Matheus saga postola*, in: C.R. UNGER (ed.), *Postola saga. Legendariske Fortællinger om Apostlernes Liv, deres Kamp for Kristendommens Udbredelse, samt deres Martyrdød*, Kristiania 1874, pp. 797-798. Erant itaque duo magi Zaroos et Arphaxat arabes apud et æthiopias [...] quod omnia quæ magi faciebant mala hominibus: hic dei apostolus euacuare: Illi enim ideo uulnerabant quos poterant: et uulnerati ipsos rogarent: qui ideo curare putabantur: quoniam a læsione cessabant. *Passio sancti Mathei*, in: B. MOMBRIUS (ed.), *Sanctuarium, seu, Vitae sanctorum*, Paris 1910, vol. II, p. 257-258.

try to awaken *með folkyngi sinni* ‘with their magic arts’ (lat. *arte sua magica*)⁽²⁰⁾; but – the saga tells us – the dragons are not able to open their eyes, nor to get up. Matthew for his part addresses the dragons with a prayer and they leave the town peacefully. Later, when it becomes known that the king’s son is dead, the two magicians, unable to raise him from the dead, convince the king that his son has been elevated to the rank of a deity, and that a temple and a statue should be built to worship him. In contrast to the impotence of the magicians, who as well as *ffolkunga menn* are also referred to as *gall dramenn*, the eunuch of Queen Candice, who had been baptised by the apostle Philip, asks the apostle Matthew for help, and he resurrects the young man, thus demonstrating the superiority of the Christian god⁽²¹⁾.

Faced with their own inferiority in comparison to the apostles, whose power comes from the Christian God, the magicians flee from *Bláland* (Ethiopia) to *Serkland* and *Persialand* (Persia), passing themselves off as gods (*letuz guð vera*), until God sends the apostles Simon and Judas *a mot villu þeira*, i.e. to contrast their *villa*, which can be

(20) *Matheus saga postola*, p. 799; *Passio sancti Mathei*, p. 258.

(21) þar var gratr mikill ok ogleði, þviat sonr konungs var þa dauðr. En þeir Zaroes ok Arfaxath stoðu hia liki hans ok hugðuz mundu reisa hann af dauða. En er þeir mattu þat eigi gera, þa toldu þeir þat fyrir konungi, at hann væri uppnomin ok orðinn at guði, ok gera skylldi honum hof ok likneski ok blota hann. En Candacis gellingr gekk fyrir drottningu ok mælti: Seti þer i bond þessa fiolkunga menn, ok biðit, at hingat komi Matheus postoli; en ef hann reisir hann upp af dauða, þa brenni þer gall dramenn i elldi kvika. *Matheus saga postola*, p. 801. ecce tumultus luctuosus subito ortus est: in quo regis filius mortuus plangebatur: ad cuius funus stabant magi: qui cum non possent suscitare eum: suadebant regi hunc a diis raptum et in collegio eorum positum ut sit unus ex diis: cui oportet et simulacrum fabricari et templum: Tunc ingressus Candacis eunuchus ad reginam dixit: *Istos magos iubete custodiri: et rogate: ut ueniat ad nos apostolus dei Mathæus: et si ipse: eum uobis suscitauerit: istos iubete uiuos incendi (*Passio sancti Mathei*, p. 260).

understood as ‘misleading doctrine, false belief, heresy’, but also ‘illusory arts, witchcraft’⁽²²⁾.

In fact, we find Zaroes and Arphaxat in the *Tveggja postula saga Simons ok Júdass*, serving the Persian king Xerxes. At the beginning of this saga, we read that Varardac, the king’s army commander, had figures in his retinue who are described in the Latin source as *sacrificatores et Arioli et magi et incantatores*. They gave auspices with their deceptive arts, but upon the arrival of the apostles, they lost their powers. These figures are rendered in Old Norse with *blótbyskupar ok visendamenn, fjólkungir menn ok gall dramenn*: they make use of *skurðgoð* (idols), who dumb down before the apostles, and then the magicians and enchanters are forced to move to another town to practise their arts⁽²³⁾. In the saga Zaroes and Arphaxat are also referred to as *villumenn*, i.e. ultimately ‘heretics’, and their doctrine is traced back to the sphere of the devil (the *inimicus humani generis*). In the end, they will be burnt alive at the stake in the temple: «En þeir Zaroes ok Arphaxat urðu drepnir elldingu ok do hinum versta dauða»⁽²⁴⁾ (lat. *ad carbonem converti sunt*)⁽²⁵⁾.

(22) *Matheus saga postola*, UNGER, *op. cit.* 1874, p. 802.

(23) i för hans voru ʼskurðgoð, ok blotbyskupar ok visendamenn, þeir er blotuðu diöflum i hverium nattstað, ok gafu monnum svør *flærðar sinnar [var. fiolþi blotmanna með skurðgoðum, þar varo fjólkungir menn oc gall dramenn AM 655 XII-XIII 4°]. En a þeim degi mattu þeir engi svør gefa mǫnnum, þviat skurðgoðin voru dumb orðin. Þa foru þeir til annarrar borgar ok blotuðu þar diofla. *Tveggja postula saga Simons ok Jude*, UNGER, *op. cit.* 1874, p. 779. erantque in comitatu ejus sacrificatores, & arioli, & magi, & incantatores, qui per singulas mansiones, sacrificantes dæmonii, dabant responsa fallaciæ suæ. Contigit autem, ut die qua Apostoli in exercitu erant, coincidentes se, & sanguinem suum effundentes, nulum penitus dare potuerunt duci belli responsum. Quapropter perrexerunt ad fanum vicinæ civitatis, & consulentes illic dæmonia, dæmonem cum ingenti mugitu ita audiverunt loquentem. *De S. Simone et Juda*, in: J.A. FABRICIUS (ed.), *Codex apocryphus Novi testamenti*, vol. I, Hamburg 1703, p. 611.

(24) *Tveggja postula saga Simons ok Jude*, UNGER, *op. cit.* 1874, p. 787.

(25) *De S. Simone et Juda*, p. 635.

Similar considerations about the false magic arts of Zaroos and Arphaxat are also found in *Barthólómeuss saga postula* about the *skurðgodð* 'idol' (lat. *idolum*) Astaroth. Within the idol there is a demon (a *djofull*), also called *hinn lygni guð* 'the false, mendacious god', who heals those he harms, and to the fools he seems to heal them, when he in fact stops harming them: «þa syniz heimskum monnum sem hann grøði, þa er hann lætr af at meiða»⁽²⁶⁾. In *Jakobs saga postula*, the magician Hermogenes has his sorcery books destroyed and becomes Christian.

But the most famous and significant magician in the Sagas of the Apostles is undoubtedly Simon Magus, a character known throughout medieval Europe. The dispute between Simon Magus and the apostle Peter plays an important role in *Pétrrs saga*, *Clemens saga* and *Tveggja postula saga Pétrrs ok Páls*, which share some sources with *Pétrrs saga*⁽²⁷⁾. Moreover, Simon Magus appears in *Páls saga* and is mentioned in *Tveggja postula saga Jóns ok Jakobs* in the chapter on the twelve battles against the Antichrist, necessary for Christ to lead the Church to eternal glory⁽²⁸⁾. The sources of the story

(26) *Bartholomeus saga postula*, UNGER, *op. cit.* 1874, p. 744.

(27) The saga about Peter and Paul has only been preserved in AM 656 I 4^o (c. 1300-1325), which contains several lacunae. This combined saga about the two apostles, whose martyrdom, according to tradition, took place on the same day, is a compilation of pre-existing Old Norse translations and contains little original text. It represents a fusion of the oldest versions of *Pétrrs saga* and *Páls saga*, which are preserved in the manuscripts AM 630 4^o and AM 645 4^o respectively, as well as some fragments. Therefore, the sources are the same as those of the separate sagas: the Vulgate, the *Passio sanctorum apostolorum Petri et Pauli* and the *Passio sancti Pauli apostoli*. In terms of content, the text can be divided into three sections, but there are gaps both between and within them, which led Kirby (1980: 26) to hypothesise that it may not form a single composition. I.J. KIRBY, *Biblical Quotation in Old Icelandic-Norwegian Religious Literature*, vol. II, Rit 10, Reykjavík 1980, p. 26.

(28) *Tveggja postula saga Jóns ok Jakobs*, UNGER, *op. cit.* 1874, p. 622.

of Simon Magus are the Acts of the Apostles, the *Passio sanctorum apostolorum Petri et Pauli*, and the Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitiones*, which also form the basis of *Clemens saga*.

In *Pétrrs saga postula* I (SÁM 1, *Codex Scardensis*) Simon Magus is introduced with a description that follows the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 8, saying that he was regarded by the people as a divine power (*virtus Dei*)⁽²⁹⁾. The saga also tells us that he said he was *guðs krafr* (a power of God) *ēða spámaðr ēða guðs engill*. We recall in this connection that also «Zaroes ok Arphaxat villumenn foru um borgir ok letuz guð vera». In the course of the saga, in addition to *hinn fjölkunnigi*, he is alternately referred to as *hinn galdrafullasti*, *hinn illi*, *hinn sviksami*, *hinn versti maðr*, *skröksmaðr* and also *falskristi*⁽³⁰⁾. He introduces himself as a power of the Almighty creator (*krafr almattigs skapara*), listing his powers in a significant monologue, which in content parallels the *Recognitiones* (II, 9) and is found in similar versions in both *Pétrrs saga* and *Clemens saga*⁽³¹⁾:

Þá callaþe sá enn illi carl Simon hótt með öllo oc melte:
Hlyþet mér aller menn, þeir es her erop comner. Ec emc

(29) Maðr er nefndr Simon magus at kenningarnafni, honum hlyddi allt folk i Samaria fra minnzta manni til hins mesta sakir hans galldra ok faheyrdrar folkyngi. Hann sagði sik vera guðs krapr ēða spamann ēða guðs engil, ok truðu þeir því, sem villtuz i hiörtum sinum. *Pétrrs saga postola*, UNGER, *op. cit.* 1874, p. 36. vir autem quidam nomine Simon qui ante fuerat in civitate magus seducens gentem Samariae dicens esse se aliquem magnum; cui auscultabant omnes a minimo usque ad maximum dicentes hic est virtus Dei quae vocatur Magna; adtendebant autem eum propter quod multo tempore magicis suis dementasset eos. *Actus apostolorum* 8, 9-11.

(30) Examples of these appellatives can be found in various places throughout the saga. For instance: fyrr nefndan Simonem hinn galdrafullazta (*Pétrrs saga postola*, p. 63), hinum illa Simone (63, 86) hins sviksama Simonis (79, 111: var. fjölkunniga SÁM 1), Hinn versti maðr (97), falskristi (98).

(31) *Clemens saga*, UNGER, *op. cit.* 1874, pp. 133-134.

crafrt almattex scapera. Ec comk af himnom ofan oc vasc getenn i qviþi kono þeirre, es Rakel het. Hon fode mic.x. vetr vandliga. En.i. hvern dag selde hon i hønd mer sigþ, oc sende hon mic til cornscurþar. Ec com til acrsens oc melta ec viþ sigþenn: Scerþu nu cornet. Hann scar acrenn eigi seinna en.x. menn. Mér es hlyþen øll scelpna til þess es ec vil. Ec ma fliúga i lofte i ellz like. Ec gere sva, at aldentre eþa acr rennr þar up sem ec vil. Ec ma fara i gegnom fioll, hvars ec vil. At boþorþe mino hleia licnesce, þau es ger ero ór tre eþa ór malme, oc hrørasc þau oc mela, ef ec byþ þat. Ec scipte iferlitom minom, ef ec vil, svat ec synomc stundom gamall maþr oc scegiþr mioc oc hárr, en stundom fultipe maþr oc nacqvot scegiþr, en stundom synomc ec granspretingr eþa yngre, oc sva ungr oc stundom ungmene. Stundom bregþ ec a mic kycqvenda like ymissa, fogla eþa orma, fiska eþa dýra, nauta eþa hrossa, hruta eþa hafra.

Þa er Simon talpe slíct firer lyþnom, þa andsvaraþe Petrus postole: Synesc yþr eigi sem sia sialfr diøfols maþr lyse ifer fiolcynge sinne oc fleþþ i sinom orþom, en eigi of godome þeim es hann lezc hafa oc hann hefer þo at øngom coste.

[Then this wicked man Simon cried out in a very loud voice and said: 'All you who have come here listen to me! I am the power of the Almighty Creator. I came down from heaven and was conceived in the womb of a woman whose name was Rakel. She raised me with care for ten years. And one day she put a scythe in my hand and sent me out to reap. I went to the field and said to the scythe: 'Cut the grain!' It cut the field no slower than ten men. Every creature is obedient to me for whatever I wish. I can fly through the air in the form of fire. I make

fruit trees or crops grow as I wish. I can cross mountains wherever I wish. Statues made of wood or metal laugh at my command, and if I command them they move and speak. I change my appearance if I wish so that sometimes I appear as an old man and very bearded and canine, and sometimes as a grown man and slightly bearded, and sometimes I appear as a teenager or younger, and as young and even sometimes as a child. Sometimes I take the form of different creatures, birds or snakes, fish or wild animals, cattle or horses, rams or goats.’ When Simon had said these things before the people, then the Apostle Peter replied: ‘Does it not seem to you that this servant of the devil is himself proclaiming his witchcraft and deception by his words, and not that divinity which he claimed to have and which he in no way has?’]

As Phil Roughton and Annette Lassen have observed⁽³²⁾, the description that Simon Magus gives of himself shares many of Óðinn’s characteristics and powers, as described in *Ynglinga saga* ch. 7 and Snorri’s *Edda*: changing his appearance, looking younger or older, transforming himself into the most diverse animals, flying (in his case in the form of tongues of fire), penetrating rock, and so on⁽³³⁾. At the con-

(32) ROUGHTON, P., “Stylistics and Sources of the Postola Sögur in AM 645 4to and AM 652/630 4to”, *Gripla* XVI (2005), pp. 7-50; A. LASSEN, “Óðin and medieval magicians”, in: WALTHER, S., JUCKNIES, R., MEURER-BONGARDT, J. & SCHNALL, J.E. (eds.), *Res, Artes et Religio. Essays in honour of Rudolf Simek*, Literature and Culture 1, Leeds 2021, pp. 341-355.

(33) Furthermore, Annette Lassen has pointed out how the episode of the scythe doing the work of ten men can be traced back to the myth of the acquisition of the mead of poetry (found in two versions in *Hávamál* and *Snorra Edda*), when Óðinn makes Baugi’s nine servants kill each other and then presents himself to him as *Bólverkr* (‘the evil one, the one who does evil’, which can be interpreted as *maleficus*) and offers to do the work of nine men. He then takes the form of a serpent and slips into the mountain, spends three nights

clusion of Simon's monologue, the Apostle Peter replies that his words merely illustrate his magic and deception (*fjolkynn-gi ok flérð*), not the divinity he claims to possess but does not possess at all.

Also in a confrontation with the apostles Peter and Paul in the presence of Nero (in Rome) Simon Magus attributes to himself divine powers that echo those of Jesus Christ, declaring to Nero that he would be beheaded only to be resurrected on the third day. In reality, with his magic and spells (*i gerningum sinum ok gólldrum*) he has a ram beheaded in his place and makes it appear human to onlookers. This is made easier by the fact that the execution takes place in a dimly lit area at his own request. On the third day, he presents himself to Nero, pretending to be resurrected, and wins his trust⁽³⁴⁾.

There is no power or prestige in being *fjolkunnigr*, and Simon Magus refuses the appellation for himself when addressing Nero⁽³⁵⁾, and in another episode, overcome with envy, he accuses Peter in turn of being *fjolkunnigr*: *kvað hann fjolkunnigan vera*⁽³⁶⁾. As a further proof of his divinity, Simon asks Nero to have a wooden tower built, from which his angels would lift him up to his father. His

with Gunnlöd, managing to drink three sips of mead, and flies away in the guise of an eagle. John McKinnell has hypothesised that the story of the theft of the mead belongs to the late pagan period; according to Annette Lassen, it could be from an even later period and be the invention of a Christian author, inspired by the story of Simon Magus, which he may have known in Latin or in an Old Norse version, for instance in the *Clemens saga*. A. LASSEN, "Bølværkr – maleficus", in: A. LASSEN, SVANHILDUR ÓSKARSDÓTTIR & T. WILLS (eds.), *Orðlof veitt Þorbjörgu Helgadóttur sjötugri 18. Maí 2021*, Reykjavík 2021, pp. 16–19.

(34) *Pétrs saga postola* II, Unger, *op. cit.* 1874, p. 189.

(35) tok Simon til máls: Truir þu því konungr, at ek sia 'fjolkunnigr [V: galldramaðr SÁM 1], þar sem ek hefi risit af dauða? *Pétrs saga postola* II, Unger, *op. cit.* 1874, p. 190.

(36) *Pétrs saga postola* II, Unger, *op. cit.* 1874, p. 185.

inferiority is shown in the epilogue of the episode: while Simon is suspended in the air, Peter's prayer to the evil angels, who are supposed to support him, causes him to fall to the ground, dying shortly afterwards⁽³⁷⁾. In the version in *Codex Scardensis*, Simon Magus' artifices are made even more explicit by the specification that he rises into the air thanks to the expedient of two wings that he has sewn to his robes (*með tilsómdum vængjum*)⁽³⁸⁾. At Peter's prayer, the wings intertwine, causing him to fall to the ground.

The only saga that renders the appellation *magus* referring to Simon in a neutral way is *Páls saga* (AM 234 fol, c. 1340), where the events concerning him are only hinted at to motivate the beheading of the apostle Paul ordered by Nero. Here he is mentioned as Simon spekingr ('the wise') with the addition, however, of the explanation 'he whom we call enn fiolkunga Simon', thus of a negative valence, also in the light of the narrated events.

This and other episodes from the Sagas of the Apostles and hagiographical texts in translation in general show the dichotomy between magic and the miraculous, between magical expedients, dictated by a lust for power and linked to the sphere of evil and fraud, and miraculous events or the simple unmasking of deception by representatives of the Christian god.

From this short overview, some characteristics of magic and its origins in Old Norse translation literature can be summed up: it is related to the eastern countries, most often to Persia; it is associated with evil and the devil, and indeed all magicians meet a tragic end when their deception is revealed; there is a dichotomy between characters

(37) *Ibid.*, pp. 194-195.

(38) *Ibid.*, p. 102.

with special skills and tricks, i.e. magicians who pass themselves off as gods, and saints who act in the name of the Christian God and perform miracles. The origin of magic is connected to the rise of idolatry, since the magicians use their skills to pass themselves off as gods, so there is an euhemered vision of the deity, the same as we find in the prologue of *Snorra Edda*, where the Nordic and the Latin tradition melt.

Concerning the lexical aspect of the terms *ffolkynngi* and *ffolkunnigr*, the analysed texts show that they are transpositions of the Latin concepts of *magia*, *ars magica*, *magicus* and related expressions. The original etymology of *ffolkunnigr* refers to someone who knows a lot, ‘learned’ or *spekingr*, a nickname that was only given to Simon Magus in the aforementioned cases (and even then, it was accompanied by an explanation that highlighted his negative characteristics). Holtsmark equates the term with the Latin *multiscius*, but does not “dare to comment on it”⁽³⁹⁾, and there is no precise counterpart in the surviving material. While the term *ffolkunnigr* reflects its etymology, the surviving material shows that it has a negative connotation, as magic and magical arts are opposed to divinity in Latin texts and their Old Norse renditions. As Wellendorf observes, this contrast is also evident in the *Snorra Edda*⁽⁴⁰⁾:

The terms *ffolkunnigr* and *ffolkynngi* are used on a handful of occasions in the Prose Edda, but it is noteworthy that they are mainly applied to characters who are presented as adversaries of the gods or whose relation to the gods is

(39) A. HOLTSMARK, *Studier i Snorres mitologi*, Oslo 1964, p. 13.

(40) J. WELLENORF, *Gods and Humans in Medieval Scandinavia. Retying the Bonds*, Cambridge University Press 2018, p. 89.

indeterminate.

It may be possible to identify a gradation of magical knowledge, as well as the characters who possess *ars magica*. We have seen that Zaroos and Arphaxat, the two *fiolkunnigir menn*, are in the king's service, which elevates them above the crowd of soothsayers and magicians in King Xerxes' entourage. However, they are powerless compared to the apostles. Simon Magus, Zoroaster and Óðinn pretend to be gods, but Christian writers portray them as euhemerised figures. The portrayal of Óðinn as a medieval magician with powers of illusion and enchantment, rather than a god, is thus similar to the characterisation of Simon Magus as the most prominent magician of the Middle Ages⁽⁴¹⁾. However, it is primarily the magical arts and their practitioners, seen in relation to and in opposition to Christianity (or at least the deity), that go by the name *fiolkunngi*, *fiolkunnigr* or related words⁽⁴²⁾.

It could be argued that the *interpretatio norrœna*, which forms the basis for the transfer of the Roman pagan gods to the Norse gods, also includes a reflection on the mother tongue, which is bent to express foreign concepts, including the vocabulary of magic. This implies an adoption of the negative or at least derogatory meaning of magic, in contrast to the figures representing divine power in

(41) A. LASSEN, *op. cit.* 2021b.

(42) In ONP's material, there are a few examples where *fiolkunnigr* is used in a positive sense. One concerns the specific concept of magic in connection with the three wise men (the Three Kings), who are referred to as *enir fiolkyn-gu* in an encyclopaedic text in AM 194 8° (1387):

I Micla-gardi ero reifar þær, er Christus var vafidr i, ok gull þat er enir folkyn-gu ferðu, ok margskyns heilagr domr annar. Kr. KÁLUND, *op. cit.* 1908, p. 26.

Christianity. One can tentatively conclude that the perception of magic in Latin texts may have influenced the perception of indigenous magic at the time when the Icelandic sagas were written down and may have contributed to a shift in the semantic valence of the term *folkunnigr* and other semantically related words.

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LAZAMON'S ARGANTE AND MORGAN LE FAY: SOME LITERARY CORRESPONDENCES

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ABSTRACT: In the Arthurian section of his *Brut* (c. 1185-1205), the English poet Lazamon elaborates extensively on preternatural elements. A pivotal figure in this narrative is Argante, queen of elves, who appears as Arthur's saviour to guide him to Avalon for healing. While modern scholarship has often sidelined Argante as a marginal curiosity, this paper argues that she and Geoffrey of Monmouth's Morgen are two iterations of the same character, serving as the ancestral model for the figure that would eventually evolve into Morgan le Fay. Through a three-pronged analysis, this study first traces textual links between the *Brut* and the *Vita Merlini*, demonstrating how Lazamon adapts Geoffrey's material through his own cultural lens. Second, an etymological survey examines the transition from "Morgan" to "Argante", suggesting the name reflects a moment of linguistic transition. Finally, the paper situates the role of elves within the broader folkloric context of medieval England, exploring the semantic shift from "ælf" to "fairie".

1. A vindication for the rights of Argante

The Matter of Britain is first articulated into the English language through the endeavours of the priest-poet Lazamon. With his poem, *Brut* (or *Hystoria Brutonum*), he undertook the task of adapting Wace's *Roman de Brut*, a French verse translation of Geoffrey's *De Gestis Britonum*

(or *Historia regum Britanniae*), for an English-speaking audience⁽¹⁾. Composing at the close of the twelfth century, in accordance with prevailing conventions of the Medieval era, Lazamon did not merely translate Wace's poem⁽²⁾. Among the multitude of features that set Lazamon's *Brut* apart from Wace's and Geoffrey's works, he chose to infuse his poem with a substantial measure of preternatural elements. Primary among these are some peculiarly otherworldly creatures, which come and go in his rendition of the life and deed of King Arthur; mentioned as *aluen* in the text, they seem to be led by a beautifully mysterious figure.

(1) While Geoffrey of Monmouth composed his pseudo-historical endeavour probably at Oxford while he was acting there as a *magister*, between 1123 and 1139, and Wace, according to Lazamon's own statement, completed his translation in 1155, the *Hystoria Brytonum* was probably composed toward the end of the twelfth century. The text, comprising approximately sixteen thousand lines of semi-alliterative verse, is preserved in two manuscripts dating from the late thirteenth century, both currently held in the Cotton collection at the British Library: London, BL Cotton Caligula A1x and London, BL Cotton Otho Cxiii. As stated in the prologue of the poem, Lazamon was a country priest at Areley Kings, near the River Severn, within the diocese of Worcester; thus, located very close to the borders with medieval Wales. See F.H.M. LE SAUX, *Lazamon's Brut: The Poem and its Sources*, D.S. Brewer, Cambridge, 1989, p. 8; J. FRANKIS, *Lazamon or the Lawman? A question of names, a poet and an unacknowledged legislator*, «Leeds Studies in English» 34, 2003, pp. 109-132; S. MEECHAM-JONES, "Pe Tiden Of Pisse Londe" – *Finding and Losing Wales in Lazamon's Brut*, in *Reading Lazamon's Brut: Approaches and Explorations*, ed. by R. ALLEN, J. ROBERTS and S.C. WEINBERG, Rodopi, Amsterdam, 2013, pp. 69-106.

(2) Medieval literary production is largely characterized by its derivative nature, and Lazamon's work is deeply indebted to Wace's poem. In the context of medieval Europe, translation was not understood as a neutral or mechanical transfer of meaning, but as a practice that combined interpretation with invention. To translate a text was therefore to engage in an active process of transformation, involving the appropriation, continuation, and recreation of the source material. On this topic, see R. COPELAND's seminal work *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, pp. 179-220 and more recently J. BEER, *A Companion to Medieval Translation*, Arc Humanity Press, Leeds, 2019, pp. 1-4.

Indeed, Argante, their queen, appears at the end of Arthur's life as the king's saviour, who will lead him to Avalon to be cured after his final battle. Such a figure might evoke another renowned female presence in Arthurian lore with which Argante appears to share a function: the character more commonly known in English as Morgan le Fay.

Indeed, it has long been argued that the two figures are one and the same. Academic debate on this identification was particularly active at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, by its end, as scholarly attention to the character increased, Lazamon's version was generally treated as a marginal curiosity and was often omitted from discussion. Argante does not occupy the prominent position in Arthurian narrative that Morgan le Fay later assumes, and, from a superficial perspective, she appears markedly different from her later incarnations. It is therefore expected that such a figure could be easily overlooked.

Nonetheless, Lazamon's version can still offer new insight in the study of such a pervasive character. As briefly touched upon, the *Brut* provides the earliest English account of the Arthurian material, and, while generally indebted to Wace's *Roman de Brut*, Lazamon uses elements from both Geoffrey's major works and from other traditions; besides, unsurprisingly, adding something from his own cultural context, personal sensibilities and choices.

Aim of this paper is, thus, to offer a new examination on the relationship between Lazamon's queen of elves and the most famous Arthurian magical lady through a three-pronged analysis. First, it will trace textual links between Lazamon's Argante and Geoffrey of Monmouth's Morgen in his *Vita Merlini*, investigating any narrative parallels among the two depictions. Second, it would conduct an

etymological survey of early sources mentioning the character's name, exploring whether "Argante" and "Morgan" share linguistic roots. Finally, it will situate the role of elves and fairies in the *Brut* within the broader cultural and folkloric context of medieval England. By reassessing the textual, linguistic, and cultural dimensions of Argante, this study aims to shed new light on the evolution of supernatural female figures in early Arthurian legend and their enduring significance in medieval literary traditions.

2. A saviour for Arthur (or two)

When detailing the end of Arthur's reign and his demise, Geoffrey's *De Gestis Britonum* briefly mentions what appears to have been a tradition among the people of British ancestry: that the king was taken away to the island of Avalon, also known as the *Ynys Avallach*, the island of apples of Celtic folklore⁽³⁾. According to this tradition, then, the island will be the place where the king's wounds will be cared for (*DGB*, XI, 178):

Sed et inclitus ille rex Arturus letaliter uulneratus est; qui illinc ad sananda uulnera sua in insulam Auallonis euectus Constantino cognato suo et filio Cadoris ducis Cornubiae diadema Britanniae concessit anno ab incarnatione Domini.dxlii⁽⁴⁾.

(3) See J.M. HEBERT, *Morgan Le Fay, Shapeshifter*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 163: «Celtic folklore promoted the belief that the realm of the dead was not so much an underworld as it was an otherworld, an island in the West that some called *Ynys Avallach*, or the island of apples».

(4) Texts and translation from *De Gestis Britonum* [*DGB*] are taken from GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH, *The History of the Kings of Britain: An Edition and*

The illustrious king Arthur too was mortally wounded; he was taken away to the island of Avallon to have his wounds tended and, in the year of Our Lord 542, handed over Britain's crown to his relative Constantinus, son of Cador duke of Cornwall.

This cursory reference to the notion of the so-called "Breton Hope", which refers to Arthur's wounds as mortal («letaliter») and yet treatable, seems to dismiss it in the context of Geoffrey's historical account⁽⁵⁾. Nonetheless, the Oxford *magister* returns to the matter at stake in his other major work, the *Vita Merlini*, a poem composed around 1148-50, circa twelve years after the completion of his pseudo-historiographical oeuvre. This new poem details the main events in the legendary life of another important character of *De Gestis Britonum*, Merlin⁽⁶⁾.

Using the words of the sage Taliesin (Talgesinus in the text), the *Vita Merlini* expands on the matter of Arthur's legendary death and return. Arthur is here said to have been led to the presence of Morgen, healer and ruler of the

Translation of De gestis Britonum [Historia Regum Britanniae], ed. by M.D. REEVE, trans. by N. WRIGHT, The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2007.

(5) On Geoffrey's doubtful approach to the legends on Arthur's death see D. HELBERT, 'An *Arður sculde zete cum*: The Prophetic Hope in Twelfth-Century Britain', «Arthuriana», 26, 2016, 1, pp. 77-107, in particular 83-84.

(6) Geoffrey conceives his version of Merlin inspired by the figure of Ambrosius Aurelianus introduced in the *Historia Brittonum* by the pseudo-Nennius; but he connotes him with different features drawn from the two Myddrin of Welsh tradition. In the legends of ancient Cumbria, Myrddin is a nobleman who has been traumatised by the cruelty of battle. He refuses to participate in heroic deeds and instead chooses to live in symbiosis with wild nature. In the Welsh area, a wise character of the same name was represented as a prophet who foretold the future successes of the British people against the Anglo-Saxons. For the origins of Merlin as a Galfridian character see S. KNIGHT, *Merlin: Knowledge and Power through the ages*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 2009, pp. 1-42.

otherworldly and fertile *Insula Pomorum* – a place perfectly aligned with the *Insula Auallonis* mentioned in Geoffrey’s history of the Britons – where the king should rest, if he intends to survive (*VM*, ll. 934-38):

Inque suis talamis posuit super aurea regem
fulcra manuque sibi detexit vulnus honesta
inspexitque diu, tandemque redire salutem
posse sibi dixit, si secum tempore longo
esset et ipsius vellet medicamine fungi⁽⁷⁾.

She put the king in her chamber on a golden bed, uncovered his wound with her noble hand and looked long at it. At length she said he could be cured if only he stayed with her a long while and accepted her treatment.

In this context, the presumed return of Arthur is narrated as a fable⁽⁸⁾, there is no pretence to achieve any historical truth, thus the figure of Morgen is presented as in complete control, almost certain that Arthur could be cured. The confident and reliable lady of the island was earlier introduced in the poem as the first and most beautiful of nine sisters (*VM*, ll. 908-29):

Insula pomorum que Fortunata vocatur
ex re nomen habet quia per se singula profert.
Non opus est illi sulcantibus arva colonis,

(7) Text and translation from the *Vita Merlini* [*VM*] are taken from GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH, *Life of Merlin: Vita Merlini*, ed. by B. CLARKE, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1973.

(8) For a discussion on the differing intentions and receptions of *HRB* and *VM* see V. FLOOD, *Fantastic Histories: Medieval Fairy Narratives and the Limits of Wonder*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2024, pp. 17-26.

omnis abest cultus nisi quem natura ministrat.
Ultero fecundas segetes producit et uvas
nataque poma suis pretonso gramine silvis.
Omnia gignit humus vice graminis ultro redundans,
annis centenis aut ultra viviter illic.
Illic jura novem geniali lege sorores
dant his qui veniunt nostris ex partibus ad se,
quarum que prior est fit doctior arte medendi
exceditque suas forma prestante sorores.
Morgen ei nomen didicitque quid utilitatis
gramina cuncta ferant ut languida corpora curet.
Ars quoque nota sibi qua scit mutare figuram
et resecaere novis quasi Dedalus aera pennis.
Cum vult, est Bristi Camoti sive Papie,
cum vult, in vestris ex aere labitur horis.
Hancque mathematicam dicunt didicisse sorores
Moronoe, Mazoe, Gliten, Glitonea, Gliton,
Tyronoe, Thiten cithara notissima Thiten.

The Island of Apples gets its name “The Fortunate Island” from the fact that it produces all manner of plants spontaneously. It needs no farmers to plough the fields. There is no cultivation of the land at all beyond that which is Nature’s work. It produces crops in abundance and grapes without help; and apple trees spring up from the short grass in its woods. All plants, not merely grass alone, grows spontaneously; and men live a hundred years or more. That is the place where nine sisters exercise a kindly rule over those who come to them from our land. The one who is first among them has greater skill in healing, as her beauty surpasses that of her sisters. Her name is Morgen, and she has learned the uses of all plants in curing the

ills of the body. She knows, too, the art of changing her shape, of flying through the air, like Daedalus, on strange wings. At will, she is now at Brest, now at Chartres, now at Pavia; and at will she glides down from the sky on to your shores. They say she had taught astrology to her sisters – Moronoe, Mazoe, Gliten, Glitonea, Gliton, Tyronoe, and Thiten, – Thiten, famous for her lyre.

Geoffrey paints a simple but detailed picture, infused with elements from both the Classical and the Celtic traditions. The island's introduction seems to echo Isidore of Seville's descriptions of the fertility within the Fortunate Islands and Solinus's ideas on the longevity of the inhabitants of the Isle of Trapobane⁽⁹⁾. In particular, however, it appears to be modelled out of Pomponius Mela's description of Isle of Sein and its governing group of nine priestesses with their abilities of foresight, shape-shifting and curative knowledge⁽¹⁰⁾. Classical influences seem to resonate

(9) See ISIDORE OF SEVILLE, *Etymologiae*, XIV, VI, 8; SOLINUS, *Collectanea rerum memorabilium*, LIV, II.

(10) See *De Chorographia*, III, 16: «Sena in Britannico mari, Ossismicis adversa litoribus, Gallici numinis oraculo insignis est, cuius antistites, perpetua virginitate sanctae numero novem esse traduntur: Gallizenas vocant, putantque ingeniis singularibus praeditas maria ac ventos concitare carminibus, seque in quae velint animalia vertere, sanare quae apud alios insanabilia sunt, scire ventura et praedicare, sed non nisi deditas navigantibus, et in id tantum ut se consulenter profectis». [In the Britannic Sea, opposite the coast of the Ossismi, the isle of Sena (Sein) belongs to a Gallic divinity and is famous for its oracle, whose priestesses, sanctified by their perpetual virginity, are reportedly nine in number. They call the priestesses Gallizenae and think that because they have been endowed with unique powers, they stir up the seas and the winds by their magic charms, that they turn into whatever animals they want, that they cure what is incurable among other peoples, that they know and predict the future, but that it is not revealed except to sea-voyagers and then only to those traveling to consult them.] Text from POMPONIUS MELA, *De Chorographia Libri Tres*, ed. G. PARTHEY, Akademische Druck, Graz, 1969. Trans from

also in the names of the nine sisters which remind of the nine muses. In this classical infused mystical tale, many Celtic traits are also traceable: notwithstanding Taliesin himself, the boat is led by a legendary Welsh helmsman, Barinthus.

The character of Morgen herself reveals this syncretic nature: she has been associated with Circe and Medea⁽¹¹⁾. Chief among her sisters, she displays androgynous features, combining nurturing functions with ruling ones⁽¹²⁾. She is not merely a healer, but is presented as the principal governor of the island; she is schooled in medicine and astrology, to the extent that she can instruct her sisters; moreover, she is able to shape-shift and to fly from one place to another. Geoffrey mentions Brest, Chartres, and Pavia, notably important centres of learning⁽¹³⁾.

The account of Arthur's death proposed in Lazamon's *Brut* is noticeably similar. While Wace's *Roman de Brut* offers, in this instance as in many others, a statement of disbelief⁽¹⁴⁾, aligned with the tone set by *De Gestis*

R.E. ROMER, *Pomponius Mela's Description of the World*, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1998. p. 127.

(11) See C. LARRINGTON, *King Arthur's Enchantresses: Morgan and her Sisters in Arthurian Tradition*, I.B. Tauris, London, New York, 2006, p. 8 and FLOOD, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

(12) On this, see, first among others, M. FRIES, *From The Lady to The Tramp: The Decline of Morgan le Fay in Medieval Romance*, «Arthuriana», 4, 1994, 1, pp. 1-18, in particular p. 2, where she argues for Morgen's role as a female counter-hero.

(13) See F. TOLHURST, *Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Feminist Origins of the Arthurian Legend*, New Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 127-129.

(14) See *Roman de Brut*, ll. 13275-93 : «Arthur, si la geste ne ment, / fud el cors nafrez mortelment; / En Avalon se fist porter / Pur ses plaies mediciner. / Encore i est, Bretun l'atendent, / Si cum il dient e entendent; / De la vendra, encor puet vivre. / Maistre Wace, ki fist cest livre, / Ne volt plus dire de sa fin / Q'en dist li prophetes Merlin; / Merlin dist d'Arthur, si ot dreit, / Que sa mort dutuse serreit. / Li prophetes dist verité / Tut tens en ad l'um puis duté,

Britonum, the English poet seems to prefer the *Vita Merlini*.

As *Lazamon* bestows on Arthur a messianic role⁽¹⁵⁾, it should not be surprising his persisting on prophecies and references to Arthur's present, past and future greatness. The story on the presumed death of the king is, indeed, firstly revealed in advance by Merlin's words (*Brut*, ll. 11512-15):

þat he uaren wolde into Aualune,
 into þan æitlonde, to Argante þere hende,
 for heo sculde mid haleweie helen his wunden,
 and þenne he weore al hal he wolde sone come heom⁽¹⁶⁾

that he would journey to Avalon, to the island, to the fair Argante, for she should heal his wounds with healing balm, and when he was fully recovered he would soon come back to them.

/ E datera ço crei, tut dis, / Se il est morz u il est vis. / Porter se fist en Avalun,
 / Pur veir, puis l'Incarnatiun / Cinc cenz e quantare dous anz.» 'Arthur, if the chronicle is true, received a mortal wound to his body. He had himself carried to Avalon, for the treatment of his wounds. He is still there, awaited by the Britons, as they say and believe, and will return and may live again. Master Wace, who made this book, will say no more of his end than the prophet Merlin did. Merlin said of Arthur, rightly, that his death would be doubtful. The prophet spoke truly: ever since, people have always doubted it and always will, I think, doubt whether he is dead or alive. It is true that he had himself borne away to Avalon, five hundred and forty-two years after the Incarnation.' Text and trans. from WACE'S *Roman de Brut: A History of the British*, ed. J. WEISS, University of Exeter Press, Exeter, 2002.

(15) It is generally understood that *Lazamon* exhibits a providential vision of history in his poem; on the messianic features of Arthur and the role of prophecy in *Lazamon's* work see HELBERT, *art. cit.*; see also J. CHURCH, "The Play of Elves": *Supernatural Peripheries and Disrupted Kingship in Layamon's Brut*, «*Philament: A Journal of Literature, Arts, and Culture*», 24, 2018, 1, pp. 15-32.

(16) Text and translation from *Lazamon's Brut* are taken from LAZAMON, *Brut or Hystoria Brutonum*, ed. and trans. by W.R.J. BARRON and S.C. WEINBERG, Longman, 1995.

This first mention reveals immediately the main features of the character: she resides in Avalon, she is beautiful and she will cure the king to enable him to get back to his subjects («he wolde sone come heom»).

The second mention comes directly from Arthur's own voice. After his deadly fight against his traitorous nephew, Mordred, the king announces his next steps (ll. 14278-81):

“And ich wulle uaren to Aualun, to uairest alre maiden
to Argante þere queen, aluen swiðe sceone;
and heo scal mine wunden makien alle isunde,
al hal me makien mid haleweiȝe drenchen.
And seoðe ich cumen wulle to mine kineriche
and wunien mid Brutten mid muchelere wunne.”

“And I will go to Avalon, to the loveliest of all women, to the queen Argante, fairest of fairy women; and she shall make well all my wounds, make me all whole with healing draughts. And afterwards I will return to my kingdom and dwell with the Britons in great contentment.”

In typical Lazamonian fashion, the defining traits of Arthur's saviour are reiterated through the king's own speech. Argante is again described as exceptionally beautiful, with a variation of superlatives – she is ‘the fairest of all maiden’ («uairest alre maiden») and ‘the most shining elf’ («aluen swiðe sceone») –, and she is once more situated in «Aualun», a place definitely connected to Geoffrey's *Insula Auallonis*.

Although Avalon is never explicitly described as an island or depicted in detail, it is presented as an otherworldly realm, presumably familiar to the audience as the dwelling place of the *aluis* people. Indeed, Lazamon first introduces

it in connection with Arthur's armour, identifying it as the place where an elvish smith forged it (ll. 10539-48).

Argante's defining quality, however, lies in her ability to offer Arthur healing. This curative power is underscored by the reuse of the previously employed by Merlin, «haleweize», there attributive adjective for «helen» ('balm'), here for «drenchen» ('potion' or 'ointment'). In both cases, highlighting its curative function⁽¹⁷⁾.

The text then corroborates the veracity of Arthur's statements and the positivity of his belief, as his discourse is swiftly succeeded by the arrival of the two ladies on a vessel that leads him away (ll. 14283-92:

Æfne þan worden þer com of se wenden
 þat wes an sceort bat liðen, sceouen mid vðen
 and twa wimmen þerinne wunderliche idihte;
 and heo nomen Arður anan and aneouste hine uereden
 and softe hine adun leiden and forð gunnen liðen.
 Þa wes hit iwurðen þat Merlin seide whilen
 þat weore unimete care of Arðures forðfare.
 Bruttes ileued 3ete þat he bon on liue,
 and wunnien in Aualun mid fairest alre aluen;
 and lokieð eure Bruttes 3ete whan Arður cumen liðe.

(17) In later attestations, *haleweie* occurs primarily as a substantive and is defined by the *Middle English Dictionary [MED]* as a «sweet healing liquid used either as a potion or a lotion». The term seems to derive from an Old English form *halewege*, which occurs only once in a metrical charm (Charm 7) against a disease caused by, curiously, water-elves. Its precise meaning remains uncertain. According to the *Dictionary of Old English [DOE]*, *wēge* may indicate either a “cup” or “water,” while *hāl* can be understood as “holy” or as a form of *hælu* (“health”). As a result, the compound has been interpreted in various ways, including “holy cup,” “a cup containing health-giving water,” or, more literally, “health-water.” Despite these uncertainties, the association of the term with healing properties appears to be consistent. See *MED* s.v. *hāle-weie* and *DOE*, s.v. *hāle-wēge*.

With these words there came moving in from the sea a small boat, driven onward by the waves, and therein two women wondrously arrayed; and they at once took Arthur, and quickly bore him up and laid him gently down, and sailed away.

Then was come to pass what Merlin prophesied of yore: that there would be grief beyond measure for Arthur's passing. The Britons yet believe that he is alive, and dwells in Avalon with the fairest of all fairy women; and the Britons still await the time when Arthur will come again.

The *Brut* version of Arthur's voyage to Avalon reads as analogous to the one proposed by Geoffrey in *Vita Merlini*. In particular, in relation to the figure who helps the king, both texts portray a character that is a beautiful and knowledgeable ruler of an otherworldly place, that knows how to heal deadly wounds and is accompanied by other feminine figures. However, a close analysis also reveals some discrepancies. Besides the names, which will be discussed in more detail later, Geoffrey emphasises Morgen's role as a ruler, her preeminent position among her sisters, her knowledge and the classical affiliations of her island. By contrast, Lazamon narrows the focus to Argante as a singular healing figure, reducing descriptive elaboration in favour of some sort of eschatological expectation to lend credence to Arthur's messianic promise. The English poet gives her also a specific identity, declaring her to be part of the *aluis* kind.

Some of the differences between Lazamon's and Geoffrey's accounts have been explained by older Welsh influences; others recognise in them the impact of a contemporary continental fashion fascinated with fairy-motifs. In this respect, it is still intriguing – even after more

than one-hundred and twenty years – to immerse oneself in Lucy Allen Paton’s research on Arthurian legends. Writing in 1903, she proposed that Lazamon’s account is somewhat “closer” to the folkloric motif of the wounded king carried on a magical island to be cured, suggesting that, Lazamon’s immediate sources for this account rather than the *Vita Merlini* were oral traditions circulating around the Welsh marches⁽¹⁸⁾.

(18) See L.A. PATON, *Studies in Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance* (Radcliffe College Monograph, 13), Ginn & Co., Boston, 1903, pp. 25-28. The academic history concerning Lazamon and his sources of Celtic, or more specifically, Welsh origin is long and complex due to prejudices, oversimplifications, and power dynamics with the hegemonic English-speaking culture. Le Saux has brilliantly resumed more than a century of scholarly debate (see LE SAUX, *op. cit.*, pp. 118-154); yet her explanation that Lazamon might have used «a learned Welshman to guide him through those Welsh manuscripts that were available [...] and explain certain features of Welsh tradition to him» (ivi, p. 146) cannot be said to be conclusive. Her hypothesis leaves much to be desired for one end of the spectrum – Leslie Johnson, for example, saw her approach as being not cautious enough (see L. JOHNSON, *Tracking Lazamon’s Brut*, «Leeds Studies in English», 22, 1991, pp. 139-65) – and for the other – according to Jennifer Miller, the idea that a person living on the border with Wales needs an interpreter is far too speculative (See J. MILLER, *Lazamon’s Welsh*, in *Reading Lazamon’s Brut: Approaches and Explorations*, ed. by R. ALLEN, J. ROBERTS and S.C. WEINBERG, Rodopi, Amsterdam, 2013, pp. 589-622). Miller’s own proposition – that Lazamon may have been, indeed, a Welshman himself – appears to work in the realm of speculation, too. However, in recent scholarship, growing attention has been paid to the implication of Lazamon’s closeness to the Welsh Marches and thus to the distinctive cultural and literary milieu that shaped his text. This has resulted in varying interpretations on Lazamon’s affiliations without fully addressing the question of the sources (see M. WARREN, *History on the Edge: Excalibur and the Borders of Britain, 1100-1300*, University of Minnesota Press, London, Minneapolis, 2000, pp. xi-xii; M. FALETRA, *Once and Future Britons: The Welsh of Lawman’s Brut*, «Medievalia et Humanistica», 2001, pp. 1-24; MEECHAM-JONES, *art. cit.*). Tangentially discussing the matter at end, in his study addressing the issue of the prophetic tradition in the *Brut*, Helbert finds some consistency to the Welsh sources theory. He argues that Lazamon unites in Arthur the “threat” of the “Breton Hope”, derived from the Anglo-Norman historiography, and the Mab Darogan of the Welsh tradition. Conceding that it is impossible

An alternative explanation, however, lies in the emergence in France – and subsequently in Germany and England – of a literary fashion centred on the figure of the fairy-mistress during the transition from the twelfth to the thirteenth centuries. During this same period, Walter Map was engaged in the composition of *De nugis curialium* (ca. 1187-91), a work that features narratives of fairy mothers from both English and Welsh history, and Heinrich von Morungen was writing his elf-songs (ca. 1200). It is thus possible to posit, with Cyril Edwards, that the *Brut*, with its «elfin interpolations», demonstrates Lazamon's «grafting» of such motifs onto the historiographical material inherited from Wace⁽¹⁹⁾. It might also be likely, as Victoria Flood has suggested, that the association of fairy motifs with Wales did not originate in Welsh traditions itself, but developed later⁽²⁰⁾.

Certainly, when the differences between the two texts are examined more closely, the influence of contemporary continental literary fashions emerges with particular clarity; an aspect that will be explored in detail in the following sections.

3. Morgan by another name

The most notable discrepancy between the two narratives and characters is, undoubtedly, the variation in their names.

to point to specific allusions to Welsh prophecies, he nevertheless finds in the prophecies of the *Brut* «broad literary motifs and a distinct narrative tone that are unique to the Welsh language» (HELBERT, *art. cit.*, p. 94).

(19) C. EDWARDS, *Lazamon's Elves*, in *Lazamon: Context, Language, and Interpretation*, ed. by R. Allen, L. Perry and J. Roberts, (King's College London Medieval Studies, 19), King's College London, Centre for Late Antique and Medieval Studies, Exeter, 2002, pp. 79-85, esp. p. 94.

(20) FLOOD, *op. cit.*, pp. 22-23.

The origin of the name chosen by Geoffrey in itself has been at length discussed in many regards: ranging from any possible association with Irish Goddesses like *Morrigan* or the *Modron* of Welsh literature, derivation from a root **mor* linked with the sea or with the masculine Welsh name “Morgan”⁽²¹⁾.

The choice of “Morgen” in *Vita Merlini* appears to be slightly incoherent with the other names used in the text being non-Latinate in form. One conceivable possibility is that the name was “invented” or “borrowed” by Geoffrey due to a deliberate effort to achieve assonance with sounds reminiscent of the Welsh or Breton languages⁽²²⁾; this would not be the first time that the Oxford *magister* would employ names derived from Welsh texts,

(21) The connection with the sea is explored in PATON, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-12; and the possible connection with the *Morrigan* is delved in the notes in pp. 152-153. Roger Sherman Loomis proposes the association with the Welsh *Modron* (see R.S. LOOMIS, *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1926, p. 192 and *Morgain La Fee and the Celtic Goddesses*, «Speculum», 20, 1945, p. 188). The masculine “Morgan” is a name that appears also in the *De Gestis Britonum* for the grandson of Leir, and was perceived as being exclusively masculine way long before the seventeenth century. For a relatively more recent survey, see K. PÉREZ, *The Myth of Morgan la Fey*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2014, pp. 2-4. See also Hebert, who, after having discussed the various associations of the name Morgen, concludes: «As variations in the name developed across languages and countries, arguably confluences occurred, so that over time Morgan came to have both ‘nightmarish’ qualities and features associated with water and sea goddesses and fairies added to her role of queen. Geoffrey of Monmouth’s use of the form *Morgen* in his *Vita Merlini*, then, suggests that he is aware of the Welsh association of *mor* with ‘sea’ and thought it an appropriate name for the ruler of an island. French authors took Geoffrey’s *Morgen* and rendered it *Morgain*, later adding the ‘e’ to correlate with a more standardized feminine name style. Likewise, Italian authors constructed her name as *Morgana* (as in the ancient Roman deity, the *Fata Morgana*)» (HEBERT, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-26).

(22) This was argued firstly by E. FARAL, *L’Ile d’Avallon et la Fee Morgane*, in *Mélanges de linguistique et de littérature offerts à M. Alfred Jeanroy*, Droz, Paris, 1928, pp. 250-253.

without using any particular regard to meaning or grammatical gender⁽²³⁾. However, in the majority of sources detailing Arthur's final journey, the character leading him to Avalon or watching over him on his deathbed is, indeed, named Morgaine, Morgan or variants, as in Arthur's kinswoman mentioned by Gerald of Wales⁽²⁴⁾.

Lazamon's "Argante" is a variant of greater magnitude than any other⁽²⁵⁾. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Paton

(23) As it might have been the case for the name Guendoloena – adopted by Geoffrey for the daughter of Corineus, repudiated wife of king Locrin and third ruler in *DGB* and for the wife of Merlin in *VM*. Explained by some as a misreading of a Welsh masculine name *Guendoleu*. See A.E. HUTSON, *British Personal Names in the Historia Regum Britanniae*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1940. For an in-depth analysis on Geoffrey's complete masterful use and "manipulation" of his source material, see B. GUY, *Geoffrey of Monmouth's Welsh Sources*, in *A Companion to Geoffrey of Monmouth*, ed. J.B. SMITH and G. HENLEY, Leiden, Boston, Brill, 2020, pp. 31–66.

(24) In *Speculum Ecclesiae* (ca. 1216), Gerald relates the "Breton Hope" legend as told orally: «Propter hoc enim fabulosi Britones et eorum cantores fingere solebant, quod dea quaedam phantastica, scilicet et Morganis dicta, corpus Arthuri in insulam detulit Avalloniam ad ejus vulnera sanandum.» [On account of this, the legendary Britons and their singers were accustomed to imagine that some fantastic goddess, namely that one called Morgan, carried forth the body of Arthur to the island of Avalon for the healing of his wounds.] (Text from GERALD OF WALES, *Speculum Ecclesiae*, in *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, ed. J.S. BREWER, *et al.*, vol. 4, Roll Series, Longman, London, 1873. Trans. from HEBERT, *op. cit.*, p. 34). In *De Instructione Principis* (ca. 1223), instead, the tale is completely rationalized: «Unde et Morganis, nobilis matrona et partium illarum dominatrix atque patrona, necnon et Arthuro regi sanguine propinqua, post bellum de Kemelen Arthurum ad sanandum ejusdem vulnera in insulam quae nunc Glastonia dicitur deportavit.» [And Morgan, noble mother, ruler and patron of those parts, and also a relative by blood to King Arthur, carried Arthur after the war from Camlaan to the island which is now called Glastonbury for the healing of his wounds.] (Text from GERALD OF WALES, *De Instructione Principis*, in *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, ed. G.F. WARNER, vol. 8, Rolls Series, Longman, London, 1891, pp. 1160–64. Trans. from HEBERT, *op. cit.*, p. 35). In both cases, the figure associated with Arthur's death is named Morganis.

(25) It is widely accepted that the reading *Argante* is the most accurate. Indeed, even though MS BL Cotton Otho Cxiii reads *Argane* in the first

offers a first interpretation of the name employed by Lazamon as the feminine form of “Argant”, used in Welsh compounds names and meaning “brilliant”. She contends that “Argant” was a «Celtic proper name, well known in Lazamon’s time»⁽²⁶⁾; Thus, the substitution may have been intended to avoid confusion with “Morgan”, the already mentioned Welsh masculine name used elsewhere in the text for King Leir’s grandson. Rudolf Imellman held a similar view, supposing a derivation from a common Celtic root **arganto*⁽²⁷⁾.

The first to propose that the form “Argante” might have been, instead, a corruption of the Old French form “Morgan(t)” or “Margan(t)” was Arthur Brown⁽²⁸⁾; over time, J.D. Bruce, Gerald Visser and Roger Loomis provided extensive proof in favour of this hypothesis⁽²⁹⁾. The main arguments detailing this derivation could be, indeed, summarized, by addressing one by one the three factors of distinctions between the two names.

The first aspect of difference would be the loss of the initial *M*, which is, however, a common occurrence in relation to this character’s name. For instance, Benoit de Saint Maure’s *Roman de Troie* mentions an offended fay-lover for Hector of Troy who had given him his steed (l. 8024)⁽³⁰⁾.

passage and *Argant* in the second, MS BL Cotton Caligula Aix spells the name as *Argante* both times.

(26) PATON, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

(27) See R. IMELMANN, *Lazamon. Versuch über seine Quellen*, Weidmann, Berlin, 1906, p. 26.

(28) See A.C.L. BROWN, *Welsh Traditions in Lazamon’s “Brut”*, «Modern Philology», 1, 1903, 1, pp. 95-103.

(29) See J.D. BRUCE, *Some Proper Names in Layamon’s Brut Not Represented in Wace or Geoffrey of Monmouth*, «Modern Language Notes» 26, 1911, 3, pp. 65-69; G.J. VISSER, *Lazamon: An Attempt at Vindication*, Van Gorcum & Comp., Assen, 1935; R.S. LOOMIS, *Morgain La Fee* cit.

(30) See *Roman de Troie*, ll. 8023-28 : «Hector monta sor Galatee, / Que li tramist Orva la fee, / Que mout l’ama e mout l’ot chier / Mais ne la voust

The figure has been read as associated with Morgan le Fay, yet while some manuscripts spell her name with the initial *M*⁽³¹⁾, others name her variously as *Orua*, *Oua*, *Orains*, *Orainz*, *Ornainz*, *Orueins* and *Oruain*⁽³²⁾. The *M* is dropped also in the single copy of Jacob Van Maerlants's Middle Dutch translation of Boron's *Merlin* (ca. 1260-66); the Dutch poem mentions that «Morgant-li-feie» was originally named «Orgaine»⁽³³⁾. Other analogous instances of

o sei couchier: Empor la honte qu'ele e not, / L'en hai tant come el plus pot». [Hector mounted Galatea, a horse that Orvain the Fay11 had sent him. She loved him very much and held him very dear, but he refused to lie with her. Because of the shame his rejection caused her, she began to hate him with all her heart]. Text from BENOÎT DE SAINTE-MAURE, *Le Roman de Troie: publié d'après tous les manuscrits connus*, ed. by L. CONSTANS, Vol. I, Société des Anciens Textes Français, Firmin Didot, Paris, 1904, p. 434. Trans. from BENOÎT DE SAINTE-MAURE, *The Roman de Troie*, trans. by G.S. BURGESS and D. KELLY, D.S. Brewer, Cambridge, 2017, p. 141.

(31) *Morgain* in Paris, BNF, fond fr., 783 and Montpellier, Bibliothèque Interuniversitaire, Section de Médecine, 251; *Morgan* in Vatican City, Bibl. Apostolica Vaticana, Reg. Lat. 1505 and Paris, BNF, fond fr. 2181; *Morguein* in Paris, BNF, nouv. acq. fond. fr. 6534 and *Morganz* in Paris, BNF, fond fr. 794.

(32) Respectively: Paris, BNF, fond fr. 12600 and London, BL, Harley 4482; Paris, BNF, fond fr. 783; Milano, Bibl. Ambrosiana, D 55; Paris, BNF, fond fr. 782 and Paris, BNF, fond fr. 1553; Paris, BNF, fond fr. 19159; Venezia, Bibl. Marciana Z 18, folio 39r; Paris, BNF, nouv. acq. fond. fr., 6774; Paris, Bibl. de l'Arsenal, 3342. See also CONSTANS, *op. cit.*, p. 434 and BRUCE, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

(33) See *Merlijn*, ll. 8992-94: «Oeck wan hi een dochter bastaerde / Organie, die hilt bi waerde / By synen rade enter mage mede; / Ende wy lesen dat hi se dede / In een hues van religioene, / Die wonder dade van menigen doene: / Astronomie hiet men die art, / Daer si ombe geheten wart / Morgant-li-feie in elke stede, / Want zi wonder dade daer mede». [He also had a bastard daughter, Orgaine, whom he held in esteem, by his opinion and the help of his kin; and we read that he placed her in a house of religion, she did marvels of many kinds: that art was called "astronomy", whereby she was called "Morgant le Fay" in every place, for she did wonders with it]. Text from J. van MAERLANT, *Merlijn, naer het eenig bekende Steinforter handschrift*, ed. by J. van VLOTEN, Brill, 1880. Translation is mine.

‘dropping the *M*’ are pointed by Loomis⁽³⁴⁾. In the *Historia Meriadoci*, the twin sister of the eponymous hero, named in the text *Orwen*, is married off to a king Urien, husband of Morgan le Fay in the most famous Medieval iterations of the character, the *Huth Merlin* and Malory’s *Morthé D’Arthure*. Similarly, another example can be found in Spanish chivalric literature in the form of *Urganda la Desconocida*⁽³⁵⁾.

Another key point of distinction is the presence of *a* instead of *o* in the first syllable. The alternation between *a* and *o* is, once again, a fairly common instance both in French and in English written sources: the manuscripts of Chretien’s *Yvain* show, indeed, for the same character the alternation between «Morgue» and «Margue» (ll. 2949)⁽³⁶⁾; and, similarly, both manuscripts of *Lazamon’s Brut* reads for Cordelia’s nephew the variants: «Morgan», «Margan» and «Margane» (ll. 1920-21; 1930).

The third problem would be the presence in “Argante” of a final *-e*: this might simply be a French feminine ending, which, at the time might have been added as a way to normalise the spelling of the name⁽³⁷⁾.

(34) LOOMIS, *Morgain la Fee* cit., p. 185.

(35) While there can be no actual certainty about the connection between the British and Spanish names, the similarities between the characters have been analysed at length. See A. CAMPOS GARCÍA ROJAS, “*Urganda, la otra gran sabidora*”: *Evolución y refuncionalización*, in *Palmerín y sus libros: 500 años*, ed. A. GONZÁLES, A. CAMPOS GARCÍA ROJAS, K.X. LUNA MARISCAL y C. RUBIO PACHO, El Colegio de Mexico, Ciudad de México, 2013, pp. 343-366.

(36) Paris, BNF fond fr. 1433, folio 86v has «margue la sage», while Paris BNF fond fr. 794 (the Guiot manuscript), folio 90v has «morgue la sage». See CHRÉTIEN DE TROYES, *Le Chevalier au Lion (Yvain)*, ed. M. ROQUES, (Les Romans de Chrétien de Troyes, Vol. IV), Honoré Champion, Paris, 1999, p. 90.

(37) In Visser’s words, this addition might have helped to present a «more normal-looking form». VISSER, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

In Bruce's view, all these corruptions were due to an unspecified French source, but this is not necessarily the case. These changes could have easily happened in the transmission of the English texts, or even in any other moment of the tradition through any Latin or Welsh source⁽³⁸⁾.

4. Between elves and fairies

Geoffrey's Morgen is never described as anything other than human, a particularly skilled human in certain sphere that make her quasi-divine, but nonetheless human. As already noted, she appears to be a figure characterised by her skills: the *magister* from Oxford focuses his depiction on the woman's arts and crafts – she is a teacher, a healer, a ruler.

Lazamon's attention, instead, seems to be concentrated mostly on her physical appearance. She is the courteous Argante («Argante pere hende», l. 11513)⁽³⁹⁾, the fairest among human and non-human maidens («uairrest alre

(38) Bruce believed the two codices transmitting the text were much closer to Lazamon's time, now it has been however demonstrated that they derive from a common ancestors separated from the original by at least another copy (see E.J. BRYAN, *The Two Manuscripts of Lazamon's Brut: Some Readers in the Margins*, in *Lazamon's Brut: The Text and Tradition*, ed. by F.H.M. LE SAUX, D.S. Brewer, Cambridge, 1994, p. 89). It is not at all necessary to postulate the existence of an added French source.

(39) Another famously "hende" character within the *Brut* is Arthur's mother Igraine. The *MED* defines the adjective as denoting someone «having the approved courtly or knightly qualities, noble, courtly, well-bred, refined, sportsmanlike» (see *MED*, s.v. *hende*). Weinberg argues that it is an English equivalent for Wace's "cortéis". See S.C. WEINBERG, 'Hende' Words in *Lazamon's Brut*, in *Early Medieval English Texts and Interpretations*, ed. by E. TREHARNE and S. ROSSER, Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, Tempe, 2002, pp. 119-31.

maiden», l. 14277; «faireste alre aluen», l. 14291) and the most beautiful elf («aluen swiðe sceone», l. 14278).

This last half-verse is particularly interesting because it reflects an older association of terms. In reference to people, the Middle English adjective *shene* denotes beauty, sometimes of a supernatural character⁽⁴⁰⁾. Old English knew the compound adjective *ælf-scȳne*, attested in *Genesis A* and in *Judith*, referring to Sarah and Judith, to denote, as suggested by Alaric Hall, «a quality of feminine or angelic beauty modified by *ælf*⁽⁴¹⁾, some sort of beauty so captivating that it becomes a threat⁽⁴²⁾. Thus, this feature, which is a must in any positive female character in *Lazamon*, might have been associated to her because of her otherworldly nature, as *Lazamon*'s Argante is primarily the queen of *aluen*.

These otherwise undefined creatures appear in *Lazamon*'s *Brut* connected to at least four crucial moments of Arthur's life: they grant him gifts of strength and courtesy at his birth (ll. 9608-11), manufacture his armour and sword (ll. 10543-48), populate the marvellous lakes that are the designed location for his crushing victory against the Scots (ll. 10849-53) and, finally, with Argante, lead him to the place that will grant him saving in Avalon⁽⁴³⁾. Their precise nature remains to

(40) See *MED* s.v. *shēne*.

(41) A. HALL, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England: Matters of Belief, Health, Gender and Identity*, (Anglo-Saxon Studies, 8), The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2007, p. 92.

(42) *DOE* gives the meaning «beautiful, shining like an elf» (see *DOE*, s.v. *ælf-scȳne*). Discussing the use of the adjective within the context of the *Judith* poem, Hall notes: «However, the idea that *ælfscȳne* might connote entrancing beauty, perhaps also implying supernatural assistance, would fit the context admirably». HALL, *op. cit.*, p. 94. These nuances of meaning would, in fact, appear to be applicable to Argante as well.

(43) The creatures do not appear in other sections of the poem, except in the episode when Loclin reject his wife (l. 1151) within the Otho manuscript which changes the Caligula reading «for alpeodisc medien» with «one aluis maide».

be completely elucidated. They could easily be compared with both fairy creatures and the elves of Germanic tradition⁽⁴⁴⁾. Referring to their first appearance in the *Brut*, Edwards points out the «richesse of analogues»⁽⁴⁵⁾ among Ancient Egyptian, Celtic, Germanic and Romance traditions for the presence of supernatural women – “Fairy Godmothers” – at the birth of the hero. However, the creatures depicted as “playing” within the lakes on the Scottish marches seem to have a more suspicious nature (ll. 10849-53):

Pat is a seolcuð mere iset a middel-ærde
mid fenne and mid ræode, mid watere swiðe bræde,
mid fiscen and mid feozelen, mid uniuele þingen.
þat water is unimete brade – nikeres þes baðieð inne;
þer is æluene ploze in atteliche pole.

That loch, set in this mortal world, with marsh and reeds, with very broad waters, with fish and birds, with many other creatures, is a wondrous one. That lake, the abode of water-monsters, is immensely broad; there is sport of elves in that fearsome pool.

Helpful in many instances, but also mischievous, the *aluen* in the *Brut*, therefore, exhibit features that can correlate

(44) See EDWARDS, *art. cit.*, p. 81. Discussions on Lazamon's *aluen* could be found also in J. FRANKIS, *Towards a Regional Context for Lawman's Brut*, in *Lazamon: Context, Language, and Interpretation*, ed. by R. ALLEN, L. PERRY and J. ROBERTS, (King's College London Medieval Studies, 19), King's College London, Centre for Late Antique and Medieval Studies, Exeter, 2002, pp. 53-78, esp. pp. 74-77; N. DALBEY, “*Aluen hine iuengen*”: *Fairies, Arthur, and Ideal Kingship in Lawman's Brut*, «*Scientia et Humanitas*», 6, 2016, pp. 1-18; CHURCH, *op. cit.*; J. BRIA, *Aluen and lechecraft: magic and the supernatural in Layamon's Arthuriad*, «*Medioevo Europeo*», 6, 2022, 2, pp. 5-20.

(45) See EDWARDS, *art. cit.*, p. 83.

them to different supernatural realms. Indeed, Argante's depiction seem to be associated with motives that will be better developed in later Arthurian texts: she and her companions are beautiful females, wondrously dressed. They appear to be close in features with the dancing angel beings described in the *South English Legendary* in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS. Laud Misc. 108 within the entry for Saint Micheal (ll. 251-257):

And ofte in fourne of wommanne: in many derne weye
 Grete compaygnie men i-seoth of heom; boþe hoppie
 and pleize,
 Þat Eluene beoth i-cleopede: and ofte heo comiez to
 toune,
 And bi daye mucche in wodes heo beoth: and bi nizte ope
 heiye dounes.
 That beoth þe wrechche gostes: that out of heuene weren
 i-nome⁽⁴⁶⁾

And often in the form of a woman, in many hidden ways, men see great companies of them; both dancing and playing, they are called elves, and often they come to town, and by day they stay much in woods, and by night on high hills. They are the wretched spirits that were taken out of heaven.

In this context, the term *eluen* is employed to denote a category of beings that, indefinite in nature, are explained as fallen angels. However, these entities are not exclusively

(46) Text from *The South English Legendary, or Lives of Saints: MS. Laud, 108, in the Bodleian Library*, ed. by C. HORSTMANN (Early English Text Society, o.s. 87), Trübner & Co., London, 1887. Translation is mine.

negative in their connotations. Ambiguity is intrinsic to their nature and their relationship with humans is a complex one. They are situated in a liminal space, neither fully human nor fully other: they dance and play; they come to town, but inhabit the woodlands; they are *not* women, but *appear* as women. It is conceivable that, akin to Layamon's *aluen*, they possess some form of "magical" ability, but present no other specificities that distinguishes them from humans⁽⁴⁷⁾.

Thus, Lazamon's *Argante* appears to be what fourteenth century Arthurian romance's writer, as indeed Barron and Weinberg translation suggest, would call the *queen of fairies*. In later evolution of the English language – as in Geoffrey Chaucer's works, for instance – "elves" and "fairies" could easily coexist⁽⁴⁸⁾, but the earliest attestation of the word "fairy" in English does not antedate the early fourteenth century; it occurs in *Sir Orfeo*⁽⁴⁹⁾.

(47) After a detailed reconstruction, Tom Shippey posits that, in general, within the framework of Germanic languages, the concept of 'elves' conveys a «general implication of strangeness which does not quite exclude humanity». T. SHIPPEY, *Alias Over Aboe: The Elves as a Category Problem*, in *The Shadow-Walker: Jacob Grimm's Mythology of the Monstrous*, ed. by T. Shippey, Brepols, Turnhout, 2005, pp. 157-188, esp. p. 158. Similarly, Jenni Bergman proposes their identification with the "Significant Other", a specific category of beings that are in direct relation with humans while also being situated beyond the boundaries of what is human, or, in a sense, a supernatural double that defines these boundaries. See J. BERGMAN, *The Significant Other: a Literary History of Elves*, Ph.D. thesis, Cardiff University, 2011.

(48) Bergman notes that, in Chaucer's era, the term "fairie" does not yet denote a person, but rather signifies a place name and the capacity to cast enchantments. Thus, discussing the use of both "elf" and "fairie" in *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, she notes that «The object of the knight's desire is called both 'elf-queen' and 'queen of Fayerye' [...] because fairy can mean both a power and a place in *The Canterbury Tales* there is no reason why Chaucer should not point out that its queen is also ethnically an elf». BERGMAN, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

(49) The oldest version of the lai is preserved in the Auchinleck Manuscript (Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, Advocates MS 19.2.1),

In Lazamon's early-thirteenth-century diction all these creatures are all called either "elves", sg. "elf" from Old English "ælf", or, more frequently, "aluen"/ "elven", sg. "elve" from an Old English "ælfen". This last form combined the root "ælf" with a feminising suffix *-en* (earlier *-inn* < **-injō*) and was already in use in Old English to gloss words for nymphs⁽⁵⁰⁾.

The elves (sg. "ælf", pl. "ylfe") of Anglo-Saxon tradition are usually interpreted as diminutive beings, little and mischievous creatures, seen as instigators for a wide range of illnesses⁽⁵¹⁾. Sometimes associated with demons. Entities which may be somewhat similar to the creatures inhabiting the marvellous lakes, but not much with Arthur's beautiful healer.

However, as argued profusely by Alaric Hall, similarly to the Scandinavian tradition, even in early Old English attestations, the word "ælf" share semantic networks with human-related terms, placing them closer to humans or gods rather than monsters and its presence in personal names shows positive and culturally embedded connotations. If originally the masculine "ælf" was meant to refer to males of the species, the emerging of the feminine form "ælfen" served firstly to describe classical female nature

dating to 1330s. See *The Auchinleck Manuscript*, ed. by D. BURNLEY and A. WIGGINS, National Library of Scotland, 2003, <http://auchinleck.nls.uk/> [30 January 2026].

(50) See HALL, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

(51) See R. NORTH, who proposes to translate the Old English *ælf* as "demon", in *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature* (Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 22), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 52. For a more recent examination see also L. GHERARDINI, *Elfica marginalia. La vitalità degli elfi oscuri al tempo dei giochi di ruolo*, in *Riscrittura e attualizzazione dei testi germanici medievali*, cur. M.G. CAMMAROTA e R. BASSI, Bergamo University Press, Bergamo, 2017, pp. 299-320.

spirits; however, by the eleventh century, even the masculine “ælf” could carry a specifically female denotation⁽⁵²⁾.

Thus, the paradigm of the beautiful feminine elf can already be traced within the shift in the gendering of the elves in Old English attestations with the creation of the feminine variant. Therefore, Argante's characteristics – magical skills, otherworldly nature, shining beauty – could have been easily encompassed in the eleventh century definition of “ælf” and subsequently in Lazamon's idea about them.

Thus, the English poet did not use the term “fairy” simply because it had not yet been imported. At the same time, Argante and her peers could have been seen as the «beginnings of the confluence of ‘elves’ and ‘fairies’ in the English imagination»⁽⁵³⁾ which will later led to the Middle English “elf” and “fairie” interchangeability.

In conclusion, it could be said that Lazamon's Argante and Geoffrey's Morgen are, in fact, two iterations of the same character, serving as the ancestral model for what would eventually evolve into the figure of Morgan le Fay. The similarities in function, setting, and attributes are simply too consistent to be dismissed. Lazamon knew the *Vita Merlini* and drew on it deliberately. But he was not merely repeating Geoffrey. Instead, he adapted the material through his own cultural lens, combining Geoffrey's account with echoes of different traditions: possibly older and connected to Wales, or probably more contemporary and tied to a new literary fashion. These traditions associated the image of this powerful otherworldly ruler with a specific category of beings, adjacent to humanity, which

(52) See HALL, *op. cit.*, pp. 54-74.

(53) See C.A. COLE, *'Fairy' in Middle English Romance*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Saint Andrew, 2014, p. 174.

in Lazamon's own tongue was still encompassed by the term "elf". Only later, under the influence of French romance, would terms like "fee" or "fairy" become dominant. Lazamon's choice, then, preserves a moment of transition between insular and continental traditions, between the elves of Old English imagination and the fairies of later medieval romance. Therefore, the figure of Argante shows us how Lazamon both participates in and reshapes the Arthurian legend.

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VERNACULAR AND LATIN IN MEDIEVAL GERMAN CHARMS THE SÉLESTAT CHARM

ELEONORA CIANCI

ABSTRACT: This article proposes a historically grounded interpretation of the so-called Sélestat charm (Bibliothèque Humaniste, Cod. 134), a short bilingual marginal text whose opening line has resisted explanation since its first edition by Steinmeyer. Rather than seeking external “analogues,” the study applies a three-level method tailored to early medieval German charms: close reading of the textual units, analysis of page layout and paratextual positioning, and reconstruction of the manuscript’s compilation logic. The decisive advance comes from codicological context: on the facing page, the same hand copied a previously unnoticed and partially erased witness of the Legend of the Twelve Fridays. Read as a micro-dossier, the two marginal entries clarify the procedural force of the crux *Sicuta sicunda* which presupposes a penitential observance before initiating the therapeutic action of touch and verbal performance. The Sélestat material thus demonstrates how early medieval charms derive meaning not only from formulaic counterparts, but from the local, manuscript-bound alignment of penitential instruction, liturgical authority, and vernacular efficacy.

KEYWORDS: Old High German charms; Sélestat Cod. 134; Twelve Fridays legend; manuscript marginalia and paratexts; bilingual ritual language (Latin–vernacular)

1. The mysterious case of the Sélestat charm

The Sélestat charm, first entered scholarly discussion through Elias Steinmeyer's publication in 1877 in the *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur*⁽¹⁾. Steinmeyer offered a tentative transcription, while explicitly acknowledging that the precise wording of the five lines could not be securely established and that, consequently, their meaning remained opaque. He closed his brief notice with a characteristically guarded conclusion: "*aber alles hilft nicht viel weiter und volles verständnis wird sich nur durch auffindung weiterer ähnlicher fassungen erreichen lassen.*" Nearly a century and a half later, no genuinely parallel witness has come to light, and the very notion of what would count as an "analogous" text deserves renewed scrutiny.

To date, no charm can be identified as a true counterpart, at best, isolated segments of the text invite limited comparison with contemporaneous materials. The principal difficulty lies in the opening line, for which no close formulaic parallels in either Latin or German have yet been identified. By contrast, the *formulaic* sequence (*Kardeya Karnentia*), however resistant to semantic interpretation, appears to participate in a pattern attested elsewhere in medieval charm traditions through near-identical formulations. This asymmetry suggests that further progress may depend less on searching for "Germanic" folkloric analogues than on situating the text within contemporary Latin textual cultures, especially liturgical and medical writings.

Recent scholarship on early medieval charms has increasingly shown that interpretive traction is more likely to

(1) E. VON STEINMEYER, «Segen II», in «Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur», 21 (1877): 210.

be gained from the densely Christianised milieus in which these texts were composed, copied, and put to use, especially within the Carolingian world, than from attempts to reconstruct pre-Christian “magic” or folklore⁽²⁾. In the earliest German charms (9th–12th c.), interaction with Latin may be described across three interrelated levels. First, at the level of the text, many Old High German charms are effectively bilingual, combining Latin and German elements within a single compositional frame. Second, at the level of the written page, such texts frequently occupy liminal positions alongside predominantly Latin material. Third, at the level of manuscript compilation, Old High German charms are often transmitted within Latin miscellanies and may constitute the only non-Latin items in an otherwise Latin codex.

This article adopts these three levels as a methodological framework for elucidating an enigmatic charm. Rather than awaiting the emergence of close cognate texts, I propose a segment-by-segment reading that proceeds in two directions at once: outward, by comparing each unit with

(2) I. GARIPZANOV, «Magical Caractères in the Carolingian World: A Ninth-Century Charm in MS Vat. Lat. 5359 and Its Broader Cultural Context», in «Speculum», 96 (2021): 287–308, E. HELLGARDT, «Althochdeutsche Texte in liturgischen und kanonistischen Handschriften (8.–12. Jh.)», in C. HERBERICHS *et al.* (Hg.), *Liturgie und Literatur*, Berlin/München/Boston, De Gruyter, 2015: 23–46, T. Terrahe, «Vom lateinischen Glossar zum althochdeutschen Zauberbuch? Der Trierer Codex Hs 40/1018 und seine Transformation im Gebrauchszusammenhang zwischen Religiosität, Medizin und Magie», in M. DAHM-KRUSE, J. von DITFURTH (Hg.), *Mittelalterliche Handschriften und ihre Biographien. Betrachtungen aus kunsthistorischer und germanistischer Perspektive*, Kiel, Ludwig, 2022: 116–144, E. CIANCI, *Multilingual Verbal Remedies: Compilation and Transmission of Old High German Charms*, in I. GARIPZANOV, C. BURRIDGE (a cura di), *Between Liturgy and Magic*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2026 (forthcoming).

other German and contemporary charms, and inward, by testing it against its immediate manuscript ecology: its surrounding text, its placement on the page, and its position within the compilation as a whole. On this basis, it becomes possible to move closer to a historically grounded interpretation. In the present case, that manuscript ecology is unusually concrete: the charm is paired with a second, previously unnoticed marginal entry on the facing page, copied upside down by the same hand and partly subjected to erasure. Establishing this pairing is essential, because it changes the status of the opening line from an isolated crux into a clause that presupposes a prior instruction.

There are, of course, numerous later references to the charm, including in online catalogues; yet none has clarified its sense, its wording, or even its basic profile. What, precisely, is this text? A healing charm—but for what condition? A blessing connected in some way to the manuscript's main text?

The discussion that follows therefore aims to impose a clearer structure. I begin with a transcription and a proposed interpretation of the text, addressing both its Latin and its German components. I then identify the formulae and motifs that link this charm to other known charms and related texts. Finally, I broaden the focus to consider the charm in relation to its immediate material environment: the manuscript as a whole and, more specifically, the texts that stand in closest proximity to it, on the same page and on the facing and adjacent folios. The exact wording transcription is in the comments. Spelling, punctuation, line division are given with corrections that make more sense. The original wording, the other possible readings in the comments below.

2. The text

1. Secuta Secunda infirmis cunas kat chemino. Tange.
2. Ig fant. Iz ferswant
Ig berein. Iz ferswein
3. Inceatus Pater, immensus eternus Pater.
4. C †in †odie in illo zostre.
5. Paternoster tribus vicibus.
6. Kardeya Karnentia
Nessia Simphonia
Karniketika Carnisonsetica.
7. Wazzer fluzit
Iordan heizit
da der heiligo Crist
inne gedofet ist.
8. Inceatus Pater, immensus eternus Pater.

3. The patatextual elements

Secuta Secunda infirmis cunas kat chemino. Tange

Before turning to the grammar of the line, one codicological fact must be stated in advance. On the facing page (f. 37v), the same hand copied, also upside down in the lower margin, a short Latin text belonging to the *Legend of the Twelve Fridays*⁽³⁾, beginning “Ego Clemens Romanus

(3) S. IVANOV, «The Legend of the Twelve Golden Fridays in the Western Manuscripts. Part I: Latin. Addenda et Corrigenda. Part II: Vernacular – II.1 French, II.2 Italian», in *Colloquia classica et indogermanica* 6, *Acta linguistica petropolitana*, 10(1), St. Petersburg, 2014: 347-367, S. IVANOV, «The Legend of the Twelve Golden Fridays in the Western Manuscripts. Part I: Latin», in *Colloquia classica et indogermanica* 5, *Acta linguistica Petropolitana*, 7, a cura di

pontifex...”. This adjacent entry is not recorded by the catalogue description of the codex; it emerges from direct examination of the manuscript and provides the decisive contextual key for the opening sequence *Secuta secunda*. The manuscript reads:

Sicuta⁽⁴⁾ Sicunda Minfirmis⁽⁵⁾ kunas kat kemino Tenge⁽⁶⁾.

The opening line of the text reads like a riddle. Its components are, in principle, recognisable as Latin forms, yet the sequence as a whole resists straightforward interpretation. Steinmeyer already observed that full understanding would likely depend on the discovery of analogous versions. I already tried to reclassify the line as German rather than Latin, or to connect it directly to the vernacular *ig fant* sequence that follows, but without producing a convincing solution⁽⁷⁾.

If we are dealing with a healing charm entered into the margin of a liturgical manuscript, the broader

N. Bondarko, N. Kazansky, St. Petersburg, 2011: 561-572.

(4) My emendation, it is with <i> in the manuscript. Other possible readings: *Sicucta*, *Sicuita*, *Sicutta*.

(5) After the <r>, above on the rim of the page, there is a sign, maybe a correction, not readable. Other possible readings: *Minfirmis*, *Minfirmas*, *Minfirnas*, *Minfirntis*. The initial <M> could be an abbreviation for “*minimum*”, but I could not find any better interpretation.

(6) The first letter could be capital <I, L, T> or something else (the ink is fading). Steinmeyer read <Tongo> without any explanation or meaning, but the second letter looks more like an <e>. After this it could be a <m> or <n>. The <g> is different from the other <g> in the text. Finally, the last letter could be an <o> but is not really closed on the top. Moreover, the following words are in German, so this one could as well be Latin or German (E. von Steinmeyer, «Segen II»: 210).

(7) See my first transcription in E. CIANCI, *Incantesimi e benedizioni nella letteratura tedesca medievale (IX–XIII secolo)*, Göppingen, Kümmerle Verlag, 2004: 135-138.

cultural setting is not exceptional: comparable texts from the German-speaking world often alternate Latin and the vernacular, and many charms follow a recognisable internal pattern, combining a rubric or disease designation with instructions for ritual action and oral performance. On those grounds, one would expect the first line to contain some medical indication and, crucially, directive forms that introduce what is to be done and how the subsequent German words are to be spoken. Instead, the wording seems to point beyond the visible text, as if it presupposed an external reference or a prior set of instructions now missing from the line itself⁽⁸⁾.

Secuta: perfect participle of *sequor* “to follow,” in the feminine singular nominative form. *Secunda*: feminine singular nominative of *secundus* “second,” used adjectivally with an implied noun (such as *pars*, *formula*, or *actio*); *Infirmis*: dative or ablative plural of *infirmus*, *-a*, *-um*; *cunas*: accusative plural of *cunae*, “cradles”; *Kat*: unclassical spelling that functions as a conjunction/relative particle (for *quod/quid/quatenus* in practice); *chemino*: “path/course”; *Tange*: imperative form of *tango*, *tētgi*, *tactum*, “to touch”.

Even if each individual word can be assigned a plausible lexical value, the overall sense remains elusive. The point is not that each word is intelligible, but that the sequence becomes interpretable only when read as a continuation of

(8) E. CIANCI, «Tipologie e funzioni del titolo negli incantesimi tedeschi medievali», in E. CIANCI (a cura di), *Rappresentazioni e linguaggi della magia*, Alessandria, Edizioni dell’Orso, 2024: 11-14.

the adjacent text, presented and discussed below. The following pages, in fact, introduce a striking contextual clue from the adjacent leaf: a short Latin text, likewise written in the margin and upside down, which precedes the charm and appears to stand in a close functional relationship to it. This text belongs to the so-called legend of the Twelve Fridays and sets out precise prescriptions concerning what should be done and when. Read against that backdrop, the first line of the charm can be approached as a compressed directive that presupposes the completion of the preceding observance: once the prescribed act has been carried out, one proceeds to the physical gesture signalled by *tange*, directing the touch to the locus of the ailment, *infirmis cunas*, and tracing it along its *chemino*, its “course” or “path.” This interpretation gains particular force if the charm is indeed aimed at a condition characterised by a linear progression on the skin, for which the metaphor of a “path” provides a natural descriptive framework.

4. The historiola

2. *Ig fant. Iz*⁽⁹⁾ *ferswant*
Ig berein. Iz ferswein⁽¹⁰⁾

Ig fant: “I found”;

Ig: pers. pron. 1sg. nom. “I”. Not very well documented form for OHG *ih*, *ik*. According to Graff [I:117] it is attested as *igh* as early as in the 11th century;

(9) The *iz* underneath seems to be corrected in *ig*. I propose to emend in *iz*, which makes more sense.

(10) Other possible readings: *fersuem*, *fersuern*.

fant: pret. 1sg. OHG *findan* stv3 “to find”.

Iz ferswant: “It vanished”;

ferswant: pret. 3sg. OHG *farswindan*, *firswintan*, *verswindan* stv3 “to vanish, disappear”

Ig berein: “I touched”;

berein: pret. 1sg. OHG *bibrinan* stv1 “to touch” [Graff IV, 1158], MHG *berîn*, pret. *berein*;

iz ferswein: “it disappeared”;

ferswein: pret. 3sg. OHG *firswinan* stv1 “weaken”, MHG *verswînen* “disappear”.

This couplet is entirely in German and is built around a sequence of preterites, a register that corresponds closely to what charm scholarship conventionally labels the *historiola*: a brief narrative or narrative-like utterance that asserts a prior efficacious act and thereby lends force to the present performance. What is much less typical, however, is the consistent use of the first person. In charms, the first person more often surfaces in authoritative or adjuratory passages, where the performer issues commands to the affliction or enjoins the patient; here, by contrast, the “I” is embedded in a compact, almost report-like statement of action and result.

This grammatical posture becomes more intelligible when the *historiola* is read within its immediate codicological environment. The adjacent marginal text begins with an emphatic ego (“*Ego Clemens Romanus pontifex*”) and presents a prescriptive discourse in the first person; the shift to a German first-person voice may therefore reflect a local strategy of textual alignment, as if the same ritual persona were carried across the page boundary. It is one of the reasons why the charm, as copied in this manuscript,

is best approached not as an isolated fragment but as part of a larger performative unit that includes the preceding Twelve Fridays text.

Formally, the two lines are striking for their symmetry and their controlled sound patterning. Each verse is divided into two short cola with identical syntax and parallel semantics, producing a neatly balanced bicolaic structure: “*Ig* + verb” is immediately answered by “*Iz* + verb.” The end words form a clear rhyme pair in *-ant* / *-ein* (*ferswant: ferswein*), reinforced by alliteration and internal repetition (*Ig...Iz... / Ig...iz...*) and by the near-echo between the two outcome verbs. This tight patterning is not merely ornamental: it turns the gesture prescribed in the preceding Latin directive (“*Tange*”) into a verbal-ritual sequence of two coordinated acts, finding and touching, each immediately validated by the disappearance of the ailment.

The Athanasian creed

3. *Increatus Pater immensus eternus Pater.* “Uncreated Father, immeasurable Father, eternal Father.”

It is also repeated at the very end of the charm (line 8).

The sequence *Increatus Pater, immensus, eternus Pater* is best understood as a compressed echo of the Athanasian Creed (Latin incipit *Quicumque vult*), a Western Latin confession that articulates, with unusual precision, the doctrine of the Trinity and of the Incarnation. The creed is traditionally attributed to Athanasius of Alexandria, but is generally regarded as a product of the early medieval Latin West, commonly dated to the fifth or sixth century. It is also notable for its characteristic “damnatory” framing,

which presents adherence to its doctrinal content as soteriologically decisive; this feature contributed both to its authority and to later unease about its use and circulation.

Within the present charm, the clause functions less as a full creed than as a doctrinal *incantamentum*: a sequence of divine attributes attached to the Father that can be deployed in ritual speech as a marker of orthodoxy and as a source of performative force. The repetition of the same wording at the end of the charm reinforces this effect, creating a ring-composition that frames the vernacular historiola and the subsequent motifs within an explicitly Trinitarian horizon. As Franz observed, elements of the Athanasian formulation entered medieval benedictional and adjuratory repertoires and could be mobilised in contexts of protection, including rites directed against demonic forces or meteorological threats⁽¹¹⁾.

This wider functional range helps to explain why a doctrinal text could migrate into practical healing discourse: the creed's authority, and the density of its divine predicates, make it particularly suitable as a compact verbal guarantee of divine power. A close parallel for this kind of ritual use is offered by a twelfth-century blood charm where the Jordan motif and Athanasian predicates appear within the same composite sequence of biblical quotations, apotropaic statements, and short prayers. The relevant passage, transmitted in clm. 100 (München *Bayerische Staatsbibliothek*), ff. 74r-74v reads⁽¹²⁾:

ALITER [Contra sagittam diaboli] Wazzer rinnet lordanis

(11) A. FRANZ, *Die kirchlichen Benediktionen im Mittelalter*, Freiburg im Breisgau, Herder, 1909, II:313.

(12) E. CIANCI, *Incantesimi*: 118-119.

heizzet. da der heilige crist inne getoufet wart. Eiter bistu zegan soltu, Super aspidem et basiliscum ambulabis. et conculcabis leonem et draconem. Dexter a dei. Abstrahe domine malum istud sicut abstraxisti maculam sancti uiri iob. Pater noster. Sanctifica, Per signum. Ecce c. Eum. In principio. *Increatus pater. Increatus filius. Increatus spiritus sanctus. Immensus p. Eternus pater. tribus uicibus.*

Two points are worth stressing for the present discussion. First, this Clm 100 sequence shows that Athanasian predicates could circulate as modular components within a practical healing and protective rite, not necessarily as a liturgical recitation of the creed as a whole. Second, the co-presence of the Jordan motif and the Athanasian predicates in a blood-staunching context offers a concrete comparandum for the kind of composite textual logic that seems to structure the Sélestat charm as well, where doctrinal, biblical, and vernacular elements are integrated into a single performative script.

What is this remedy for?

4. C? in odie? in illo zostre⁽¹³⁾.

The line can only be transcribed with confidence in part, the initial character appears to be either an uppercase C or a G followed by a superscript sign that may indicate abbreviation; this is why one might tentatively expand it as “cum ochot”, although the result yields no meaningful Latin. The most methodologically sound solution is therefore to translate conservatively, preserving the uncertainty:

(13) zoster: herpes.

“C? in odie? in that zoster,” leaving the opening words unresolved.

If the reading *zostre* (*zostere*) is correct, it can be taken as an oblique form of *zoster*, *-eris* (masculine), a Greek loanword (ζωστήρ, “girdle”) used in Latin medical writing for a belt-like form of “sacred fire,” i.e. herpes zoster. In modern English, the common term is shingles, a name that is conceptually congruent with the ancient designation insofar as it evokes a band-like eruption progressing along the body.

Pliny the Elder describes the term in *Naturalis Historia* 26 as follows:

Ignis sacri plura sunt genera, inter quae medium hominem ambiens, qui zoster vocatur, et enecat, si cinxit. medetur plantago cum creta Cimolia et peristereos per se, radix persollatae; aliis, quae serpunt, cotyledonis radix cum mulso, aizoum, sucus e linozosti ex aceto.

There are several kinds of ‘sacred fire’; among them is the one that encircles a person around the middle, which is called *zoster*, and it kills if it has girded him. It is treated with plantain mixed with Cimolian chalk, and with peristereos by itself, and the root of persollata; for other forms that creep/spread, the root of cotyledon with honey-wine, aizoum, and the juice of linozostis with vinegar.”

A closely related formulation is transmitted in Plinius Secundus Iunior, *De medicina*, 3, 24, 17:

Est genus sacri ignis quod zoster uocatur, quoniam occidit eum quem appetit si praecingat. huic occurrit imposita plantago cum creta Cimolia.

“There is a kind of ‘sacred fire’ that is called *zoster*, because it kills the person it attacks if it encircles him. Against it, plantain applied with Cimolian chalk provides a remedy.”

If the term is correctly read, the implication for the charm is considerable. At minimum, it suggests that the text targets a condition conceptualised as *ignis sacer* in its “girdling” form; and the very choice of *zoster* is notable, since it is a learned, Graeco-Latin technicalism that is not common in routine medieval Latin. This lexis points to a compiler who was at least conversant with medical Latin and with the authoritative register of antique remedy discourse, which is precisely the kind of milieu in which early medieval charms often belong: not simply to oral “popular” practice, but to literate repertoires assembled within ecclesiastical book culture.

From a medical-historical perspective, the herpes zoster is typically characterised by a unilateral, band-like eruption following a nerve territory; premodern observers could readily construe such a presentation as a disease that “runs” or “traces” a line and, in severe cases, threatens to “encircle.” At the same time, medieval diagnostic categories for burning cutaneous diseases were porous: depending on presentation and severity, zoster-like eruptions could be conflated with other inflammatory skin conditions (for instance erysipelas) in both descriptive language and therapeutic practice. The charm’s explicit use of *zoster*, if secure, would therefore be an unusually specific anchor within a field otherwise dominated by broader labels such as *ignis sacer* and related “burning” or *aposteme* afflictions.

5. The prayers

5. Pater noster tribus vicibus.

The Latin rubric instructs the recitation, or possibly the chanting, of the Lord's Prayer three times. Such a directive is extraordinarily common in medieval charms and should not be treated as a neutral pious addendum: it is one of the principal devices by which a charm reinforces its efficacy and anchors its performance within an unmistakably Christian register. The Lord's Prayer, as the paradigmatic *verba Christi* and the most universally memorised prayer, provides a form of liturgical authentication; it also supplies a stable verbal component that could be executed correctly even when the surrounding text—often partially opaque, multilingual, or graphically unstable—was difficult to read. In practical terms, the insertion of the Pater noster therefore functions as a dependable “performative hinge” between gesture and speech, converting a sequence of ritual actions into a recognisable devotional act⁽¹⁴⁾.

The specification *tribus vicibus* is equally significant. Repetition is a basic technique of ritual intensification, and the number three carries an obvious Trinitarian resonance that is especially appropriate in a charm that elsewhere deploys explicitly doctrinal language. Repeating the prayer three times can thus be read as a deliberate reinforcement, both quantitative and theological: the act is strengthened through iteration, and its efficacy is implicitly framed as proceeding under the sign of the Trinity. In many charms

(14) E. Cianci, «Direttive per la corretta esecuzione degli incantesimi tedeschi medievali», in E. Cianci (a cura di), *Rappresentazioni e linguaggi della magia*, Alessandria, Edizioni dell'Orso, 2024: 25-47.

this triplication also serves a pragmatic purpose, allowing time for accompanying gestures (touching, tracing, making the sign of the cross, or applying a remedy) to be synchronised with speech.

In the majority of rites, the *Pater noster* appears towards the end and can function as a practical marker of closure. This point matters because charm transmission frequently poses a structural problem: charms are often copied in compact clusters or cumulative strings of remedies for related complaints, and the boundary between one text and the next is not always signalled by layout, punctuation, or headings. A repeated, widely recognisable prayer can therefore operate as an internal delimiter, indicating that a self-contained performance has reached its terminus.

In the present case, however, the rubric is positioned in a way that seems to interrupt rather than conclude, and the subsequent material raises a genuine question of segmentation. The lines that follow introduce the Jordan motif, a hallmark of blood-staunching formulas, which is conceptually compatible with the broader field of burning, spreading cutaneous afflictions but not necessarily identical in therapeutic target. From a codicological perspective, the copyist appears to have treated the sequence as a single practicable rite within this manuscript, copying it as one continuous unit; yet the internal cues, the placement of the tripled *Pater noster* and the thematic shift signalled by the Jordan material, leave open the possibility that two originally independent charms have been conflated in the course of transmission. Such a hypothesis is further supported by the exceptional status of the German formula *ig fant*, which remains without close parallel in the surviving German charm tradition and may represent a discrete

vernacular unit subsequently incorporated into a broader Latin framework.

6. The second *Historiola*: the *flum Jordan* motif

Wazzer fluzit, Iordan heizit, da der heiligo Crist inne gedofet ist.

A river flows, named Iordan, where the holy Christ was baptized.

In a charm targeting a burning, spreading skin condition, the move to haemostatic language is not anomalous: medieval therapeutic scripts regularly treat inflamed eruptions, ulcerations, and oozing lesions through the same verbal modules that also serve to arrest bleeding and secure ritual protection. This section deploys one of the most widely attested *historiolae* in the medieval charm repertoire⁽¹⁵⁾, the Jordan motif, whose standard function is haemostatic: the river's divinely arrested movement becomes the model for arresting the flow of blood.

The Sélestat wording is dominated by parataxis and sonic binding rather than by syntactic subordination. The clauses are brief, balanced, and strongly marked by end-rhyme and internal echo: *fluzit / heizit* creates an audible hinge, while the repeated dental and sibilant consonants

(15) M. BARBATO, *Incantamenta latina et romanica. Scongiuri e formule magiche dei secoli V–XV*, Roma, Salerno editrice, 2019: 25–26, E. Cianci, «Ad restringendum sanguinem: Edizione di due incantesimi tedeschi medievali», in C. Benati, S. Leonardi (a cura di), *Incontri Filologici. Studi in onore di Claudia Händl*, Göppingen, Kümmerle Verlag, 2024: 97–106, F. Ohrt, *Die ältesten Segen über Christi Taufe und Christi Tod in religionsgeschichtlichem Lichte*, København, Levin & Munksgaard, 1938: 61, H.H. Steinhoff, «Schlettstädter Blutsegen “Wazzer fluzit Iordan heizit”», in 2VL, 8 (1992), coll. 714–715.

(z, t) produce a crisp cadence that lends itself to measured recitation. The rhythm is reinforced by the pairing of key nouns and verbs (*wazzer / fluzit; Iordan / heizit*), so that the line works almost like a two-beat formula: statement of natural motion, immediate naming and localisation, then the decisive sacred event. In other words, it compresses geography, authority, and efficacy into a single performative unit.

The biblical background that enables this transfer of authority is twofold. On the one hand, the Old Testament provides the paradigm of miraculous stoppage. In the Vulgate account of Joshua, the Jordan ceases to flow so that Israel may pass, and this miracle offers an obvious template for “stanching”:

The topic is drawn from the Old Testament account in Iosue 3:9-13, Vulgate:

Dixit Iosue ad filios Israel: Accedite huc et audite verba Domini Dei vestri. Per hoc scietis quoniam vivus Deus est in medio vestrum et quod eiciat a facie vestra Canaanitas, Hittheos, Heveos, Pherezeos, Gergeseos, Amorreos, et Iebuseos. Ecce arca foederis Domini universae terrae praecedet vos in Iordanem. Et cum pessum fecerint pedes sacerdotum, qui portant arcam Domini, aquae Iordani a parte superiori cessabunt et stabit una acervus.

On the other hand, the Gospels frame the Jordan as a privileged site of purification and divine action through Christ’s baptism. The river is not merely a place-name; it becomes a symbolic locus where transformation takes place, which helps explain why it could be mobilised not only for “stopping” but also for cleansing and healing:

Matthaeus 3:5-6 (Vulgate): “Exibat autem ad eum Iohannes baptizans in Iordane flumine, confessique sunt peccata sua.”

Marcus 1:5 (Vulgate): “Et egrediebantur ad eum universa Iudea et Hierosolymitae, et baptizabantur ab eo in Iordane flumine, confitentes peccata sua.”

Lucae 3:3 (Vulgate): “Et ibique venit in universam regionem Iordanis, praedicans baptismum poenitentiae in remissionem peccatorum.”

Ioannis 1:28 (Vulgate): “Haec in Bethania facta sunt trans Iordanem, ubi Iohannes baptizabat.”

This double scriptural anchoring—miraculous stilling in Joshua and sacramental action in the Gospels—explains the durability and adaptability of the motif. Compilers could emphasise stoppage, purification, or both, and they could embed the Jordan line among prayers, benedictions, and other adjurations without weakening its recognisability. In that sense, the Jordan formula is not a quotation in the narrow sense but a reusable scriptural emblem, easily reshaped to local performance contexts.

This compilation process reveals a deep engagement with Latin textual traditions, not only borrowing from them but reshaping them to suit the needs of vernacular communities. The Jordan formula, often paired with the Longinus motif, enjoyed an exceptionally wide circulation well beyond the geographical and chronological boundaries represented by the present dossier, and it can be regarded as one of the most distinctive and defining features of the *Blutsegen* tradition:

1. Also uerstant duo so der Iordan stuont, ubi Sanctus Iohannes Christum filium Domini baptizavit (2.

- Erfurt, Universitätsbibliothek, CA 8° 062b, fol. 8r)⁽¹⁶⁾;
2. So verstant du bluod sóse Iordanis áha verstunt, do der heiligo Iohannes den heilanden Crist in íro toufta (Bamberg SB, Msc. Med. 6, f. 139rb);
 3. Dâ ward er getoufet vone Jôhanne in demo Jordâne. Duo verstuont der Jordânis fluz unt der sîn runst. (Wien ONB, cod. 1705, f. 32r).

These examples show how the same conceptual mechanism is realised through slightly different verbal strategies: direct command to the blood, explicit analogy to the river's stillness, or a compressed narrative that presupposes the miracle and lets the analogy do the work.

For that reason, even where the manuscript's mechanical damage complicates the reading of adjacent material, this section provides a secure interpretive anchor. The surviving wording is sufficient to situate the Sélestat text within the established repertoire of medieval charms, while also highlighting the compiler's skill in shaping scriptural material into a rhythmically disciplined, high-impact performative unit.

Also uerstant duo so der Iordan stuont ubi Sanctus Iohannes Christum filium Domini baptizavit.

So verstant du bluod, sóse Iordanis áha verstunt.

7. The Formula: Kardeya Karnentia

Kardeya Karnentia Nessia Simphonia Karniketika
Carnisonsetica.

(16) E. CIANCI, *Incantesimi*: 97-106.

This sequence is semantically opaque, yet it is not isolated. Its form and sound pattern place it squarely within a recognisable family of charm formulas that circulate as *vores magicas*: strings of quasi-Latin or Latinate-looking items whose primary function is not denotation but performative efficacy, secured through phonetic cohesion, reiteration, and rhythmic regularity. What is especially diagnostic here is the tight clustering of recurring initial consonants (k-/c-), the dense network of internal echoes (kar-/car-, -entia/-etica, -ia), and the way the series alternates between short, chant-like units and longer, more heavily suffixed items. Even without a recoverable propositional meaning, the line is highly “speakable”: it invites measured, segmented delivery, and its sonic design makes it easy to memorise and to reproduce with minimal variation. On the level of rhythm, the formula is constructed through parallel stress profiles rather than through strict metre. Several members are built on the same cadence, with a strong initial stress followed by a lighter tail (Kár-de-ya; Kár-nen-ti-a; Nés-si-a; Sí-m-pho-ni-a), and the longer forms tend to preserve the same prosodic logic by adding Latinate suffix blocks that can be articulated in a predictable way (Kar-ni-ke-tí-ca; Car-ni-son-se-tí-ca). This produces a cumulative “pulse” that resembles liturgical litanic recitation more than lexical phraseology: a sequence of discrete names or name-like units, each marked by an initial beat and connected by sound rather than syntax. In such contexts, alliteration and suffix rhyme are not ornamental; they are structural devices that stabilise performance and reinforce the impression of a coherent, authoritative utterance.

The presence of *nessia* is particularly consequential because it points to a broader dossier of healing charms in which *nesso/*

nessia (and related forms) function either as the name of an affliction or as a key element in adjurations against worms and other disorders⁽¹⁷⁾. It is precisely this signal word that prompted Ernst Wickersheimer to classify the Sélestat text within that tradition. The charm was briefly noted and incorporated into the catalogue compiled by Wickersheimer, which lists Sélestat MS 134 among Latin manuscripts on medical subjects. There he assigns the title *Carmen ad nesciam*, and reproduces the incipit together with a handful of isolated words, presumably those he could decipher, or what he took to be the concluding portion of the text:⁽¹⁸⁾

Carmen ad nesciam (latine et germanice).

F. 38. “Sic vita, sic unda Minfirntis kunas kat kemino...
incretus pater, inmensus eternus pater.”

The broader comparison becomes especially clear when one sets the Sélestat formula against analogous sequences in the German tradition. In Clm 100, the relevant material appears within a longer composite charm, where a “*Kardeya/Gardia*” cluster and a *nescial/suffonia* cluster occur in close proximity, embedded among prayers, adjurations, and protective biblical citations:

(17) L.D. GRAHAM, «False friends among the disease demons: On the meaning of Old High German “nesso”», in «Papers from the Institute of Archaeology», 29 (2019): 1-14, N.A. Trufanova, «О природе наименования древневерхненемецкого “nesso” в текстах заговоров (Sulla natura della denominazione del termine altotedesco antico “nesso” nei testi di incantesimi)», in «Вестник Самарского университета. История, педагогика, филология / Vestnik of Samara University. History, pedagogics, philology», 26/1 (2020): 134-140.

(18) E. WICKERSHEIMER, *Les manuscrits latins de médecine du haut Moyen Âge dans les bibliothèques de France* (Documents, Études et Répertoires publiés par l’Institut de Recherche et d’Histoire des Textes, XI), Paris, 1966: 174.

München (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek) clm. 100, 12th c⁽¹⁹⁾.
Contra sagittam diaboli.
Kyrie eleison, christe eleison. kyrie eleison. Alamamiam
alamiam. palamiam. sit in sitim per omne corpus tuum.
Per ista tria nomina patris et filii et spiritus sancti.
Gardia, gardiana, gardentia. Domine nescia, suffonia.
quia necesse est per istud malum malannum, (...) Adiuro
te uenenum per patrem et filium. et spiritum sanctum, ut
non noceas ultra famulo dei N. sed ab illo recedas.

The formal similarity lies not in any one-to-one lexical identity, but in the shared strategy: name-like series with strong internal cohesion, placed at points where the charm intensifies its performative force. A later, structurally comparable example is offered by Clm 4350, where a *Carna*-series functions in an explicitly instructed performance setting (“sprich diu wort”), again emphasising that these sequences are meant to be spoken as self-contained verbal units:

München (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek) clm. 4350, f. 73v,
14th century⁽²⁰⁾
Für daz ungenant.
Haisse ein wazzer schepfen mit trein pater noster in dem
namen der trivalentichait und sprich diu wort.
Carna. Spodia. Carnans. Sedia. In mesima samsodina.
Gast pistu von N. solt tu aiter pistu zergen solt (...).

In her discussion of this formula in medieval charms, Elke Krotz argues that the reading *Karnentia*, rather than

(19) E. KROTZ, «Sibasi pari cumba. Varianz in magischen Wanderformen», in M. Schulz (a cura di), *vinderinne wunderbærer mære. Gedenkschrift für Ute Schwab* (Studia Medievalia Septentrionalia, 24), Wien, 2013: 210-212.

(20) ivi: 232-242.

Gardentia or *Caradencia*, is significant because it invites an etymological link to Latin *carna* and, by extension, to pre-Christian mythological discourse, even though Ovid's identification of *Carna* with Cardea in the *Fasti* is generally treated as poetic licence or error. She further suggests that *nesciat* may already have shifted from a performative verb into a disease label, later glossed as hip pain, and criticizes earlier Germanist interpretations that too readily construed the term as "unknown disease" or "worm," despite the corrective offered by Rainer Reiche. Krotz also notes that botanical explanations have likewise been proposed, for instance by connecting *symphonia/siffon* with henbane in folk medicine. Finally, she is sceptical of attempts to translate the obscured opening by postulating extensive, atypical scribal corruptions, since such conjectures sit uneasily with the comparatively stable transmission of the remainder of the text⁽²¹⁾.

In this context, a Hildegard passage is particularly valuable because it shows that the *nesso/nessia* complex is not confined to charm transmission or to purely "magical" registers. It also appears in learned, remedy-oriented writing, where it is treated as a named condition that can be driven away by a concrete therapeutic procedure:

Hildegarda, *Physica* 4, XX (De Cristallo)⁽²²⁾

Et qui a nesseden fatigatur, eumdem lapidem ad solem calefaciat et ita calidum super locum illum ubi dolet ponat, et nussia fugabitur.

(21) Krotz refers to my very first attempt in E. Cianci, *Incantesimi*: 135-138, see: Krotz, op. cit.: 218-219.

(22) https://monumenta.ch/latein/advkonkordanz.php?suchbegriff2=ness*&binary=&modif=&domain=&lang=o&tabelle=Latein&id=&kkwlauss=kk_alle&von=advsuchen&suchbegriff=ness*&target=

Two aspects of this quotation deserve emphasis. First, the ailment is associated with a specific locus of pain “*super locum illum ubi dolet*”, which aligns well with the way *nessol/nessia* can function as a disease designation rather than as an empty charm word. Second, the closing clause “*et nessia fugabitur*” casts the condition in terms of expulsion, using the same logic that structures many charms: the disease is treated as something that can be made to depart. Even where the remedy is entirely “natural” (a warmed stone applied to the painful spot), the verbal framing retains an expulsive, quasi-personifying idiom, and this overlap helps to explain how a term like *nessia* could circulate across boundaries between learned medicine, monastic compilations, and the charm repertoire.

Taken together, these parallels suggest that the Sélestat sequence should be approached as a deliberately shaped performative unit. Its importance lies not in deciphering it as a hidden sentence, but in recognising its function: a rhythmically stabilised, alliterative name-chain that reinforces the rite at a point of heightened verbal intensity, while simultaneously situating the charm within wider clusters of *Kardeyal/Carna* and *nessol/nessia* materials known from German manuscript contexts.

The Twelve Fridays in Sélestat 134: Context and Function

The Sélestat charm is entered upside down in the lower margin of f. 38r. This materially liminal position has direct consequences for legibility: the writing runs along the edge of the page and several letters are partially obscured or mechanically damaged. The script is a mature Carolingian minuscule and may be dated to the first half of the eleventh

century; on palaeographical grounds, it is plausibly local to the region in which the codex is preserved today. The facing page (f. 37v) contains a second marginal entry. It is likewise written upside down, in the same hand, and was very probably added in the same writing session. This four-line text belongs to the tradition commonly known as the *Legend of the Twelve Golden Fridays* (my transcription and translation)⁽²³⁾:

Ego Clemens Romanus pontifex inveni in canonibus apostolorum domini ad sanctum ad beatum Petrum qs qs apostolorum de istis XII dies scilicet: I in mense marcio, II ante annuntiationem dominicam, III in parasceve, IV ante ascensione Domini, V ante pentecoste, VI in IIII tempora de mense Junio III, VII ante nativitatem Sancti Iohannes, VIII ante nativitate Sancti Petri, IX, post nativitate apostolorum, X in semptember, XI in Decembre, XII ante nativitate Domini.

“I, Clement, bishop of Rome, found in the canons of the apostles of the Lord, to/at the holy one, to/at the blessed Peter, *qs qs* of the apostles, concerning these twelve days, namely:

- in the month of March;
- before the Lord’s Annunciation;
- on the Parasceve;
- before the Ascension of the Lord;
- before Pentecost;
- at the Four Ember Days of the month of June, the third;

(23) S. IVANOV, «The Latin Twelve Fridays Texts: Textual Analysis and Edition», in «Mediaeval Studies», 81 (2019), pp. 105-169.

- before the Nativity of Saint John;
- before the Nativity of Saint Peter;
- after the Nativity of the apostles;
- in September;
- in December;
- before the Nativity of the Lord.”

Sergey Ivanov characterizes the Latin “Twelve Fridays” texts as concise, highly portable devotional and penitential units, distinguished by a remarkably regular internal architecture and an explicitly practical purpose. Their opening typically legitimizes the practice by constructing an authoritative chain of transmission: Clement of Rome claims to have received the instruction from Peter the Apostle, who in turn received it from Christ. The pseudo-historical “I found it in the canons” posture lends the practice prestige and a quasi-canonical aura, while simultaneously signalling its pseudepigraphic character and thus its susceptibility to ecclesiastical suspicion. The introduction often also states the basic prescription (which is missing here): fasting on bread and water on the specified Fridays, reinforced by a symbolic alignment between the number twelve and the twelve apostles.

At the centre of these texts stands the list itself, which functions as their constitutive core by specifying which Fridays should be observed across the year. Ivanov stresses that, despite minor surface variation in the wider tradition, the underlying sequence is comparatively stable, anchored to recurring calendrical and liturgical reference points. The closing component typically articulates the rewards promised to those who keep the fast. In some witnesses these benefits are anticipated earlier, and the conclusion may be

reduced or omitted, yet the fundamental logic remains intact, binding prescribed practice to promised spiritual gain.

This combination of a readily applicable penitential regimen with a strong narrative apparatus helps to explain both the text's utility and its ambivalent ecclesiastical status. The same mechanisms that facilitate its circulation as a quasi-authoritative directive also render it liable to rejection as suspect pseudepigrapha. Ivanov notes that some copies were even crossed out, a striking material signal that the text could be perceived as hovering between acceptable devotional instruction and unauthorized religious writing. The marginal entry in Sélestat 134 conforms closely to this liminal profile: it is copied upside down in the lower margin, and the name "Clemens Romanus" has been deliberately erased to near illegibility, remaining only faintly recoverable through residual traces.

So, what is the connection between the two texts? The connection is not merely thematic but strongly suggested by material and functional convergence. The two entries share the same hand, the same inverted layout, and the same marginal placement, which already implies that they were conceived as part of a single micro-compilation rather than as two unrelated jottings. More importantly, the *Twelve Fridays* text establishes a prescriptive, calendrically structured regime of action whose internal logic is "practice first, benefit afterwards." The adjacent charm begins with wording that is most plausibly read as procedural and sequential, culminating in an imperative (*tange*) and moving immediately into the vernacular *historiola*. In this configuration, the Twelve Fridays text can operate as the pre-conditioned frame, an anterior discipline that legitimizes or empowers what follows, while the charm functions as

the concrete therapeutic application. In other words, the juxtaposition supports a reading in which penitential observance and healing performance are coordinated within a single devotional-ritual horizon, rather than belonging to separate spheres of practice.

Finally, the shared first-person framing reinforces this impression. The Twelve Fridays text opens with a forceful ego voice (“Ego Clemens...”), and the charm’s German section unusually adopts a first-person narrative stance (“*Ig fant ... Ig berein ...*”). Even if the speakers are not meant to be identical, the rhetorical effect is cumulative: the page presents a coherent ritual persona whose authority is grounded, first, in apostolic transmission and prescribed fasting, and then enacted in a healing rite. This does not prove intentional pairing in a strict sense, but it provides a materially and rhetorically plausible explanation for why these two specific texts were copied together, in the same marginal mode, within the same codicological space.

8. The manuscript

Schlettstadt (Sélestat), Bibliothèque Humaniste, Cod. 134 is a small-format parchment codex transmitting Latin ecclesiastical material. The early catalogue entry is notably cursory and remains of limited use for understanding the book’s actual structure and contents; for that reason, the description that follows is based primarily on my direct examination of the manuscript. The catalogue characterises it in general terms as: “*In octavo, on vellum. Various sermons. Tenth century. Incomplete fragment containing sermons or homilies. Written in long lines in a semi-cursive script,*

without title or any indication⁽²⁴⁾. The manuscript comprises 74 folios, measuring 143 × 100 mm, copied in long lines. The surviving codicological structure is described as ten quaternions (quires V–XIV), with quires I–IV missing, which implies that the present first folio does not coincide with the original beginning of the book⁽²⁵⁾.

Although Wickersheimer classified the codex as a *medical* manuscript, its contents are more accurately described as a monastic and homiletic compilation, centred on the Rule of St Benedict with interpolations, alongside sermons or sermon-like material. A later hand added a descriptive label on the upper margin on f. 1r, *Praecepta religiosa et monastica*, in black ink⁽²⁶⁾. The manuscript's provenance remains unknown. A further annotation on f. 1r (right margin), 1169 (*Catalogue Paris 484*), may reflect a later cataloguing or shelf-marking practice; in any case, it does not in itself allow the place of production to be identified. The textual incipit also suggests that f. 1r is not the beginning of the original compilation, a point consistent with the loss of the first four quires.

The Bibliothèque Humaniste in Sélestat is distinctive in that it preserves both medieval manuscripts and Renaissance humanist book collections. Originating in the library of the Latin School of Sélestat, it was later enriched by the library of Beatus Rhenanus (a close associate of Erasmus). Within this broader holding, Cod. 134 represents a Carolingian-period witness to ecclesiastical Latin learning and monastic textual culture.

(24) M. MICHELANT *et al.*, *Catalogue général des manuscrits des bibliothèques publiques des départements*, t. III, Paris, Imprimerie impériale, 1861: 601.

(25) P. ADAM, *L'Humanisme à Sélestat. L'École, les Humanistes, la Bibliothèque*, Sélestat, Impr. Alsatia, 1962: 104.

(26) Thanks to Dr. Audrey Link for the pictures of this non digitized manuscript.

Within the codex, f. 38r, the page transmitting our charm, transmits material from Isidore of Seville's *Differentiae*⁽²⁷⁾, specifically the *Differentiae rerum*. Isidore's *Differentiae* exemplify a form of knowledge organisation in which language functions as an instrument of conceptual discrimination. The work is conventionally divided into two parts: (1) *Differentiae verborum*, which lists a large number of distinctions between words and near-synonyms in alphabetical order (e.g., *aptum* vs *utile*), and (2) *Differentiae rerum*, organised into thematic sections, which articulates distinctions between concepts or entities by contrasting terms such as *Deus* and *Dominus*.

The deliberate switch between Latin and German ensured that the charm resonated with audiences, while Latin served as the universal language of the Church, the liturgy and its rituals and it also signifies a hierarchy, a ranking of language power. Latin, as the language of the Church and authority, carries a sense of sacredness and legitimacy. At the same time, the vernacular grounds the charm in everyday life.

This duality reflects the charm's role in medieval Europe in regions where vernacular languages coexisted with Latin, not only as a religious formula but also as a pragmatic tool that had to be understood and internalised by its users.

The variability inherent in these texts, which was often considered a limitation, was, in fact, their greatest strength. This fluidity allowed charms to evolve, embedding local linguistic and cultural elements within a framework derived from Latin sources. It also facilitated the transmission of shared cultural memory, preserving the sacred heritage

(27) ISIDORE OF SEVILLE, *Differentiae*, in J.-P. Migne (a cura di), *Patrologiae cursus completus. Series Latina* (= PL), 83, Paris, J.-P. Migne, 1850, coll. 9-98A.

of Latin liturgical texts while simultaneously addressing the immediate needs of medieval communities.

Eventually, the German charms illustrate the dynamic interaction between Old German and Medieval Latin traditions. They are living testimonies to the creativity of medieval compilers, who shaped these texts to reflect a vibrant interplay of linguistic, cultural, and intellectual traditions. Through their adaptability, these texts stand as enduring evidence of the medieval world's capacity to integrate sacred and practical knowledge into meaningful expressions of healing and belief⁽²⁸⁾.

This level of investigation concerning the manuscript transmission of charms shows how the environment shapes both their form and their interpretation. If we restrict our focus to the oldest stratum (ninth to eleventh century), the small corpus of Old High German charms display a striking degree of convergence in the modes of copying and in the environments that preserved them⁽²⁹⁾. First, the

(28) M.B. PARKES, «The Influence of the Concepts of *Ordinatio* and *Compilatio* on the Development of the Book», in J.J. G. Alexander, M.T. Gibson (eds.), *Medieval Learning and Literature. Essays Presented to Richard William Hunt*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1976: 115-141, R. PICCHIO, «Compilation and Composition: two Levels of Authorship in the Orthodox Slavic Tradition», in «Cyrillomethodianum», 5 (1981): 1-4. K. Pratt et al. (eds.), *The Dynamics of the Medieval Manuscript. Text Collections from a European Perspective*, Göttingen, V&R Unipress, 2017.

(29) E. HELLGARDT, «Die deutschen Zaubersprüche und Segen im Kontext ihrer Überlieferung (10. bis 13. Jahrhundert). Eine überlieferungsgeschichtliche Skizze», in «Atti della Accademia Peloritana dei Pericolanti. Classe di Lettere, Filosofia e Belle Arti», LXXI (1995), Messina, 1997: 5-62, E. Hellgardt, «Die deutschsprachigen Handschriften im 11. und 12. Jahrhundert. Bestand und Charakteristik im chronologischen Aufriß», in V. Honemann, N.F. Palmer (Hg.), *Deutsche Handschriften 1100-1400*, Tübingen, Niemeyer, 1988: 35-81, H. STUART, F. WALLA, «Die Überlieferung der mittelalterlichen Segen», in «Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur», 116 (1987): 53-79.

charms are overwhelmingly transmitted as marginal additions. In manuscripts of this early phase they typically belong to a secondary campaign of writing and were not part of the codex's original plan. Yet they are not random accretions. They are entered into margins or blank spaces that were available for use, and they tend to be accompanied by other "beneficial" items added in the same liminal zones. Ivanov's observations on the Legend of the Twelve Fridays fit this pattern closely: in many manuscripts the text appears precisely in such liminal spaces as a "minitext"⁽³⁰⁾ and is frequently juxtaposed with medical or prognostic material, which confirms that the margins could be used to assemble small, purpose-driven clusters of instruction and remedy.

Moreover, the manuscripts that preserve the earliest German charms are typically miscellanies with predominantly religious content, often liturgical or para-liturgical in orientation. As in this case, the charm is the only vernacular element in an otherwise Latin codex, which makes the switch of language a deliberate and highly visible choice rather than a default register. The institutional background is consistently monastic, and very often Benedictine. In such environments, Latin was the normative language of textual culture, and the manuscript book was primarily a vehicle of ecclesiastical learning and practice.

(30) I. GARIPZANOV, «Early Medieval Minuscule Texts as a Subject of Study: Tentative Taxonomy, Codicological Contexts, and Related Social Practices», in «*Scrineum*», 21/2 (2024):13-37.

9. Conclusions

The Sélestat charm has long been treated as an interpretive dead end because its opening line resists the standard comparative method: no securely analogous charm has emerged, and attempts to decode the phrase as either Latin or German in isolation have produced only local, non-binding plausibilities. The analysis developed in this article proposes a different solution to Steinmeyer's methodological impasse. Instead of waiting for an external parallel, it tests the text against the three sites where Latin–vernacular interaction can be observed most concretely in early German charms: the internal structure of the bilingual text, its placement on the written page, and the logic of the manuscript compilation in which it is embedded.

Read at the level of the textual sequence, the Sélestat material proves to be highly structured rather than chaotic. The vernacular couplet *Ig fant ... Ig berein ...* is not a random insertion but a tightly balanced *historiola* whose symmetry and rhyme organise action and result into a memorable performative unit. The surrounding Latin components function as modular anchors of authority: the Athanasian predicates compress doctrinal force into a speakable formula, while *Pater noster tribus vicibus* provides both Christian authentication and ritual intensification through triplification. The Jordan *historiola*, with its strongly patterned cadence and sonic cohesion, situates the charm within a widely attested repertoire of protective and haemostatic utterances that circulate precisely as reusable modules in medieval compilations.

The decisive advance, however, emerges only when the text is read at the level of the page and of the compilation.

Direct observation of Cod. 134 shows that the charm is not an isolated marginal curiosity: it is materially paired with a second marginal entry on the facing page, copied upside down by the same hand in the same liminal zone and evidently intended to be read as part of the same micro-dossier. This adjacent text belongs to the Legend of the Twelve Fridays and is of particular importance because it is not merely a generic devotional note but a prescriptive schedule. Its internal logic is “practice first, benefit afterwards”: presented as the condition for a promised efficacy. In the Sélestat witness, the erasure of “Clemens Romanus” further confirms the text’s ambivalent ecclesiastical status and, at the same time, the intensity of its practical reception: the entry was significant enough to be copied and later significant enough to be partially suppressed, yet it remained physically present within the ritual space of the codex.

On this basis, the opening crux *Secuta secunda infirmis cunas kat chemino. Tange* can be reclassified. The phrase *secuta secunda* is no longer a free-floating riddle: it becomes a condensed temporal-procedural marker that points back to the observance just set out in the Twelve Fridays list, and specifically to its internal sequencing. In this manuscript context, *secuta secunda* is best understood as “once the second [Friday] has been observed,” or more generally “after the second prescribed observance,” and therefore functions as the hinge between a penitential prerequisite and the therapeutic performance that follows. The imperative *tange* then introduces the bodily action that activates the charm: the performer touches the locus of the affliction and traces it along its “course” (*chemino*), before voicing the German historiola that asserts the disappearance of

the ailment. In short, the semantic recoverability of *secuta secunda* depends directly on the newly identified, previously unedited Twelve Fridays text copied beside it.

This conclusion has two broader implications. First, it shows that the Sélestat charm is not an anomalous fragment but a carefully assembled ritual script in which penitential discipline, doctrinal authority, vernacular efficacy, and biblical *historiolae* are compiled into a single practicable unit. Second, it confirms that the interpretive centre of gravity for early medieval charms often lies not in reconstructing hypothetical lost “folkloric” archetypes, but in attending to the manuscript as a site where small texts were clustered, aligned, and made to cooperate.

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ISAC FRIBERGS SVARTKONSTBOK: MAGIA E MEDICINA IN UN MANOSCRITTO SVEDESE DEL XVIII SECOLO

ANGELA IULIANO

ABSTRACT: This article explores the *Isac Fribergs svartkonstbok* (1770), a significant example of a Swedish black book of magic held at the Skövde Stadsmuseum. Through a dual approach – synchronic-literary and diachronic-historical – the study analyses the manuscript's heterogeneous content, which ranges from verbal charms and complex exorcisms to practical medical recipes and alchemical references. The first part of the article defines the *svartkonstbok* genre, highlighting its origins within the scholarly and ecclesiastical milieu and its role as a repository of useful knowledge for managing the hardships of rural life. Central to this analysis is the performative power of the word and of its executioner. In the second part, by applying Bengt af Klintberg's structural classification of charms, specific formulas for healing, protection, and social coercion are analysed. Through the study of the manuscript, finally, the article provides a meaningful glimpse on cultural and social aspects of 18th-century Scandinavia.

KEYWORDS: *Svartkonstbok*, Swedish Folklore, Verbal Charms, Isac Friberg, Magic and Medicine.

1. Introduzione

Tra i testi magici di area nordica, l'*Isac Fribergs svartkonstbok* (Skövde, Stadsmuseum, Isac Fribergs svartkonstbok

3MI6:11816) è un esemplare interessante per la sua epoca e dimensione. Scritto in gran parte nel 1770, consisteva originariamente di 160 pagine (oggi 145) e il suo contenuto eterogeneo, con una vasta gamma di incantesimi, ricette, ammonimenti e rimedi, ci consente di valutarlo come un prezioso esemplare del genere *svartkonstbok*.

L'intento di questo articolo è presentare il manoscritto sia da un punto di vista strutturale, con un approccio letterario sincronico che analizza cioè la narrazione della magia, sia da un punto di vista storico-sociale, da una prospettiva diacronica, adoperando i testi per comprendere il contesto in cui il manoscritto è stato redatto⁽¹⁾.

2. Svartkonstböcker, magia e incantesimi

Prima di entrare in merito al testo in questione è opportuno fare alcune brevi considerazioni preliminari sulla tipologia testuale menzionata, la sua diffusione e i contenuti tipici.

Per *svartkonstbok* si intende un “libro di magia nera”, più precisamente un testo legato alla conoscenza e alla tradizione popolare che raccoglie formule magiche, rimedi e incantesimi, e che unisce elementi precristiani a influenze cristiane, spesso elaborando formule per protezione, guarigione, divinazione e invocazioni. Si tratta, vale a dire, di una raccolta di incantesimi di vario genere, ma anche di cure mediche e di rimedi popolari. Questi testi sono in genere appunti personali, annotazioni o taccuini scritti o redatti da

(1) Questo tipo di approccio metodologico è suggerito da Clive TOLLEY, *The Peripheral at the Centre. The Subversive Intent of Norse Myth and Magic*, in «ARV. Scandinavian Yearbook of Folklore», vol. 70 (2014) pp. 15-37.

praticanti di arti magiche. Quasi sempre le annotazioni corrispondono a formule molto più antiche di almeno due o tre secoli (Johnson 2010: 2) rispetto alla data di redazione. Questi testi sono identificati anche come *svartböckerk* (libro nero), *konstböcker* (libri delle arti) o *Cyprianus*, con riferimento al leggendario mago San Cipriano di Antiochia o di Cartagine, al quale erano attribuiti molti incantesimi contenuti nei testi magici nord-europei⁽²⁾. Dal XVI secolo, i testi magici sono stati definiti anche grimori⁽³⁾.

Gli *svartkonstböcker* ebbero origine in un contesto ecclesiastico erudito già alla fine del XV secolo⁽⁴⁾; questa origine può essere rintracciata nella mescolanza di formule in

(2) Cfr. AMUNDSEN A.B., *Genre in the Making. The First Study of Charms in Norway*, in J.A. Kapalo, É. Pócs, W. Ryan (eds.), *The power of words. Studies on charms and charming in Europe*, Central European University Press, Budapest 2013, p. 21; A. OHRVIK, *When Ritual Texts Become Legendary: Practice and Fiction in Nordic Folklore*, in B. Otto, D. Johannsen. (eds.), *Fictional Practice: Magic, Narration, and the Power of Imagination*, Brill, Leiden 2021, p. 114. Come si legge in O. DAVIES, *Grimoires. A History of Magic Books*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009, pp. 32-33), San Cipriano di Antiochia è un leggendario martire cristiano del III secolo che, a causa di una sovrapposizione con il reale Cipriano di Cartagine (martirizzato nel 258 d.C.), finì per acquisire la reputazione di mago e autore di grimori. Tale sovrapposizione è testimoniata già alla fine del IV secolo, in alcuni scritti cristiani. Durante il medioevo, manoscritti in greco, latino, siriano, copto e arabo sulla storia di Cipriano erano circolati in tutta Europa e nel Vicino Oriente. Secondo la leggenda, Cipriano, dapprima iniziato ai culti di Apollo e Mitra, acquisì i saperi della magia caldea in Egitto e a Babilonia, divenendo un grande e rinomato mago. Convertitosi al cristianesimo, divenne vescovo e fu infine martirizzato.

(3) Cfr. S.A., MITCHELL *Leechbooks, Manuals, and Grimoires. On the Early History of Magical Texts in Scandinavia*, in «ARV. Scandinavian Yearbook of Folklore», vol. 70 (2014), p. 58.

(4) Cfr. B. af KLINTBERG, *Svenska trollformler*, Wahlström och Widstrand, Stockholm 1965, p. 22; J. LINDOW, (transl. and ed.), *Swedish Legends and Folktales*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1978, p. 47; K. STOKKER, "The Would-Be Ghost": Why Be He a Ghost? Lutheran Views of Confession and Salvation in Legends of the Black Book Minister, in «ARV. Scandinavian Yearbook of Folklore», vol. 47 (1991), pp. 143-152.

latino, di chiara matrice cristiana, e in volgare, insieme a simboli della tradizione cabalistica. Poiché ai sacerdoti era spesso affidata non solo la cura spirituale ma anche quella fisica dei fedeli, in questi testi si trovano anche formule per guarire malattie. Magia e medicina hanno confini indistinti in tali libri, che possono includere anche rimedi pratici che nulla hanno a che fare con pratiche occulte o soprannaturali⁽⁵⁾.

La varietà dei contenuti ha tuttavia un *trait d'union*, ovvero il fine ultimo di tali pratiche, che è la felicità, il tornaconto e il successo di colui ne fa uso. Da questo punto di vista non c'è distinzione tra scopi medici, religiosi, catartici o apotropai. Catharina Raudvere sostiene che incantesimi e rituali sono un metodo pratico e psicologico per gestire situazioni critiche, come malattie, sfortuna, o incidenti di vario genere⁽⁶⁾.

La parola magia, dunque, è un termine generico che utilizziamo a posteriori, esterna al contesto di produzione, che in qualche modo include differenti manifestazioni che di volta in volta, secondo una categorizzazione emica interna, possono essere definite come cure, rimedi, esorcismi, incantesimi⁽⁷⁾.

Per magia, quindi, si può intendere un sistema di credenze e pratiche ritenute in grado di poter influenzare il mondo naturale o soprannaturale attraverso atti rituali,

(5) Cfr. L. TAGLIANETTI, *Incantesimi e formule magiche negli svartebøker norvegesi*, in «Annali. Sezione Germanica», vol. 26, n. 1-2 (2016), pp. 133-134.

(6) Cfr. C. RAUDVERE, *Meeting Hardship, Illness and Malice. Valter W. Forsblom and His Documentation of Healing Practices in Swedish-Speaking Finland 1913-1917*, in «ARV. Scandinavian Yearbook of Folklore», vol. 70 (2014), p. 149.

(7) Cfr. A. OHRVIK, AÐALHEIÐUR Guðmundsdóttir, *Magic and Texts. An Introduction*, in «ARV. Scandinavian Yearbook of Folklore», vol. 70 (2014), p. 10.

formule verbali o l'uso di oggetti simbolici. Le formule verbali sono propriamente detti incantesimi, cioè formule la cui magia è data dal potere della parola: in questo contesto, non esiste distinzione tra il “dire” e il “fare”. Pronunciare una formula (correttamente) corrisponde a un atto perlocutorio, in cui l'enunciazione corrisponde all'azione stessa; si tratta dunque di un atto creativo che modifica la realtà materiale.

Gli *svartkonstböcker* vanno quindi oltre la stregoneria in senso stretto; benché abbiano a che fare con le credenze popolari e la superstizione, essi sono legati alle pratiche della medicina popolare, alla religione e alle conoscenze pratiche popolari nell'uso quotidiano. Questi testi, quindi, si rivelano interessanti fonti di informazioni sulle credenze popolari, sulle pratiche di guarigione nelle comunità rurali, sui contesti quotidiani della magia e della stregoneria nei periodi in cui sono stati composti.

L'eterogeneità dei contenuti di questi libri talora complica la definizione di magia e una eventuale classificazione degli incantesimi in essi contenuti. Forsblom incontrò grandi difficoltà nel cercare di dividere nettamente queste pratiche tra “superstizione” e “medicina popolare” proprio a causa della natura ibrida di ciò che popolarmente era ritenuto magia, e pertanto potenzialmente dannoso, e di ciò che era medicina e quindi curativo⁽⁸⁾. Gli *svartkonstböcker* sono espressione di un credo popolare che vive in sovrapposizione a quello religioso ufficiale. La religione espressa in questi testi è rivolta agli aspetti quotidiani dell'esistenza e mira proporre soluzioni e rimedi alle difficoltà concrete della vita, come la malattia, la scarsità di cibo, i furti. Le pratiche riportate nei libri di magia non costituiscono un

(8) Cfr. C. RAUDVERE, *Meeting Hardship, Illness and Malice*, cit., p. 149.

sistema religioso separato, ma esistono in costante dialogo o tensione con gli insegnamenti e i rituali della Chiesa⁽⁹⁾. La sopravvivenza di questi testi non è affatto scontata, dal momento che la conoscenza del loro contenuto era riservata a pochi. Questa segretezza epistemologica e sociale era ritenuta necessaria per la riuscita degli incantesimi; inoltre, non sempre i praticanti erano disposti a rivelare le conoscenze agli studiosi di folklore. Infine, dal xx secolo in poi, con la crescente fiducia collettiva nella scienza e nella medicina, tali pratiche sono state stigmatizzate e in qualche modo messe da parte⁽¹⁰⁾.

(9) Per quanto riguarda l'uso della magia in un contesto cristiano, sappiamo che ogni forma di magia era proibita fin dalla conversione della Svezia al cristianesimo. Inoltre, il concilio ecclesiastico tenutosi nel 1412 ad Arboga condannò l'uso di «omnes sortilegi, venefici, vates et somniorum interpretes: prohibitum quidquid in ignotis litteris, caracteribus, vocibus, magicum portentcosumque valere credebatur superstitio contra vim ignis, aërum, aquae, morbos et vitae quaecumque discrimina, quales sunt in plumbo ac parietibus certae incisae noelae atque scripturae, contra dolorem dentium et imbecillitatem quamlibet hominum et iumentorum» (tutti i sortilegi, i venefici, i vati e gli interpreti dei sogni: sia proibito tutto ciò che la superstizione credeva valesse come potere magico e prodigioso in lettere, e altri segni e parole sconosciuti non presenti nelle Scritture, che servono a spegnere il fuoco, fermare le spade, curare malattie o prevenire la morte, e ogni tipo di scrittura nel piombo o sul muro contro il mal di denti e e qualunque debolezza degli uomini e dei giumenti; C.E. WENSTRÖM, *De conciliis Arbogensibus disquisitio*, Upsaliae 1836, p. 7. Traduzione mia). La stregoneria non era considerata solo un peccato mortale, ma condannata come un reato grave. Ciò era già evidente in molte leggi provinciali medievali, in cui la *vidskepelse*, cioè la stregoneria intesa come superstizione era punita con ammende, mentre il *forögöring*, il maleficio operato con finalità letali poteva essere punito con la pena capitale. La legge fu particolarmente severa durante il xvii e xviii secolo, nel periodo dei processi alle streghe, e divenne più mite durante il secolo successivo, quando la pena di morte per stregoneria fu abolita. (Cfr. E. Haller, *Bidrag till den kyrkliga lagstifningens historia i Sverige under 1700-talet*, in «Kyrkohistorisk årsskrift» vol. 12 (1911), pp. 71-72).

(10) Valter W. Forsblom è stato uno dei primi folkloristi a operare sul campo con un approccio quasi antropologico, per testimoniare l'ampia tradizione popolare da lui ritenuta una sorta di filosofia coerente, un miscuglio antico di elementi cristiani e pagani. Il suo archivio, registrando le varianti delle

Dal punto di vista culturale una classificazione degli incantesimi risulta dunque complessa, tuttavia, una classificazione può essere utile da un punto di vista testuale, che ne faciliti la comprensione degli aspetti strutturali delle formule. Bengt av Klintberg, ereditando il metodo analitico di Ferdinand Ohrt, ne propone una che sarà utile per analizzare il contenuto dell'*Isaac Fribergs svartkonstbok* nel paragrafo che segue⁽¹¹⁾.

3. Isac Fribergs svartkonstbok: il manoscritto

Una nota sulla prima di copertina posteriore afferma che il libro apparteneva a una persona di nome Jonas Tjäder. Conosciamo anche la data in cui il testo fu scritto e il nome del suo autore, in base a quanto leggiamo in una delle pagine iniziali del manoscritto:

En liten Bok
Hwar uti fines allhanda
Sympatier, och
Artiga Konster af hwilka
storre delen dro sanne
och proberadei
Sammansamlade och skriv'ne
af Isac Friberg
Lund d: 22 September
1770

pratiche di cura, anziché cercare un modello unico, è una risorsa di inestimabile valore per comprendere la visione del mondo rurale pre-industriale (cfr. C. RAUDVERE, *Meeting Hardship, Illness and Malice*, cit., 162-164).

(11) Cfr. KLINTBERG 1965, *op. cit.*, e-book; F. OHRT, *Danmarks trylleformularer, I*, Gyldendal Widstrand, København 1917: pp. 540s.

[Un piccolo libro in cui si trovano ogni tipo di simpatie e arti gentili, la maggior parte delle quali vere e provate. Raccolte e scritte da Isac Friberg, Lund, 22 settembre 1770].

L'autore, Isac Friberg, nacque a Sundserud, nello Småland, nel 1736. Studiò all'Università di Lund. Queste informazioni sono note perché Friberg fu ordinato sacerdote nel 1776; fu dapprima *komminister* di Lidköping dal 1782 al 1803, poi vicario di Vartofta-Åsaka, dove morì nel 1818. Sappiamo anche che un uomo di nome Isac Friberger nel 1777 e nel 1779 fu convocato da un concistoro per aver venduto libri di incantesimi a Malmö. Nel 1777, il libro, intitolato *Vinculum Infernorum*, fu venduto a un contadino che, trovandolo inutile, denunciò il prelato. L'*Herdaminnet*, sorta di enciclopedia biografica di tutti i sacerdoti di una diocesi, riporta che, nel 1779, il prelato fu ritenuto il semplice trascrittore e non l'autore del libro.

Nel 1945 il manoscritto fu donato alla Società Storica e di Antichità di Skövde (*Skövdeortens Hembygds- och Fornminnesförening*) da tale Alma Larsson⁽¹²⁾.

Dalla nota nella prima pagina si apprende che il libro è stato scritto a Lund; diversi elementi lessicali confermano l'origine meridionale dell'autore e del testo. Anche la ricchezza del testo e l'uso del latino suggeriscono che l'autore sia stato una persona appartenente al clero. L'autore usa il latino nelle proprie annotazioni a fine o a margine degli incantesimi, dove appone le espressioni *probatum est*, o *Legetres*, qualora la formula vada ripetuta più volte.

Nel testo è presente una paginazione, posta negli angoli superiori esterni dei fogli, verosimilmente aggiunta dopo

(12) G. LINDE, *En svartkonstbok i Skövde*, in «Billingebygden», vol. 23 (1996), pp. 27-29.

la stesura degli incantesimi e delle ricette, e funzionale a un indice, denominato *register*, posto alla fine del manoscritto, che elenca i contenuti fino a pagina 42. Il manoscritto in esame, di piccolo formato ma piuttosto ricco, è in questo senso un modello per l'eterogeneità dei suoi contenuti.

In quanto *svartkonstbok*, il testo va annoverato tra i “grimori”, cioè tra quei libri, nella definizione di Davies,

«of conjurations and charms, providing instructions on how to make magical objects such as protective amulets and talismans. They are repositories of knowledge that arm people against evil spirits and witches, heal their illnesses, fulfill their sexual desires, divine and alter their destiny, and much else besides»⁽¹³⁾.

Il *Fribergsbok* è anche un taccuino in cui il guaritore/mago ha registrato i suoi incantesimi, ricette, pozioni e rituali. Come tale, contiene una ricca varietà di materiale specifico per la pratica della magia, sia essa medicina magica o semplice stregoneria volta a influenzare l'ambiente esterno. Infine, è anche un ricettario di rimedi.

Benché il manoscritto prenda il nome dal principale scriba, dalla pagina 137, secondo la paginazione apposta sul manoscritto, è possibile notare un cambiamento di grafia: tre differenti amanuensi, di cui si ignora l'identità, hanno dato, in successione, il loro contributo alla compilazione del libro. Le parti aggiunte contengono in gran parte rimedi, cioè ricette e consigli pratici, ad esempio per creare

(13) O. DAVIES., *Grimoires*, cit., p. I. «di scongiuri e incantesimi, che fornisce istruzioni su come creare oggetti magici come amuleti protettivi e talismani. Sono depositi di conoscenza che armano le persone contro gli spiriti maligni e le streghe, guariscono le loro malattie, esaudiscono i loro desideri sessuali, predicono e alterano il loro destino, e molto altro ancora».

pigmenti, riutilizzare la carta pulendola dall'inchiostro, eliminare le cimici, curare il mal di denti o rendere le scarpe impermeabili. Si tratta di rimedi pratici, con indicazioni di dosi e procedure, che non necessitano di interventi magici.

4. Gli incantesimi del *Fribergs svartkonstbok*, uno studio strutturale

Uno dei dilemmi metodologici che si affrontano studiando il folklore magico, sostiene Raudvere, è la difficoltà nel distinguere tra pratica reale e costruzione narrativa. I testi, infatti, riportano un racconto basato su cerimonie reali, ma rielaborato in forma narrativa. Si tratta cioè di una narrazione “post-rituale”, che potrebbe essere in qualche modo arricchita e/o enfatizzata. L'incertezza nasce dal fatto che questo testo è denso di elementi e segni simbolici ricorrenti nel folklore scandinavo. La presenza di questi elementi potrebbe servire non solo per garantire l'efficacia del rito, ma anche per rendere il racconto più credibile o potente agli occhi di chi lo legge o lo ascolta. Raudvere definisce elementi simbolici le sostanze organiche come sangue, latte, urina (spesso usati per legami o purificazioni); gli alcolici, usati come offerta o veicolo per rimedi; i metalli come il ferro, noto per tenere lontani gli spiriti e le creature soprannaturali; segni grafici, come la croce, la stella o il pentagramma (utilizzati per sigillare, proteggere o invocare). Seguendo la lezione di Raudvere, cercheremo di non leggere ogni incantesimo come un “manuale di istruzioni” letterale, dal momento che il testo è un prodotto culturale complesso in cui si fondono la realtà del guaritore e l'immaginario collettivo della comunità, rendendo difficile

distinguere dove finisce la medicina empirica e dove inizi la narrazione mitica⁽¹⁴⁾.

Gli incantesimi e i sortilegi presentati nel manoscritto non seguono alcun ordine; appaiono nell'ordine in cui sembrano essere stati annotati. Quanto agli incantesimi contenuti, possiamo classificarli in quattro tipi principali, secondo l'inquadramento che dà Klintberg. Il primo gruppo, che comprende il maggior numero di incantesimi, include le cosiddette formule di esortazione (*manande formler*); il secondo include le formule di comparazione o similitudine (*likenelser*); vi sono poi le formule epiche (*episka formler*), in cui viene narrato un precedente mitico; e infine le formule che utilizzano parole segrete (*lönformler*) e/o testi cifrati. Tra i tipi di formule verbali Klintberg include anche le formule rituali (*rituella formler*), in cui le parole descrivono l'atto rituale da compiere simultaneamente; nel *Fribergs svartkonstbok*, però, queste formule non sono presenti. Ancora Klintberg spiega che è raro trovare le formule in forma pura; molto più spesso esse sono infatti combinate tra loro, in modo anche complesso⁽¹⁵⁾. La classificazione di Klintberg, tuttavia, è applicabile solo ai cosiddetti incantesimi verbali, che prevedono, cioè, l'enunciazione di una formula. I libri di magia, come quello esaminato, contengono invece anche molte descrizioni rituali e ricette magiche che non prevedono alcuna enunciazione, ma forniscono indicazioni precise su una serie di azioni da compiere affinché la magia si realizzi.

Intendo illustrare l'eterogeneità del testo tipica degli *svartkonstböcker* evidenziando le sottocategorie testuali che lo caratterizzano: la definizione "libro di magia" è riduttiva, poiché questi testi contengono incantesimi di vario genere

(14) Cfr. C. RAUDVERE, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

(15) Cfr. B. af KLINTBERG, *op. cit.*, e-book.

(di guarigione, di protezione, di utilità pratica), scongiuri, benedizioni, ricette mediche e rimedi pratici. L'esecutore di queste pratiche, così come l'autore di questi testi, è, nel contesto rurale svedese, un uomo di conoscenza, un *klockman* o *viseman* "uomo saggio", "che conosce". La conoscenza si manifesta in vari ambiti nella vita quotidiana e ha lo scopo di aiutare le persone ad affrontare tutte le difficoltà e i disagi della vita quotidiana, dalla malattia, all'assistenza al bestiame, dalla necessità di riconoscere una ragazza vergine all'esigenza di fabbricare candele.

Chi ha redatto questo testo ha combinato diversi elementi: religione cristiana, elementi di *folkstro* (credenze popolari), riferimenti alla magia curativa e a cure senza magia, preparazioni chimiche e riferimenti alchemici. Il libro include anche trascrizioni di incantesimi orali e simboli disegnati. Del *seidr*, la peculiare forma di stregoneria pagana norrena raccontata dalle fonti letterarie antiche, non c'è traccia. Al contrario, molti elementi derivano dalla cultura cristiana, come gli esorcismi o le benedizioni, utilizzate anche per scopi banali, come per proteggere il pane, la carne, il burro, le verdure e così via. Per gli esempi presi in considerazione verrà data una trascrizione sinottica, che rispetta l'ortografia e la paginazione originaria. È fornita inoltre una traduzione di servizio, atta a rendere il senso del testo, che potrebbe non tener conto di eventuali figure di suono, come allitterazioni e/o rime, presenti nell'originale.

5. Formule di esortazione (*manande formler*)

Con *manande formler* Klintberg fa riferimento a formule che, attraverso un linguaggio performativo, non si limitano

a descrivere una situazione, ma “ordinano” alla realtà di cambiare. Molti incantesimi presenti negli *svartkonstböcker* prendono in prestito le formule ecclesiastiche della benedizione o dell’esorcismo; chi le pronuncia eleva l’atto magico a un livello di sacralità che lo protegge dalle accuse di eresia e ne garantisce l’efficacia agli occhi della comunità.

Tra le formule di esortazione contenute nel *Fribergsbok* meritano attenzione alcuni incantesimi di esorcismo piuttosto lunghi; il primo occupa ben sei pagine. Questi esorcismi sono diretti contro tutti gli spiriti maligni. Questa categoria include sia i demoni menzionati nella Bibbia (spesso nel numero di 18.000), sia le creature del *folktro* nordico, che in questo contesto sono equiparate a demoni. Sono inclusi tra i mali da scacciare anche gli individui che praticano la magia occulta, ed è pertanto evidente che chi pronuncia questa formula non vuole essere incluso nella categoria, perché la sacralità del rito, svolto nel nome della Trinità, lo pone al di sopra della pratica magica. La formula di esortazione è un legamento e inizia con le parole “io lego e proibisco...”; in essa sono poi elencati tutti i mali che la formula intende scacciare:

[...] Trollfolk
alla onda meniskors Konster
Gårdpuker
skogsnufer
älfwar
Waten hästar
alla bärgatroll
alla slags Wätter
bolwätter
jordwätter
Hyllemoder

onda bär
 alla slags opyske och förgiftiga spökelser [...]
 (f. 51v, p. 100)

[“...gli stregoni, le arti di tutte le persone malvage, i *gård-puker* (creature maligne delle fattorie), gli spiriti delle foreste, gli elfi, i *bäckhästar* (cavalli del ruscello: nel folclore della Svezia meridionale, è una creatura acquatica tra le più comuni), ogni sorta di troll delle montagne, ogni tipo di creatura o spirito, le creature della casa, le creature della terra, le *hyllemoder* (creature femminili che dimorano sotto gli alberi di sambuco), i malvagi *bjärrar* (una sorta di creatura troll con le sembianze prevalenti di una lepre o di un gatto), ogni tipo di piccolo troll e spirito capace di arrecare danno.]

Verso la fine, l’ammonimento (*förmaning*) viene attribuito a Papa Leone III:

Denna föregående och efterföljande Bön, komponerade Påven Leo (Leo III) och gaf sin broder Carolo Magno
 Den som hene läser elr bär
 på sig han skall den dagen
 icke blifwa mördad elr såras
 elr får någon odöd och ingen djefwul
 och ingen ond meniska skall skada honom
 til lif elr själ han får ock
 så ofta han henne läser 1000 dagars
 efterlåtelse.
 (f. 54r, p. 105)

[Questa preghiera, che precede e segue, fu composta da Papa Leone III e donata a suo fratello Carlo Magno. Chiunque la legga o la porti su di sé non sarà ucciso né ferito in quel giorno, e nessun non-morto, nessun diavolo e nessun uomo malvagio potrà nuocergli nella vita o nell'anima; riceverà inoltre 1000 giorni di indulgenza ogni volta che la leggerà]

Questo passaggio è un esempio perfetto di come la magia popolare svedese assorbisse elementi della letteratura esoterica europea. Citare papa Leone III e Carlo Magno conferisce all'incantesimo una certa autorità: già agli inizi del XVI secolo circolava sotto forma di manoscritto una presunta lettera protettiva inviata da Leone III, papa dal 795 e l'816, a Carlo Magno; alla fine del XVII secolo, questa lettera fu utilizzata come base per un *enchiridion*, un manuale di magia in francese. Uno di questi, intitolato *Clavicule de l'enchiridion du Pape Leon*, conteneva esorcismi e istruzioni su come evocare tesori o creare amuleti⁽¹⁶⁾. Questo *förmaning* è presentato come un amuleto testuale: il testo specifica che il potere non deriva solo dalla lettura, ma anche dal "portarlo su di sé". Questa funzione della parola come talismano fisico era leggendariamente attribuita anche all'*enchiridion* di Papa Leone III.

Anche nel secondo *förmaning* presente nel manoscritto le creature del folklore nordiche sono indirizzate come esseri maligni:

på Guds vägnar och binder
dem med de samma starka band
som Gud hafwer bundet all

(16) Cfr. O. DAVIES., *Grimoires*, cit., pp. 34-35.

onda andar som äro under jorden, och öfwer jorden, på jorden och i jorden. Them förmanar jag och förbjuder jag at gjöra Thetta Guds barn N: någon skada elr mehn, så förbjuder jag troll och trolfolck, bärgtroll och linormar, drakar och hyllemoder, waten hästar och watenählwar, huswättar och gårdwättar, och alla slags onda andar och förgiftig spökeri, som har i sinne, att gjöra denne Guds tjenare N:
(f. 56r, p. 109)

[Nel nome di Dio li lego con gli stessi forti legami con cui Dio ha legato tutti gli spiriti maligni che si trovano sotto la terra, sopra la terra, sulla terra e dentro la terra. Io li ammonisco e proibisco loro di arrecare a questo figlio di Dio (Nome) alcun danno o ferita; allo stesso modo io bandisco troll e stregoni, troll delle montagne e *lindorm* (serpenti alati), draghi e *hyllemoder* (madri del Sambuco), cavalli del ruscello ed elfi d'acqua, spiriti della casa e spiriti della fattoria, e ogni sorta di spiriti maligni e magie dannose che essi intendano compiere contro questo servitore di Dio (Nome).]

Oltre alle *förmaningar*, si trovano anche formule di esortazione più 'ordinarie', come quella per domare gli incendi. L'intento della formula è sempre quello di modificare la realtà delle cose attraverso il potere della parola; stavolta

non sono però coinvolti esseri soprannaturali, ma gli elementi della natura.

Att stilla wådeld.

Nu döfwer jag och binder, alt det
som jag ser för mina ögon, nu
wänder jag mig til elden och
säger, Tu skall standna och
stå och ej vidare gå i Then Hl:
Trefaldighets Namn Gud Fa-
etc.

(f. 60v, p. 118)

[*Per placare incendi.* Ora anniento e lego tutto ciò che vedo davanti ai miei occhi, ora mi rivolgo al fuoco e dico: ti fermerai e starai e non andrai oltre nel santo nome della Trinità, Dio Padre...].

La condanna alle pratiche magiche espressa negli ammonimenti che sono stati citati deriva dal fatto che chi le pronuncia si pone in una sfera di sacralità che in qualche modo autorizza ed eleva questa pratica, svolta nel nome della Trinità. Tuttavia, nel testo sono presenti anche ammonimenti che richiamano le arti oscure, in cui la formula non è pronunciata in nome di Dio, ma invocando dei demoni. Lo scopo dell'incantesimo in questione è scoprire quale tra i demoni invocati ha danneggiato una persona o il bestiame.

[...] Thenna förmaning, thet är satt
til förmaningar, til at stäm-
ma och framkalla thessa och frå-

ga hwilken af dem hafwer fådt
magt til at gjöra denna meni-
ska skada på hans lif eller leka-
men elr kreatur [...]
(f. 58r, p. 113)

[...questo ammonimento, si dice, serve per ammonire,
per chiamare a sé ed evocare costoro, e chiedere chi tra di
loro abbia ricevuto il potere di danneggiare questa perso-
na nella sua vita, nel suo corpo o nel suo bestiame].

Secondo quanto scritto, l'esecutore deve leggere il
"Padre Nostro" al contrario e dire tre volte «Signore Gesù
liberami dal male»

[...] ställe i gån med dena för-
maning som är Fader vår som
läses til bakars;
Ther efter säges 3 gånger Jesu
Herrans X fria mig ifrån alt ondt.
(ff. 58r-58v, pp. 113-114)

[Comincia con questa ammonizione, che è il Padre
Nostro che deve essere letto al contrario; poi di per tre
volte: Signore Gesù liberami dal male].

Questa pratica di inversione rituale non era necessaria-
mente vista come un atto satanico nel folklore rurale svede-
se, ma serviva a sprigionare una potenza magica diversa da
quella liturgica. L'idea è che invertendo l'ordine delle pa-
role si "scioglie" il legame della malattia o del maleficio e si
inverte l'ordine di quanto è accaduto.

La ripetizione ternaria riflette l'importanza del numero tre come simbolo della Trinità, che agisce come un sigillo per garantire che l'atto magico sia completo e vincolante. È affascinante notare come un atto di inversione (il Padre Nostro al contrario) sia immediatamente seguito da un'invocazione ortodossa "Signore Gesù liberami dal male". Questo dimostra come il guaritore cercasse di bilanciare il potere coercitivo della magia con la protezione e l'autorità della fede cristiana. Per le autorità ecclesiastiche dell'epoca, recitare il Padre Nostro al contrario poteva essere una prova di superstizione o peggio. Tuttavia, per l'esecutore del rito, era semplicemente una tecnica necessaria per rendere efficace la guarigione, dimostrando quella discrepanza di visione tra clero e popolo a cui si faceva cenno prima.

6. Formule di similitudine (*Liknelser formler*)

Secondo la Legge di Somiglianza di Frazer, il richiamo verbale del risultato desiderato produce l'effetto magico. Frazer, nel suo celebre saggio *Il ramo d'oro* (*The Golden Bough*), definisce la magia simpatetica basandosi su due leggi principali: la legge di somiglianza e la legge di contatto o contagio. Secondo la prima legge, vale il principio secondo cui "il simile produce il simile", per cui l'effetto desiderato può essere ottenuto imitandolo; secondo la legge di contatto, cose che sono state vicine tra loro e continuano a influenzarsi. Nelle formule spesso le due leggi coesistono⁽¹⁷⁾. Un esempio è l'incantesimo per far tornare a casa un ladro, che richiede di

(17) Cfr. J.G. FRAZER, *The Golden Bough. A Study in Comparative Religion*, vol. 1, MacMillan and Co., New York and London 1894, pp. 15-18.

far girare al contrario un mulino a mano: il movimento del mulino rappresenta il caos che colpirà la vita del ladro finché non restituirà la refurtiva. L'incantesimo viene lanciato invocando l'intervento di 7000 diavoli.

*At drifwa en Tjufhem
med tjufwegosset.*

En Torsdags morgon före
Solens uppgång skal du
naken taga 3 eldglöder
och kasta i ögat på en hand-
qwarn och i det du begyn-
ner draga henne awigt om-
kring säg 3 gånger följande
ord.

Upp i The wärste djefwlar som
äro uti helfwites afgrund
och efter den tjufwen som
stulit det elr det och så
starkt som jag drager denna
qwarnen ifrigt omkring
skolen i drifwa honom att
han får hwarken rast elr
ro förrän han skaffat det elr
deti sitt bo, i 7000 djeflars
namn.

Desse ord upprepas 3 gånger,
samt continueras på samma sätt
i 3 Torsdags mornar före solenes
uppgång, då tjufwen komer
nog hem med det han stulet.
(ff. 44v-45r, pp.86-87)

[*Riportare a casa un ladro con la refurtiva*. Un giovedì mattina, prima dell'alba, tu, nudo, dovrai prendere 3 carboni ardenti e gettarli nell'occhio di una macina a mano; mentre inizi a girarla al contrario, pronuncia le seguenti parole per tre volte: «Sorgete, voi, i peggiori diavoli che sono nella fossa dell'inferno, e inseguite il ladro che ha rubato questo o quello; e così forte come io giro con foga questa macina, voi lo incalzerete affinché non abbia né riposo né pace finché non riporterà questo o quello al suo posto, nel nome di 7000 diavoli». Queste parole vanno ripetute 3 volte, e si deve procedere allo stesso modo per 3 giovedì mattina prima dell'alba; allora il ladro tornerà a casa con ciò che ha rubato.]

Questo rito è un esempio perfetto di magia coercitiva basata sulla sofferenza simpatetica. Il giovedì prima dell'alba è il momento classico della magia scandinava. Jonathan Roper spiega, infatti, che esistono vere e proprie restrizioni sui giorni della settimana in cui gli incantesimi possono essere eseguiti. I giorni dedicati sono in particolare il giovedì e il sabato, che Roper definisce *backward days*, cioè adatti agli incantesimi che intendono invertire il corso o lo stato delle cose⁽¹⁸⁾. Incantesimi del genere fungevano probabilmente da deterrente psicologico. La sola eventualità, ritenuta possibile, che la vittima potesse agire magicamente contro il ladro esercitava una certa pressione sociale che poteva eventualmente spingere i colpevoli a restituire la refurtiva in segreto per evitare la maledizione.

Le formule di comparazione possono presentarsi insieme ad altri tipi di formule. Ad esempio, nel primo

(18) J. ROPER J., *Charm, Charmers and Charming: International Research on Verbal Magic*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke-New York 2009, p. 240.

ammonimento citato, si legge che l'esecutore sarà in grado di cacciare gli spiriti maligni allo stesso modo in cui Dio aveva bandito gli angeli ribelli:

Gud han förböd de onde änglar
himmelen jag förbjuder dem det

[Dio bandì gli angeli malvagi dal cielo, / io proibisco
loro...]

(f. 52r, p. 101)

7. Formule narrative (*episka formler*)

Questa categoria di formule è in qualche modo connessa con la precedente, poiché si basa sul principio del *similia similibus*. In questo caso, però, nella formula la similitudine è nella narrazione di un precedente mitico (*historiola*) che stabilisce un legame tra una dimensione umana e una mitica in cui le tensioni sono risolte⁽¹⁹⁾. Un tipico esempio di formula narrativa è dato dagli incantesimi di guarigione delle emorragie. In questi incantesimi ricorre la narrazione mitica di come Gesù, o un santo, abbia fermato l'acqua del fiume Giordano. Allo stesso modo l'incantesimo dovrà

(19) In merito all'uso dell'*historiola* nelle formule di incantesimi si vedano anche P. RAMAT, *Per una tipologia degli incantesimi germanici*, in P. Chiarini et al. (a cura di), *Filologia e critica. Studi in onore di Vittorio Santoli*, Bulzoni, Roma 1976, pp. 60-64; D. FRANKFURTER, *Narrating Power. The Theory and Practice of the Magical Historiola in Ritual Spells*, in M. Meyer, P. Mirecki (eds), *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, Brill, Leiden 1995, pp. 457-476; M. BUZZONI, *Il "genere" incantesimo nella tradizione anglosassone: aspetti semantico-pragmatici e sviluppo diacronico*, La Nuova Italia Editrice, Firenze 1996, pp. 21-40; E. CIANCI, *Incantesimi e benedizioni nella letteratura tedesca medievale (IX-XIII sec.)*, Kümmerle Verlag, Göppingen 2004, pp. 46-51).

fermare il flusso del sangue. Questo incantesimo era talmente tanto diffuso che talora l'*historiola* manca dell'elemento comparativo, come nel caso che segue, in cui non si fa riferimento né alle acque del fiume, né al miracolo. La sola menzione di un ponte richiama l'evento mitico che ha la sua fonte nei testi sacri, fondendo il Vangelo di Matteo (3:13-17) con il racconto veterotestamentario del passaggio del Giordano in Giosuè (3:14-17)⁽²⁰⁾.

Att stämma blod och döfva värk.

Jesus Kristus gick öfver denna Bro da
stämde han all blod, da döfde han all
all vee all dove all värk Inom de 3 namn
Gud faders sons och den hellig andes namn
Läses 3 gånger
(f. 74r, p. 145)

[Per arrestare il sangue e attutire il dolore. Gesù Cristo attraversò questo ponte, allora egli fermò ogni sangue, allora egli attenuò ogni male, ogni dolore, ogni sofferenza. Nel nome dei tre: nel nome di Dio Padre, del Figlio e dello Spirito Santo. Da leggere tre volte.]

Le formule per fermare il sangue sono tra le più diffuse e quasi sempre contengono una *historiola* che collega l'evento fisico presente a verità teologiche immutabili al fine di 'congelare' la situazione⁽²¹⁾.

(20) Cfr. B. af KLINTBERG, *op. cit.*, e-book.

(21) In aria germanica, tra gli incantesimi per fermare il sangue ricorre spesso l'*historiola* che ha per protagonista Longino: come la lancia di Longino trafisse il costato di Cristo e la ferita non andò in suppurazione, allo stesso modo la ferita del paziente da medicare non suppuerà (cfr. K. JOLLY, *Medieval Magic: Definitions, Beliefs, Practices*, in K. Jolly, C. Raudvere. E. Peters (eds),

At stämma blod

Säg så

Så sant som Wår Her-
re Jesus Christ påtog
sig syndernas brist, och
swettade sjelf blod uti
örtagården och är född uti
Mariae sköte så sandt
som det är wist så skal
ditt blod N.N. stanna
och stå i the 3 helige
Namn Gud fader Sons
och thens Hl: andes.

Probatum est.

(f. 34v-35r, pp. 66-67)

[*Per arrestare il sangue.* Dì così: tanto è vero che nostro Signore Gesù Cristo prese su di Sé la remissione dei peccati, e sudò sangue nell'orto del Getsemani e nacque nel grembo di Maria, quanto sicuramente questo è vero, così il tuo sangue, N.N., deve fermarsi e arrestarsi nel nome dei 3 Santi Nomi di Dio Padre, del Figlio e dello Spirito Santo. È provato].

Citare il momento in cui Cristo 'sudò sangue' nell'orto degli ulivi serve a riportare il sangue sotto il controllo divino. Nelle tradizioni popolari nordiche, l'orto del Getsemani era spesso visto come il luogo dove crescevano tutte le erbe curative. Citandolo, il guaritore non solo evoca la Passione, ma si connette idealmente alla fonte

originale di ogni medicina e rimedio naturale. Questo incantesimo lega la guarigione a tre pilastri della fede: il perdono dei peccati, l'Incarnazione di Cristo (il grembo di Maria) e la Passione. La riuscita dell'incantesimo, pertanto, è legata alla fede del malato: se il malato crede che Gesù sia nato e abbia salvato l'umanità, allora deve credere che il sangue si fermerà; se mette in dubbio l'efficacia del rito sta mettendo in dubbio i dogmi della Chiesa⁽²²⁾.

Lo spazio per il nome indica che la magia è personalizzata; il guaritore deve inserire il nome della persona ferita per dirigere l'energia del rito. La dicitura *Probatum est* non è parte della formula da recitare, ma una nota del compilatore per assicurare l'utente che la formula è efficace e ha funzionato in precedenza.

La formula che segue ha la stessa funzione, ma stavolta è espressione di una magia di trasgressione, dove il potere dell'incantesimo deriva dall'evocazione di atti peccaminosi o socialmente devianti.

Att stämma blod.

Så led är ditt blod til at rinna, som den
 qwinna som om lördagen monde spinna elr
 som then ther drager til tinga som har sant
 at säga och säger osant; I Namn Faders och
 Sons och then Hl: andes; i hans elr henes
 namn nu är til blod stämt i Fans namn. Lege
 tres.

(f. 60r, p. 117)

(22) B. af KLINTBERG (*op. cit.*, e-book) sostiene che le similitudini che alludono alle punizioni per chi viola i precetti della Chiesa (come chi lavora di domenica o giura il falso) abbiano avuto origine nel tardo medioevo da movimenti laicali e che, pertanto, contengano una velata satira sociale.

[*Per arrestare il sangue.* Il tuo sangue è così cattivo nello scorrere, come quella donna che filò di sabato, o come colui che va in tribunale e ha la verità da dire, e dice il falso; nel nome del Padre, del Figlio e dello Spirito Santo; nel nome di lui o di lei ora il tuo sangue è arrestato, nel nome del diavolo. Leggere tre volte].

In questo incantesimo viene messa in atto una comparazione in senso negativo: il sangue è riprovevole quanto lo sono la violazione del riposo sacro del sabato o lo spergiuro in tribunale. L'atto "innaturale" di questi peccati viene usato per forzare l'atto altrettanto "innaturale" dell'arresto del sangue. La formula finale mescola la benedizione trinitaria con un'invocazione al diavolo, con cui l'operatore non si affida più solo alla grazia divina, ma cerca di coartare la realtà usando forze proibite. La parola magica, quindi, è necessaria, sia essa sacra, eterodossa o sovversiva perché permette all'uomo di negoziare la propria salute e sicurezza contro le minacce del quotidiano.

8. Formule segrete (*lönnformulae*)

Il termine *lönnformulae* (o *lönnformler*) si riferisce alle formule segrete o nascoste (dallo svedese *lönn*, che significa "segreto", "celato") tipiche della tradizione magica scandinava che costituiscono il cuore esoterico dei *svartkonstböcker*. Esse costituiscono un caso particolare tra le formule, poiché in esse ha un ruolo fondamentale la parola scritta. Esse sono vincolate al segreto e utilizzano un linguaggio codificato. Spesso includono parole senza un significato apparente o preghiere distorte, pensate per agire

direttamente sulla realtà fisica. Le ragioni dell'occultamento vanno ricercate nella volontà di difendere il "capitale intellettuale", vale a dire che se la conoscenza è dominio di pochi ha più valore, ma anche nella necessità di dover nascondere le parti più oscure o pericolose del libro da occhi indiscreti o dalle autorità. Alla segretezza, inoltre, era legata anche l'efficacia rituale, la scrittura cifrata proteggeva l'integrità del potere contenuto nella parola⁽²³⁾.

Le rune erano talora usate come codice crittografico, essendo ormai non più di uso comune. Talora si faceva ricorso ad alfabeti inventati o simboli della Cabala; frequentemente lo scriba scriveva solo le iniziali delle parole della formula, che doveva poi essere completata a memoria durante l'esecuzione. Queste formule erano considerate cariche di una forza intrinseca ed erano usate per casi disparati, anche difficili, come fermare emorragie inarrestabili, scacciare demoni o proteggere i soldati dai proiettili. L'efficacia dipendeva dalla precisione, per cui sbagliare una singola parola poteva invalidare il rito e ritorcersi contro l'operatore. Nonostante la segretezza, molte *lönformulae* seguono la logica di Frazer, nascondono cioè un'*historiola* che viene sussurrata a bassa voce affinché solo le potenze spirituali e l'oggetto del rito possano sentire e obbedire al comando di guarigione.

Nel *Fribergs svartkonstbok* un esempio è dato dall'incantesimo in cui è previsto l'uso della parola priva di senso ABRAUDIOS per guarire i brividi. La parola viene scritta su carta e ogni giorno viene cancellata una lettera finché non sparisce il male. L'idea è che il male si riduca gradualmente come si riducono i caratteri della parola.

(23) A. OHRVIK, *A Hidden Magical Universe? Exploring the Secrets of Secrecy in Early Modern Manuscripts*, in «ARV. Scandinavian Yearbook of Folklore», vol. 70 (2014), pp.102-108.

At bota Frossan

ABRAUDIOS

ABRAUDIO

ABRAUD

ABRAU

ABRA

ABR

AB

A

abrudios

abrudio

abru di

abrud

abru

abr

ab

a

Detta kan ock bru-

kas på samma sätt

til samma sjukdom

Klipp det i 9 delar hwar rad

för sig gif patienten det in en

rad hwar gång frossan honom

angriper.

iPS

(f. 51r, p. 99))

[*Per guarire i brividi (febbre)* ABRAUDIOS ABRAUDIO
ABRAUD ABRAU ABRA ABR AB A abrudios abrudio
abru di abrud abru abr ab a Questo può essere usato allo
stesso modo per la medesima malattia. Taglia in nove
parti, ogni riga singolarmente, e dalle al paziente ogni
volta che ha i brividi].

Scrivendo la parola e rimuovendo una lettera alla volta fino a farla scomparire (lasciando solo la “A”), si crea un’analogia visiva e spirituale con la febbre. Quando la parola svanisce nel nulla, anche l’infiammazione e i brividi devono abbandonare il corpo del paziente. A differenza delle *historiolae*, che venivano recitate, questa formula è talismanica e fisica. Il fatto di tagliare le righe e “darle al paziente” significa che il malato doveva ingerire i pezzetti di carta su cui era scritta la formula; in tal modo il testo portava il potere della cancellazione direttamente all’interno dell’organismo malato. La parola ABRAUDIOS è priva di significato, ma potrebbe trattarsi di una variante del più celebre ABRACADABRA.

Una formula segreta è anche quella contenuta nel celebre quadrato sator, che ricorre anche nel testo⁽²⁴⁾. Le parole del quadrato (Sator, Arepo, Tenet, Opera, Rotas) sono qui pronunciate per fermare i cavalli che vogliono scappare.

sator

arepo

tenet

opera

rotas

Thenne wers brukas då hästar

wilja skena då de strax stan-

(24) Il quadrato del Sator è una iscrizione in lingua latina, il cui significato, nonostante numerose speculazioni, è oscuro, ed è composta dalle parole SATOR, AREPO, TENET, OPERA, ROTAS (la teoria più accreditata è che sia l’anagramma delle parole Pater Noster, ripetute due volte, con l’aggiunta di una *a* e una *o* a indicare l’alfa e l’omega, il principio e la fine). La loro giustapposizione dà luogo a un palindromo. Tra gli esemplari più antichi ve ne sono due rinvenuti a Pompei e antecedenti al 79 d.C. Per ulteriori approfondimenti sul quadrato del Sator si vedano T.R. FORBES, *The Midwife and the Witch*, AMS Press, New York 1982, pp. 84-93; T. BAINES, *The Rotas-Sator Square: a New Investigation*, in «New Testament Studies», vol. 33 (1987), pp. 469-476.

na så snart thessa 5 ord näm-
nas.

(f. 48v, p. 94)

[Sator, Arepo, Tenet, Opera, Rotas. Questo verso è usato quando i cavalli vogliono correre, allora si fermano subito non appena queste 5 parole sono pronunciate].

Un'altra variante del Sator è usata per impedire agli spiriti sotterranei di sottrarre un tesoro durante uno scavo.

*Att hindra jordvätter så at
de ej draga undan en jord-
skatt då man will grafwa
honom upp.*

Sedan man brugt det
på pag: 64 stående bandet,
tag 4 Eke pinnar och sätt
dem i en fyrkant om plat-
sen och säg wid hwar pinnes
nedsätjande följande ord
i det du sätter den första
Säg Sata, den andra Rata,
den tredje Upera och den
fjerde Venego, så kunna
inga Vätter draga den undan.

(f. 43r, p. 83)

[Per impedire alle creature sotterranee di sottrarre un tesoro sepolto quando si desidera dissotterarlo. Dopo aver utilizzato l'incantesimo riportato a pagina 64, prendi 4 bastoncini di quercia e disponili a quadrato nel luogo [del

ritrovamento]; mentre pianta ogni bastoncino, pronuncia le seguenti parole: al primo di' *Sata*, al secondo *Rata*, al terzo *Upera* e al quarto *Venego*; così nessuna creatura potrà portarlo via].

Questo rituale affronta una delle credenze più radicate del folklore scandinavo, ovvero l'idea che i tesori nascosti fossero vivi e potessero sprofondare nel terreno o spostarsi magicamente se chi cercava di scavare non rispettava determinate regole, come il silenzio assoluto. Usare bastoncini di quercia, simbolo di forza e possenza, serve a "inchiodare" il tesoro al suolo, rendendolo inamovibile per le creature del sottosuolo. Disporre i bastoncini in un quadrato crea un perimetro sacro, una barriera che separa il tesoro dal mondo sotterraneo e lo porta sotto il controllo dell'operatore. *Sata Rata Upera Venego* è chiaramente una versione foneticamente corrotta del celebre quadrato del Sator.

Alcune formule segrete hanno origini antichissime, come quella per scoprire un ladro usando le forbici:

*At utransaka hwem som är
tjufwen så något är stulit.
Sätt saxen i hållet som
wanligt är wid skärslände och
upprepa följande ord.
Dies, Mies, Jeschef,
Benedofet, Dovvima
Enitemaus.
(f. 45r, p. 87)*

[*Scoprire chi è il ladro in caso di furto.* Posiziona le forbici nella direzione abitualmente seguita dallo *skärslände*

(la persona che esegue questo tipo di incantesimo che richiede l'uso delle forbici) e ripeti le seguenti parole: *Dies, Mies, Jeschet, Boenedofet, Dowvima, Enitemaus*].

La sequenza *Dies, Mies, Jeschef, Benedofet, Dowvima, Enitemans* è di origine incerta. È menzionata in merito a Georg Pictorius, medico vissuto nella prima metà del XVI secolo a Villingen, in Germania. La formula era collegata a una pratica di coscinomanzia, atta a scoprire autori di furti, che consisteva nel conficcare delle forbici da tosatura nel bordo di un setaccio, dopodiché due persone, una di fronte all'altra, mettevano il medio della mano destra sotto le forbici in modo tale che queste potessero muoversi; venivano poi pronunciati i nomi delle persone sospettate di furto e, a ogni nome si recitavano per sei volte alcune di queste parole incomprensibili, la cui forza magica derivava dalla loro incomprensibilità. Queste parole avevano il potere di confinare nel setaccio il demone che, al momento della pronuncia del nome del ladro, faceva ruotare il setaccio stesso⁽²⁵⁾. In questo contesto, le parole non servono a maledire

(25) Cfr. A. EEKHOF, *De draaiende teems en de draaiende bijbel, twee vormen van gods-oordeel*, in «Nederlands Archief Voor Kerkgeschiedenis» vol. 8, no. 3 (1911), p. 208. Si ha traccia della formula anche in tempi relativamente recenti e con grafia leggermente diversa (*Dies Mies Jeschet Boene Doesef Dowvema Enitemaus*) in H.P. LOVECRAFT, *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward, part 1.*, in «Weird Tales Magazine», vol. 35, no. 9 (1941), p. 38, al quale è probabilmente giunta attraverso l'esoterista Éliphas Lévi che, a sua volta, la fa risalire al *De occulta philosophia*, il libro apocrifo di Cornelio Agrippa (VI secolo), in cui vi sono parti, come questa, attribuite al medico e alchimista medievale del XIII secolo Pietro d'Abano (cfr. O. DAVIES, *Grimoires*, cit., pp. 50-52, 113-114; E. HARDMAN, *Vile Volumes? Bibliographic Citation in H.P. Lovecraft's The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, in «The Library Quarterly. Information, Community, Policy», vol. 85, no. 3 (2015), p. 324). Si vedano anche A.E. Waite, *The Book of Black Magic and of Pacts, Including the Rites and Mysteries of Goëtic Theurgy, Sorcery, and Infernal Necromancy*, Weiser, New York 1972, pp. 58-59; O. DAVIS, *The Witch, the Magician, and the Devil in*

ma a costringere la verità a manifestarsi. L'uso di questa specifica formula dimostra che il compilatore non attingeva solo al folklore locale, ma era inserito in un flusso di conoscenze magiche 'dotte' che attraversava tutta l'Europa.

Fa notare Ohrvik che se l'uso di *lønnskriфт* è senza dubbio un atto di occultamento, d'altro canto anche l'uso di lingue straniere potrebbe essere talora considerato una strategia di segretezza⁽²⁶⁾. A seconda delle circostanze culturali e sociali, l'uso di queste lingue – anche lo pseudo-latino – poteva costituire un impedimento per lettori privi della necessaria istruzione.

9. Oltre gli incantesimi: alchimia, descrizioni rituali e rimedi Alchimia

Nella parte finale del libro si trovano per lo più ricette e rimedi. Tra questi una ricetta tratta da un giornale, il *Göteborgs Tidningar* n. 60 del 29 maggio 1795, a pagina 133 del manoscritto.

Come è stato detto in precedenza, in merito alle formule segrete, i simboli alchemici potevano essere usati per crittografare una formula. Nel *Fribergs svartkonstbok*, in realtà, gli aspetti alchemici sono più legati all'uso pratico di questa disciplina, ovvero alla chimica, che a quello esoterico. Ciononostante, a un certo punto della sua raccolta, lo scriba ha sentito la necessità di annotare il significato di un buon numero di simboli alchemici. Le tavole alchemiche erano molto popolari tra gli alchimisti. Qui troviamo

Early Modern Grimoires, in B.C. Otto, D. Johannsen (eds), *Fictional Practice. Magic, Narration, and the Power of Imagination*, Leiden, Brill 2021, p. 96.

(26) A. OHRVIK, *A Hidden Magical Universe?*, cit., pp. 114-115.

un esempio in cui, ai primi posti, figurano i sette metalli planetari con i relativi simboli (vedi immagine). Noti in Europa fin dall'antichità classica, i sette metalli erano associati ai sette pianeti classici: il piombo corrispondente a Saturno, lo stagno a Giove, il ferro a Marte, l'oro al Sole, il rame a Venere, il mercurio (argento vivo) a Mercurio, l'argento alla Luna.

Troviamo poi una miscela dei 'tre principi' (*tria prima*) dei quali, secondo Paracelso (1493-1541), sono composte le sostanze materiali (ovvero lo zolfo o anima, il mercurio o spirito, il sale o corpo), gli elementi mondani (antimonio, arsenico, bismuto, platino, zolfo, zinco), i Sali e alcuni composti (sale ammonico, cinabro, vitriol, ecc.) e i quattro elementi base (fuoco, aria, acqua, terra), oltre a fuoco e acqua presentati insieme.

Nella parte finale si trovano principalmente ricette e rimedi, inclusa una ricetta tratta da un giornale del 1795, alla pagina 133 del manoscritto. In campo alchemico, vi sono ricette con piombo e vitriol, legate più alla chimica pratica che all'esoterismo.

*Att förstå ett recepts
Metaller och Metalliska
droppar.
Guld Silfwer
Koppar Järn Bly
Ten Qwicksliwfer
Spitsglas Arsenicum
Cinober Vissmut
Zink Massing
Auripigmentum
Eld Luft Vatten*

Jorden Eld och Vaten

Svavel

Salt och Kalk-arter.

Alun Vicktrill

Saltpeter Koksalt

Salmiak Ättika

Destillerad ättika Spansk-
gröna Crystaliserad Spansk-
gröna Vinsten

Vinstens Salt Borax

Urin Aska Pottaska

(ff. 48v-49r, pp. 94-95)

[*Per comprendere una ricetta.* Metalli e gocce metalliche: oro, argento, rame, ferro, piombo, stagno, argento vivo (mercurio), antimonio, arsenico, cinabro (solfuro di mercurio), bismuto, zinco, ottone, orpimento (trisolfuro di arsenico). Fuoco, aria, acqua, terra, fuoco e acqua, zolfo. *Sali e pietre calcaree:* allume, vetriolo, sale di salnitro (nitrato di potassio), sale da cucina, sale ammoniaco, aceto, aceto distillato, verderame, verderame cristallizzato, cremore di tartaro, sale di cremore di tartaro, borace, urina, cenere, potassa].

10. Descrizioni rituali e ricette magiche

L'incantesimo senza formula si affida esclusivamente all'azione, al *dromenon*. In questa sezione possiamo includere descrizioni di riti e ricette magiche, spesso basati su un principio mimetico. L'intenzione magica viene, cioè, espressa attraverso un'azione che imita il risultato desiderato, oppure attraverso la fabbricazione di artefatti, come amuleti e/o talismani, dotati di potere magico e in qualche modo legati all'obiettivo da raggiungere. In questo caso il potere risiede nella materia o nella forma dell'oggetto stesso. Nel manoscritto si incontrano entrambe le tipologie testuali, come è evidente negli esempi che seguono. Molte hanno scopi pratici, come per esempio aver buoni cavalli, ma ne esistono anche per scopi più egoistici.

Att få goda hästar.

Tag 3 lortar på en annans dyng-
hög, brän dem i stallet på en
sten, gif hästarna det in i hafre,
på en Söndagsmorgon innan
Solen upgår. Eller också gif
dem qwinomjolk i hafre.
(f. 17r, p. 31)

[*Per aver cavalli buoni.* Prendi tre escrementi dal mucchio di letame di un altro, bruciali nella stalla su una pietra, dallo ai cavalli nell'avena una domenica mattina prima che sorga il sole. Oppure da' loro latte materno mischiato nell'avena]

Questo tipo di prescrizione è un rimedio pratico-rituale che non richiede l'enunciazione di una formula verbale, ma basa la sua efficacia sulla corretta esecuzione delle azioni e sull'uso di sostanze simboliche. Il principio è quello della magia simpatica e da contatto: una parte, seppur deteriorata, di un cavallo buono e sano consente di trasferire la fortuna e la salute al proprio animale. La domenica mattina, inoltre, rappresenta un momento liminale; il latte materno, poi, era considerato una delle sostanze più potenti e curative⁽²⁸⁾.

Att blifwa osynlig.

Tag en stor förgiftad groda, stick
hennes vänstra öga ut, tag en ärta
sätt den i det utstungna ögat och
graf hene sedan ned i jorden, der af
upväxer en ärteref med ärter på,
af dem tag en och lägg under tun-
gan så blir du osynlig.

(f. 20v, p. 38)

[*Per diventare invisibile.* Prendi una grossa rana velenosa, estrai il suo occhio sinistro, prendi un pisello e inseriscilo

(28) Éva Pócs (*Evil Eye in Hungary: Belief, Ritual, Incantation*, in J. Roper (ed.), *Charms and Charming in Europe*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2004, pp. 215) fa notare che secondo le teorie mediche ed etiche della tarda antichità l'essenza della vita era riposta nei fluidi corporei (sangue, latte materno, sperma). La privazione di questi fluidi indebolisce il corpo, la loro assimilazione genera vita. K. STOKKER (*Remedies and Rituals. Folk Medicine in Norway and the New Land*, Minnesota Historical Society Press, St. Paul 2007, e-book) sottolinea come, in Norvegia, fin dall'epoca vichinga, al latte sia stato attribuito il potere di scacciare gli influssi maligni e che, fino a metà del XIX secolo, le madri norvegesi avevano l'usanza di spruzzare latte materno negli occhi dei loro neonati per proteggerli dalla cecità. Il latte, inoltre, era usato anche per lenire le ferite e trattare le infezioni.

nell'occhio cavato; poi seppelliscilo nel terreno. Lì crescerà una pianta di piselli con i suoi baccelli; prendine uno, mettilo sotto la lingua e diventerai invisibile.]

Questo rituale è un esempio di magia simpatetica trasformativa. Partendo dal dato di fatto che l'occhio è lo strumento della visione, secondo la logica magica uccidere la vista della rana e sostituirla con un seme serve a trasferire la capacità di non essere visti, o di ingannare la vista altrui, alla pianta che nascerà. La pianta che germoglia dal bulbo oculare della rana è considerata intrisa dell'essenza della cecità/invisibilità dell'animale. Portare il seme in bocca serve, poi, a legare il potere della pianta direttamente alla persona.

Le ricette che seguono sono indicazioni per creare amuleti e usarli nel modo appropriato.

*Att narra Qwinfolk säga alt
hwad de weta.*

Lägg en Swaletunga i din mun
Kyss henne så sker det.
(f. 16r, p. 29)

[*Per indurre le donne a dire tutto ciò che sanno. Mettiti in bocca una lingua di rondine. Baciala e accadrà.*]

Att alla skola älska dig.

Bär ett Swalehjärta på dig.
(f. 16v, p. 30)

[*Per essere amato da tutti. Porta addosso un cuore di rondine.*]

*Att en flicka ej skal blifwa
hafwande.*

Hon skal hafwa 3 harelortar
hos sig.

(f. 19v, p. 36)

[*Perché una ragazza non resti incinta. Deve portare addosso tre escrementi di lepre*].

Questi incantesimi si basano sulla credenza che le proprietà biologiche o comportamentali di un animale possano essere trasferite all'essere umano tramite il contatto fisico. La lingua dell'animale viene usata per sciogliere la lingua umana, attraverso il bacio che fa da tramite. Fare del cuore, comunemente ritenuto il centro dell'affetto, un amuleto e portarlo con sé proietta una sorta di amabilità intorno a chi lo possiede. L'uso di escrementi di lepre come contraccettivo è un esempio di magia di trasferimento, probabilmente basata sulla velocità e la natura sfuggente dell'animale. La lepre è nota per la sua estrema fertilità, ma nel paradosso della magia popolare le sue secrezioni venivano talvolta usate ritualmente per allontanare o far fuggire il concepimento, così come la lepre sfugge ai cacciatori.

11. Rimedi

Il *Fribergs svartkonstbok* è un libro ricco di ricette e rimedi per trovare soluzioni a questioni di tipo pratico. La magia non compare, ma sono invece richieste competenze nell'ambito della chimica e una certa abilità nel saper maneggiare sostanze specifiche. Tuttavia, è solo un giudizio a posteriori che colloca queste pratiche al di fuori della magia,

distinguendo tra superstizione e scienza. Occorre, però, necessariamente supporre che nel XIX alla maggior parte dei fruitori di queste pratiche non apparisse così netto il confine tra i due ambiti, e che reazioni chimiche o operazioni rituali fossero ritenute espressione della medesima conoscenza. È interessante poi notare come le ricette “chimiche” siano più numerose nella parte finale del manoscritto, evidentemente più tarda. Nella parte finale del manoscritto, infatti, proprio nelle pagine redatte con grafia differente, ci sono numerose indicazioni su come svolgere operazioni quotidiane come, ad esempio, produrre pigmenti colorati, pulire la carta sporca di inchiostro per poterla riutilizzare, produrre inchiostro, uccidere cimici, curare il mal di denti o rendere le scarpe impermeabili.

Le ricette per produrre pigmenti colorati combinano la chimica minerale con la botanica; le indicazioni sono precise e scientificamente sensate. Viene suggerito, infatti, di aggiungere al verderame (acetato di rame), che è un pigmento instabile, l'aceto, che serviva per stabilizzare la soluzione acida; l'aggiunta di gomma arabica fungeva da legante per permettere al colore di aderire alla carta o alla pergamena senza spandersi. Il cremore di tartaro in queste preparazioni agisce come mordente o stabilizzatore di acidità, aiutando il pigmento a mantenere la brillantezza. La gommagutta è una resina prodotta da alberi della famiglia delle *clusiaceae*; si tratta di un ingrediente di importazione, proveniente dal sud-est asiatico, e di difficile reperibilità, anche per il costo elevato. Lo zafferano era utilizzato come alternativa più economica o più facilmente reperibile rispetto alla resina esotica per ottenere tonalità calde di giallo.

Grön färg

Kan winnas då Spansk Gröna rif-
wes ganska fint, hwaremot tages
halfparten winsten och Gummi en
fjärdedel, hwaruppå Gjutes win-
ättika i en flaska, som sättes
sedan i solen eller något warmt
rum. Det ärhålles äfwen af
flerahanda blad och löf, när de stötas
i Mortel och saften utwrides
genom Linen, samt blandas
i winättika, jämte något win-
sten och Gummi watten.

(f. 70v, p. 138)

[*Colore Verde*. Si può ottenere grattugiando o macinando del verderame molto finemente, aggiungendo una mezza parte di cremore di tartaro e un quarto di gomma arabica; su questo composto si versa dell'aceto e lo si ripone in una bottiglia, che va poi collocata al sole o in un luogo caldo. Si ottiene anche da molte foglie, pestandole in un mortaio, spremendone il succo attraverso un panno di lino e mescolandolo con aceto, insieme a un po' di cremore di tartaro e acqua di gomma arabica].

Gul färg

Gummi Gutta eller Safran blan-
das med watten då de smälta
hwilket utwrides genom en Linen
Klut.

(f. 71r, p. 139)

[*Colore giallo*. Si mescolano gommagutta oppure zafferano con acqua; una volta sciolto, spremere attraverso un panno di lino].

La presenza di queste istruzioni conferma manifestamente che questo *svartkonstbok* non è stato solo un grimoire di scongiuri e incantesimi, ma un vero e proprio manuale di sopravvivenza, anche intellettuale. Saper fabbricare l'inchiostro poteva rivelarsi utile anche per lo stesso guaritore, per trascrivere nuove formule o per preparare talismani cartacei, come quelli analizzati in precedenza.

La sopravvivenza nel freddo nord non era solo legata a vicende astratte o immateriali, ma era soprattutto di natura fisica, come suggerisce uno dei rimedi più utili riportato nel manoscritto:

*Medel att göra skodon
ogenomträngliga för
vatten.*

Man smälter tillsamman
50 ort (1 hundra del skålpund) Talg
12 ort Svinister
6 ort terpentin
6 ort Wux gjut
6 ort Matolja
Medan blandningen än
är varm öfverdrages
skodonen der med, och
tillses att alla sömmar
blifva fullständigt genom-
dränkta – blandningen
kan under längre tid för-

varas i ler eller porslins-
burk.

(f. 79r, p. 155)

[*Rimedio per rendere le calzature impermeabili all'acqua.* Fondi insieme: 50 ort⁽²⁹⁾ (circa 215 grammi) di sego (grasso bovino o ovino), 12 ort di grasso di maiale (lardo), 6 ort di trementina, 6 ort di cera fusa, 6 ort di olio da cucina. Mentre la miscela è ancora calda, stendila sulle scarpe e assicurati che tutte le cuciture ne siano completamente imbevute. Il composto può essere conservato a lungo in un vaso di argilla o di porcellana].

Questa ricetta ci riporta alla realtà quotidiana della Svezia rurale, dove l'umidità e il freddo erano nemici costanti. Il rimedio proposto era alla portata di molti e utile a tutti, non solo allo scriba. Il sego e il lardo erano ingredienti facilmente reperibili e fornivano la base grassa idrorepellente per ammorbidire il cuoio; cera e trementina creavano una pellicola protettiva più dura e resistente; la trementina, inoltre, favoriva la penetrazione dei grassi nelle fibre più profonde della pelle. Il suggerimento di imbibire le cuciture è un consiglio tecnico molto accurato, dal momento che i fori dell'ago potevano vanificare l'impermeabilità della calzatura.

(29) *L'ort* è un'antica unità di misura svedese. Sebbene il testo indichi "un centesimo di libbra", il valore esatto è variato nel tempo, ma generalmente corrisponde a circa 4,25 grammi.

12. Conclusioni

Il *Fribergs svartkonstbok* non è solo un libro di magia, ma un crocevia culturale. In esso, la distinzione moderna tra medicina, religione e superstizione si perde completamente. La presenza di rimedi pratici accanto a esorcismi solenni e rituali coercitivi dimostra che per l'individuo del Settecento la conoscenza era un *continuum* tra pratiche e saperi differenti. Il manoscritto ci restituisce l'immagine di una società rurale che gestisce le crisi quotidiane — dalla malattia all'incendio — attraverso un pragmatismo magico che non vede contraddizione tra l'uso del latino ecclesiastico e l'inversione rituale del Padre Nostro. Alcuni di questi incantesimi avrebbero potuto essere bollati come eretici e puniti con la morte degli esecutori o possessori del libro secoli prima, ma nel XVIII secolo le esecuzioni per magia diminuirono drasticamente in Svezia fino all'abolizione definitiva della pena di morte. Tuttavia, la diminuzione delle pene non fu dovuta a un calo delle pratiche magiche: la presenza di numerosi "libri neri" registrati in tutta la Scandinavia, risalenti anche a epoche recenti, conferma che il confine tra magia nera e magia curativa, specie in un contesto popolare rurale, è rimasto a lungo decisamente sfumato.

La figura di Isac Friberg è in qualche modo emblematica. Uomo istruito, perfino ordinato sacerdote, tuttavia trascrive, vende e utilizza *svartkonstböcker*. Questo conferma che il clero era al tempo stesso, e paradossalmente, il principale oppositore della superstizione ma anche il suo involontario custode: figure come Friberg fungevano da mediatori tra la cultura dotta e le necessità materiali dei fedeli. Il suo manoscritto è la prova di una religione vissuta

che agisce in parallelo, e talvolta in tensione, con il dogma ufficiale.

Infine, lo studio strutturale delle formule (seguendo la classificazione di Klintberg) evidenzia la centralità del potere performativo della parola nell'incantesimo. Che si tratti di *historiolae* che collegano il sangue del Getsemani alla ferita dell'ingiuriato, o di *liknelser* che legano il movimento di una macina al tormento di un ladro, il manoscritto con la sua ricchezza di formule è un'espressione manifesta dell'identità tra dire e fare. In questo contesto, il libro stesso, inteso come oggetto fisico da portare con sé, diventa un amuleto, trasformando la scrittura in un atto magico permanente. In conclusione, l'*Isac Fribergs svartkonstbok* è un complesso strumento di gestione della realtà, un documento prezioso che consente di osservare, a distanza di secoli, le strategie con cui una comunità cercava di affrontare l'incertezza dell'esistenza, dominare la natura e proteggere la vita umana.

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BONES, BACK-BREAKING AND MAGICAL CREATURES

MARIA CRISTINA LOMBARDI

ABSTRACT: Some passages of the Old Testament writings (the terrible curses that Jeremiah proclaimed were thrown by the Lord against the idolatrous people of Judah concerning their bones, *Jeremiah*, VIII, 1,2) would seem to have something to do with the belief that men continued to dwell in their bones. Moreover, saints' bones have been preserved as relics endowed with healing power in churches of nearly all countries. Thus, a magical virtue was supposed to reside in bones in both Christian and in pagan times. This article aims to investigate the motif of "back-breaking" as a means of destroying evil beings – which appears to be rooted also in Scandinavia – by investigating and comparing texts belonging to different genres and traditions (sagas, skaldic verses, charms, folktales), and trying to find and reconstruct common elements and patterns in order to discover the possible origin of the motif and how it spread in Nordic literary tradition.

KEYWORDS: Bones, Magical, Creatures, Back-breaking, Kenning

In many Scandinavian medical charms, illnesses are personified as evildoers going to destroy people of farms and villages by breaking their bones, sucking their marrow and blood, eating flesh, etc. Bone-breaking was often mentioned as one of the worst misfortunes, both for humans and

animals, therefore several spells contain folk remedies and magic formulas for curing fractures and sprains

Many examples are preserved in manuscripts of the so called books of magic (Sw. *svartkonstböcker*, No. *svarteböcker*, Da. *sortebøger*, Is. *galdrabækur*) compiled during the late Middle Ages and especially in the Renaissance, through the channel of medical and astronomical manuscripts, spreading through the activity of priests⁽¹⁾.

Spells often present an initial narrative part, called *historiola*, functioning as a narrative model, which describes the meeting of Jesus – usually with some other holy figure (St. Peter or the Virgin Mary) – with the demon of disease. Jesus or the Virgin asks the demon where he is going and he answers that he is running to a farmer to break his bones and suck both his marrow and blood. Jesus forbids it and drives the demon/disease away. But in some cases the protagonist are not Christian figures. Invocations to Northern pagan gods are not infrequent in Icelandic manuscripts, and may occur also in other Scandinavian spells as in the following Swedish charm recorded in Jälluntofta, Småland (Southern Sweden), where it is still the ancient formula “bone to bone”⁽²⁾ that has been handed down for centuries in various contexts and among different and distant cultures, echoing, as a mythical archetype, a very old Germanic tradition represented by the second Merseburg charm⁽³⁾. The majority of the versions of this charm tip-

(1) O. DAVIES, *Grimoires. A History of Magic Books*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009.

(2) J. ROPER, *English Verbal Charms*, Academia Scientiarum Fennica, CXXXVI, Helsinki 2005, pp. 96 – 100.

(3) Ivi, p.98, *Phol ende Uodan uuorun zi holza./du uuart demo Balderes uolon sin uuoz birenkit./ thu biguolen Sintbgunt, Sunna era suister./thu biguolen Friia, Uolla era suister./thu biguolen Uodan, so he uuola conda:/sose benrenki, sose bluotrenki,/sose lidirenki:ben zi bena, bluot/ zi bluodalid zi geliden,*

logy have both *historiola* and conjuration. In the English and the Scandinavian variants the most popular element is “bone”, as the following Swedish example clearly shows:

Mot vrickning eller benfraktur

Oden rider över sten och bärg;
Han rider sin häst
Ur vred och I led,
Ur olag och I lag,
Ben till ben, led till led,
Som det bäst var, när det helt var⁽⁴⁾.

Against a sprain or a bone fracture

«Oden rides over stone and hills,/ He rides his horse out
of sprain/And into joint,/From disorder to order,/Bone to
bone,/ joint to joint,/As it was best, when it was whole.»⁽⁵⁾

Bones are central elements in charm healing procedures and the formula “bone to bone” survives probably due to the example of the «Second Merseburg Charm», the most fully pagan verbal magic formula. It is recorded in most modern European languages⁽⁶⁾. Adalbert Kuhn has linked

sose gelimida sin! «Phol and Wodan were riding to the woods,/and the foot of Balder's foal was sprained/So Sinthgunt, Sunna's sister, conjured it;/ and Frija, Volla's sister, conjured it;/and Wodan conjured it, as well he could:/Like bone-sprain, so blood-sprain,/so joint-sprain:/ Bone to bone, blood to blood,/ joints to joints, so may they be glued.»

(4) E. LINDERHOLM, *Signelser ock besvärjelser från medeltid ock nytid*, Stockholm, Norstedt, 1940, n. 987.

(5) My translation.

(6) J. ROPER, *op. cit.*, p. 97. See also M. SCHUMACHER, *Geschichtenerzählzauber. Die „Merseburger Zaubersprüche“ und die Funktion*

it back to a charm found in the Hindu collection of hymns and incantations, the *Atharva-Veda* dating ca 500 B.C.⁽⁷⁾ In many Scandinavian spells where Christian holy figures act, the wicked are punished by forced exile and confined to remote places from which they can no longer do harm. Thus, unlike what happens in Old Norse sagas and skaldic poetry, here evildoers break bones, but they do not suffer the same fate. Instead in the Old Norse literary world, many evil-doers (witches, magicians, monsters, etc.) are killed by breaking their back-bones. Examples are found in sagas, both in prose and skaldic stanzas: see *Bárðarsaga*, Chap. IV and IX, where respectively Svalr and Kolla are eliminated in this way⁽⁸⁾, or *Friðþjófs saga*, Chap. VI, where the two sorceresses Heiði ok Hamgláma are killed in a like manner⁽⁹⁾.

Thus breaking the back of evil creatures seems to have been the most effective way to destroy them in pagan times. The reason might be connected with the manipulation of bones, as can be deduced from archaeological excavations, which prove that certain bones (both human and animal) were used as amulets since ancient times: small bones of the carpus and tarsus used to be perforated and

der „historiola“ im magischen Ritual. In: Rüdiger Zymner (Hrsg.): *Erzählte Welt – Welt des Erzählens*. Festschrift für Dietrich Weber, Köln, 2000.

(7) A. KUHN, *Indische und germanische Segensprüche*, «Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung», 13, 1864, pp. 49-74 and pp. 113 – 157.

(8) The most recent scholarly editions of *Barðarsaga* are those by Jón Skaptason and Philip Pulsiano, *Barðar saga*, Garland, New York/London, 1984, and the Íslenzk Fornrit edition by Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, *Barðarsaga Snæfellsás*, XIII, Reykjavík, 1991. In this article I quote from the 2nd edition (1968) of Guðni Jónsson, *Barðarsaga Snæfellsás, Íslendingasögur*, III: *Íslendingasagnaútgafan*, Reykjavík, 1946, pp. 295-355.

(9) *Friðþjófs saga, Fornaldar sögur norðurlanda*, út. av Guðni Jónsson, Reykjavík, 1954, ch. VI.

worn as amulets⁽¹⁰⁾. This use has been associated with the belief of bones as the seat of the principle of life, sometimes coinciding with the marrow (as we will see later). The magical power of bones has been assumed to be a survival of primitive human conditions: like the need to predict the severity of the coming winter (such as the wide use of inspecting the breast-bone of a goose killed in a certain period of the year in some American regions)⁽¹¹⁾ or the so-called “bonfire” tradition which seems to have originally been the compound “bone-fire” which symbolized the animal or man burned in ancient sacrifices⁽¹²⁾. In fact, the earliest recorded uses of this term date back to the late 15th century, with the *Catholicum Anglicum* spelling it as *bane-fyre* and John Mirk’s *Book of Festivals* speaking of a communal fire in celebrations on Saint John’s Eve, that *was clene bones & no wode & that is callid a bone fyre* «was clean bones and no wood and that is called a bone-fire»⁽¹³⁾.

The early Christian Church had spread the belief in the efficacy of the saints’ bones, and the idea of miraculous virtues supposed to reside in bones was widely accepted. The most common relics associated with the apostles and local saints renowned for working miracles across Europe were constituted by bones, the trade of which was one of the

(10) D.G. BRINTON, *Races and peoples; lectures on the science of ethnography*, Philadelphia, D. McKay, 1890, p. 18.

(11) H. FISHWICK, *Bones in a Pig’s Skull, Notes and Queries*, 3rd series, vol. ix, London, Wellington Street, 1866, p. 146 (quoted by Brinton, 1890, p. 17).

(12) Ivi, p. 109.

(13) A bonfire was originally a ‘bone-fire’. Bonfires are survive from an old tradition whereby large fires were set alight on public feast days. The bones of animals were burned in these fires as part of a purification ritual, warding off evil spirits and ensuring that the land would remain fertile. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dictionary> (05.12.2025)

briskest and most profitable businesses in the Middle Ages. Moreover, the belief in the magical power of bones (to injure an enemy, believing that their magical power could be directed against foe) is also found in several prophecies, spells and curses (*Egils Saga*, Chapter LX, when Egil took the horse's skull, fixed it on a pole and pronounced a curse against King Eiríkr and Queen Gunnhildr⁽¹⁴⁾).

In some cultures (e.g. in the Jewish tradition, *Jeremiah VIII*, I, 2) bones might be addressed by terrible curses like the one which Jeremiah proclaims against the idolatrous people of Judah: their bones shall not be gathered or buried, but “shall be as dung upon the face of the earth.”⁽¹⁵⁾ The secret lying behind this cruel fury was the above-mentioned belief that the soul continued to dwell in the bones, and that their disturbance or destruction was considered a direct attack against individuals or their complete elimination, hindering any possibility of rebirth.

In the Old Norse tradition an interesting example, although only concerning a less significant bone, is provided by Snorri's *Gylfaginning*, where Þórr's magic goats are eaten in the night and reborn the day after. Snorri tells a story where Þórr and his companion Loki decided to stop at a farm in Miðgarðr to stay the night. The farmer and his family were very poor, and could not offer any food to Þórr, who had been known on more than one occasion

(14) *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar* https://www.sagadb.org/egils_saga.on (16.11.2025), Chap. LX.

(15) Jeremiah, viii, I, 2: And they will [carelessly] scatter [the corpses] before the sun and the moon and all the host of heaven, which [the dead] have loved and which they have served and after which they have walked and which they have sought, inquired of, *and* required and which they have worshiped. They shall not be gathered, or be buried; they shall be like [b]dung upon the face of the earth. (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Jeremiah+8%3A1-2&version=AMPC>.)

to eat an entire ox. Therefore, Þórr decided to kill his two goats and cook them for dinner. Everyone was allowed to eat, but only on the condition that they did not break any of the bones, and that they threw them all onto the hides of the goats on the ground. Otherwise, they could not be reborn.

Koma þeir at kveldi til eins búanda ok fá þar náttstað. En um kveldit tók Þórr hafra sína ok skar báða. Eftir þat váru þeir flegnir ok bornir til ketils. En er soðit var, þá settist Þórr til náttverðar ok þeir lagsmenn. Þórr bauð til matar með sér búandanum ok konu hans ok börnum þeira. Sonr búanda hét Þjálfi, en Röskva dóttir. Þá lagði Þórr hafrstökurnar útar frá eldinum ok mælti, at búandi ok heimamenn hans skyldu kasta á hafrstökurnar beinunum. Þjálfi, sonr búanda, hélt á lærlegg hafrsins ok spretti á knífi sínum ok braut til mergjar⁽¹⁶⁾.

«Öku- Þórr drove forth with his he-goats and chariot, and with him that Ás called Loki; they came at evening to a husbandman's, and there received a night's lodging. About evening, Þórr took his he-goats and slaughtered them both; after that they were flayed and borne to the caldron. When the cooking was done, then Þórr and his companion sat down to supper. Þórr invited to eat with him the husbandman and his wife, and their children: the husbandman's son was called Þjálfi, and the daughter Röskva. Then Þórr laid the goat-hides farther away from the fire, and said that the husbandman and his servants should cast the bones on the goat-hides. Þjálfi, the

(16) SNORRI Sturluson, *Edda. Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. A. Faulkes, London, University College, 2005, p. 37.

husbandman's son, was holding a thigh-bone of the goat, and split it with his knife and broke it for the marrow»⁽¹⁷⁾.

The day after, the goats rose up, but one of them was lame in a hind leg. This proves the belief in the role bones had in preserving the immaterial life of creatures in every limb.

Such an assumption has a real foundation in the durability of the osseous skeleton and its permanence, when the other soft parts have disappeared. Even in the Graeco-Latin tradition, we can observe spells enumerating individual organs and various bone structures ending with the marrow, considered the seat of life⁽¹⁸⁾.

And in the Talmud, not only did the Jewish writers recognize bones as the casket of the soul, but they also identified which bone was the seat of the vital substance. They maintained that such a particular bone was situated at one end of the vertebra, in the ossicle at its lowest extremity, called the coccyges, to which the learned Rabbi Joshua Ben Chanania gave the name "the Resurrection bone"⁽¹⁹⁾.

(17) SNORRI Sturluson. 1997 *Edda* (transl. A. Faulkes), London, Everyman, 1997, pp. 37-38.

(18) P.A. MIRECKI/ M.W. MEYER, eds., *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World)*, Leiden/ Boston/ Köln, Brill, 2002.

(19) P.I. HERSHON, *A Talmudic Miscellany*, Harvard University, Trübner & Co., 1880, p. 295: «The Emperor Hadrian (may his bones be ground to powder, and his name stand accursed) once asked the Rabbi Joshua ben Chanania: "From what shall the human body be reconstructed when it rises again?" The Rabbi replied, "From the little bone Luz, in the backbone." "Prove this to me" demanded the Emperor. Then the Rabbi took the bone Luz and steeped it in the water, but it was not softened; he put it in the fire, but it was not consumed; he placed it in a mill, but it could not be ground; he laid it on an anvil, and smote it with a hammer, but the hammer broke, and the anvil was split in pieces.»

Therefore, breaking that very bone would mean destroying the individual to whom it belonged, hindering his/her resurrection.

The repeated attempts to definitely eliminate evil-doers by breaking their backbones found in some Scandinavian texts could suggest the existence of a similar belief in such a bone as the seat of life: a sort of “resurrection bone”.

In Old Norse poetry we encounter many examples of “back-breaking” as the best way to get rid of a magical creature. Moreover, metaphors and kennings seem to confirm this idea, by transforming it into poetic tropes. One of the first examples occurs in *Pórsdrápa* (a mythological skaldic poem by Eilif Guðrunarson, X century) quoted in *Snorra Edda*, where the god Þórr kills two giantesses this way⁽²⁰⁾:

Hofstjóri braut hvôru-
hreggs váfreiðar -tveggja
hlátrelliða hellis
hundfornan kjöl sprundi.

«The temple-steerer of the hovering chariot of the thunderstorm [= Þórr] broke the age-old keel of the laughter-ship [BREAST > BACK] of both women of the cave [GIANTESESSE].»⁽²¹⁾.

(20) K.E. GADE / E. MAROLD, *Poetry from Treatises on Poetics*, in *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages* 3, Turnhout, Brepols, 2017, p. 68.

(21) <https://skaldic.org/m.php?p=text&i=1170> consulted on 17.12.2025.

According to Faulknes, *Hufstjóri braut hváru/ hreggs váfreiða<r> tveggjal/ hlátrellið bellis/ *hundfornan kjöl *sprundi*. (SNORRI Sturluson, *Skáldskaparmál*, London, Viking Society for Nordic Research, 1998, p. 29) «The driver (Þórr) of the hull of the storm’s hoverchariot broke each of the cave-women’s age-old laughter-ship (breast)- keel». (SNORRI, *Edda* 1997, p. 85.)

This kenning is a complex rekit⁽²²⁾ indicating the back of the two giantesses and containing a simple kenning referring to the giantesses' breast (as the laughter-ship). Its keel is a metaphorical term for "backbone". Thus, a correspondence is suggested: as the keel runs along the bottom of a ship connecting the stem and the stern (according to the definition «in a wooden or older steel ship, the keel extends the whole length of the vessel»)⁽²³⁾, likewise the backbone extends the whole length of the back connecting the neck to the hips.

The double kenning expresses a metaphor based on both visual and functional grounds: the column of bones in the back encloses the spinal cord which runs along the chest and protects vital organs.

Worth noting in Cleasby Vigfússon is the following definition of the compound *brygg-brotinn*, «broken-backed», Fms. x. 240, Greg. 48: metaph. an unhappy wooer is said to be *bryggbrotinn*⁽²⁴⁾, which suggests a correspondence between "broken-backed" and "broken-hearted", underlining a further important role of the *bryggr* «the back» – and not only the chest – as a container of feelings and emotions.

The kenning emphasizes the backbone as the body-supporting structure by using the metaphor «laughter-ship» for "chest" and the metonymy *kjöl* «keel» for "ship". The keel is for the ship what the backbone is for an individual.

(22) See SNORRI STURLUSON, *Háttatal*, ed. A. Faulkes, Odense, Viking Society for Northern Research, 1991, pp. 8, 29-31.

(23) Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/keel_1, consulted on 31.12.2025.

(24) R. CLEASBY / GUÐBRANDUR Vigfússon *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 2 ed. with suppl. by W. Craigie, Oxford University Press., Oxford, 1962, p. 288.

The *rekit* hints also at a personification of the ship, by transforming an object, the keel, into part of an animate being and vice-versa the giantesses' backbones into keels. Here two domains (animate and inanimate) exchange their qualities: by giving the inanimate object the aesthetic and intrinsic qualities of the living being: (energy, violence, fastness) and giving the animate element the features of the object (imposing build, length, strength, spatial extension).

According to Derheng Feng and Kay L. Halloran⁽²⁵⁾, in metaphors an entity is superimposed on another entity (or part of it). In our case the superimposed entity (the keel) changes the original image (the backbone) together forming an unconventional whole, a hybrid. The salient features of the superimposed entity are added to the whole.

The giantesses are transformed into hybrids ("giantess-ship beings"): long, strong, and dangerous monsters⁽²⁶⁾.

As in the above-mentioned example in *Pórsdrápa*, in Old Norse poetry and prose many evil doers are killed by breaking their backs, usually in the sea or near the sea. Transformation is the main skill attributed to magical creatures: therefore, the sea is their ideal environment: it can rapidly transform from a calm surface into a dangerous stormy element, from the "house of fish" into the "house

(25) K. FENG / K. O'HALLORAN, *The visual representation of a metaphor: A systemic Functional Approach*, «Annual Review of Cognitive Linguistics», 11, 2 (2013), 320-335.

(26) Already in the 13th century, Óláfr Þórðarson's *Third Grammatical Treatise* describes and analyzes kennings and poetic compounds: he explains that a ship can be paraphrased as "animal of the sea" and illustrates how metaphors move from an animate being (bear) to an inanimate object (ship). (See B.M. ÓLSEN, *Den tredje og fjerde grammatiske afhandling i Snorres Edda, tilligemed de grammatiske afhandlingers prolog og to andre tillæg*, København, Møller, 1884, p. 76).

of Ran” (the sea-goddess, who reigns over a kind of hell for the drowned at the bottom of the sea). That is the reason why the lexicon occurring in the scenes of back-breaking presents terms such as “ship” and its parts, or “the sea” and its components and inhabitants.

In *Friðþjófs saga*, Chap.VI, two skaldic stanzas show how two troll-women, Heiði and Hamgláma, while transforming into whales, are eliminated by having their backs broken. This time the killer is a ship, Elliði, the protagonist’s magical ship. The two sorceresses, Heiði ok Hamgláma, had been sent against Friðþjófr by the evil kings Helgi and Hálfðan, who are pagan and practice black magic. Friðþjófr is not Christian, but he does not offer sacrifices and does not care about Baldr, as he clearly shows by contravening the prohibition against having sexual intercourse in the sanctuary of the god. In the stanzas Friðþjófr urges his magical ship Elliði to break the two monsters’ backs.

15.

Sé ek trollkonur
tvær á baru;
þær hefir Helgi
hingat sendar.
Þeim skal sníða
sundr í miðju
hrygg Elliði,
aðr af hafi skriði⁽²⁷⁾.

(27) M. CLUNIES ROSS, *Poetry in fornaldarsögur. Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, 8, Turnhout, Brepols, 2017, p. 213.

«I see two troll-women on the wave; Helgi has sent them hither. Elliði must slice their spines asunder in the middle, before he glides from the ocean.»⁽²⁸⁾

In the following stanza he urges his ship to break all their bones (jawbones, foreheads, cheeks, teeth).

16.
Heill Elliði!
Hlauptu á báru!
Brjóttu í trollkonum
tennr ok enni,
kinnr ok kjálka
í konu vándri
fót eða baða
í flagði þessu!⁽²⁹⁾

«Hail Elliði! Run on the wave, break teeth and foreheads of the troll-women, cheeks and jaw-bone of the wretched woman, one leg or both of this ogress!»⁽³⁰⁾

Síðan skaut hann forkinum at annarri hambleypunni, en barð Elliða kom á brygg annarri ok brotnaði hryggrinn í báðum. En hvalrinn tók kaf ok lagðiz á brott ok sá hann ekki síðan⁽³¹⁾.

«Then he threw the harpoon at one of the witches who was changing shape, while the pointed prow of Elliði

(28) Ibidem.

(29) M. CLUNIES ROSS, *op. cit.*, p. 214.

(30) Ibidem.

(31) *Friðhjólfs saga, Fornaldar sögur norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, Reykjavík. Íslendingasagnaútgafa, 1954, p. 36.

reached the back of the other so that their backs were broken; but the whale sank, fleeing in haste, and he did not see it since.»⁽³²⁾

Friðþjófr helps Elliði to break the witches' backs: he *skaut hann forkinum*, and the ship *brotnaði hrygggrinn í baðum* while one of them is changing shape *hambleypa*.

The name Heiði reminds of the sorceress mentioned in stanza 22 of *Völuspá*⁽³³⁾, *Hamgláma* alludes to shapeshifting, as it starts with *hamr* «skin, shape», present in *hamramr* (*ham-ramr*, adj. a mythical term, «able to change one's shape». *Gláma* is the name of a glacier (Cleasby Vigfússon⁽³⁴⁾). It might hint at the world of giants and giantesses who often bear names associated with winter, ice, snow, mountains, and lifelessness⁽³⁵⁾. Besides kennings in which mountains and rocks are called bones, an interesting correspondence is offered by the *Völuspá*, where the mountains are said to be Hymir's (the primordial giant's) bones: thus breaking their bones could mean destroying the primary structure of their world.

In *Bárðarsaga Snæfellsás* «Saga of Barðr, the Ase of Snæfell» (an *Islendinga saga* of the 14th century, in many respects similar to a *Fornaldarsaga*) which is very much

(32) My translation.

(33) *Heiði hétu, /hvars til húsa kom, /völu velspáa, vitti hon ganda; seið, hvars kunni, /seið hug leikinn; /æ vas hon angan/illrar brúðar.* «Heiði she was named when houses she visited, /A good prophesying seeress skilled in sorcery. /Spells she cast and minds she bewitched, /And always she was the delight of wicked women.» (C. LARRINGTON, *The Poetic Edda*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014.)

(34) GUDBRANDUR VIGFÚSSON /R. CLEASBY, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

(35) T.A. DEBOIS, *Nordic Religions of the Viking Ages*, Philadelphia, Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1999, p. 55.

concerned with magic and shows some folkloristic aspects⁽³⁶⁾, the evil wizards Svalr and Þúfa are also eliminated in the same way (Ch. III):

Trylldist Svalr þá, svá at Bárði varð affsfátt, en þó kom svá um síðir, at Bárði braut hrygg í Sval ok kasaði hann þar Svalsmql[...] ⁽³⁷⁾

«Svalr cast spell against Barðr in order to take away all his strength, but at the end *Bárðr managed to break Svalr's back* and covered him with stones in the place now called Svalsmql [...]» ⁽³⁸⁾

Aðra nótt eftir fann hann Þúfu a hvalnum ok drap hana með sama móti ⁽³⁹⁾.

«The following night he [Barðr] found Þúfa on the whale and *he killed her in the same way.*» ⁽⁴⁰⁾

In Ch. IX a witch named Kolla suffers the same fate (“back-breaking”) according to the prose passage at the beginning of the chapter, and to the following stanza recited by Þórir.

(36) The most recent scholarly editions of *Barðarsaga* are those by Jón Skaptason and Philip Pulsiano, *Barðar saga*, Garland, New York/London, 1984, and the Íslenzk Fornrit edition by Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, *Barðarsaga Snæfellsás*, XIII, Reykjavík, 1991. In this article I quote from the 2nd edition (1968) of Guðni Jónsson, *Barðarsaga Snæfellsás, Íslendingasögur*, III: Íslendingasagnaútgafan, Reykjavík, 1946, pp. 295-355.

(37) GUÐNI JÓNSSON, *op. cit.*, 1946, p. 305.

(38) My translation.

(39) GUÐNI JÓNSSON, *op. cit.*, 1946, p. 305.

(40) My translation.

Fann Þórir brátt at hon var it mesta tröll. Var þeira atganga bæði harðr ok langr, en þó lauk með því, at hann braut í henni hrygginn ok gekk svá af hen- ni dauðri[...]⁽⁴¹⁾.

«Þórir realized that she was a powerful troll. Their fight was both hard and long, but at the end *he broke her back* and killed her [...]»⁽⁴²⁾.

The prose passage is followed by a stanza which reads in its second helmingr:

Hugðak heimsku flagði
hryggspenning dag þenna.
Missti tröll et trausta
tír, en ek beygða svíra⁽⁴³⁾.

«To this stupid witch today I've broken the back. / The troll has lost her usual reputation/ and I have twisted her neck»⁽⁴⁴⁾.

In both sagas we have observed shapeshifting skills: in *Friðþjofssaga* it is performed by the troll-women. In *Barðarsaga* we can assume this ability in the two wizards, Svalr and Þúfa, relying on the episode where they are killed by Barðr, dominated by a close relationship between the former and the whale. Additionally, the name *Svalr* itself, which rhymes with *hvalr* «whale», could hint at this identification. Moreover, we can associate “back-breaking” with whaling since backs were considered the most deceiving parts of these animals, according to

(41) GUÐNI Jónsson, *op. cit.*, 1946, p. 340.

(42) My translation.

(43) GUÐNI Jónsson, *op. cit.*, 1946, p. 343.

(44) My translation.

the well-known descriptions contained in encyclopedic texts translated into vernaculars and spread in Scandinavia in the early Middle Ages, such as *Physiologus*⁽⁴⁵⁾. Whale backs were mistaken for land by sailors: this was considered a voluntary trick devised by the animal in order to deceive and kill men. Seen as a personification of evil, backs represented the highest concentration of wickedness.

Far from being exhaustive, this paper intends to cast light on a topic worth studying and analyzing, also by investigating the tradition of Scandinavian magic texts (charms, spells, etc.), where the breaking of bones occurs as a destructive action frequently attributed to the devil or his personifications.

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METAMORPHOSIS AND MAGIC SHAPESHIFTING IN OLD NORSE LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT Metamorphosis and shapeshifting are frequent themes in folktales, but also in Old Norse literature, in poetry as well as in prose. They exist in mythological as well as semi-mythological contexts, in dreams or in the more realistic narratives told of in the Icelandic sagas. This article concerns themes of shapeshifting from *The Poetic Edda* (*Eddukvæði*), The Family sagas (*Íslendingasögur*) and The Legendary sagas (*Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*). These sources were written down in Iceland, mostly in the 13th-14th centuries, but were preceded by a widespread oral tradition going back at least to the Viking Age. Shapeshifting stories were certainly entertaining when performed, thus the perspective of the contemporary medieval audience may be taken in account. This study also analyses whether shapeshifting seems to be gendered, and whether the change in nature is due to self-shifting or external influence – and how it was done, for example by words or gestures. Besides, shapeshifting connected with social categories, even with some hierarchical perspective is discussed. The terminology used to describe shapeshifting is exemplified, and the context of the shapeshifting narrative is considered, for instance whether time and space may be of importance, as well as the consequences.

1. Introduction with brothers in disguise

Defining shapeshifting in a broader sense means a supernatural change, performed by a human into an un-human figure, but there are a complex of problems attributed to the process itself, as to time, space, and gender. However, as an introduction I would like to refer to a special topic, „the otter’s ransom”, in The Lay of Regin (*Reginsmál*) from *The Poetic Edda* (*Eddukvæði*), and the prose counterpart in *The Saga of Volsungs* (*Völsunga saga*). There are two brothers, one named Otter (Ótr) and the other named Fafnir (*Fáfnir*). At least the last mentioned is one of the most famous human-animal shapeshifters in Old Norse literature, and also represented in Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon pictorial art, and both are for example depicted on the runic monument, The Ramsund carving (Sö 101) in Sweden, dated to the Viking Age⁽¹⁾.

Otter used to shift shape into an otter when out fishing in the river. Coincidentally, when he is sitting at the river bank, the æsir Odin (Óðinn), Hænir and Loki are at the same place, also looking for fish. But when Loki discovers the otter, he kills him and flays off his skin. In the evening, the æsir stay at Otter’s and Fafnir’s father Hreidmar (*Hreiðmarr*), a wealthy man. They show him the skin, and the father recognizes his son. The æsir now have to pay a ransom for their deed: the otter-skin must be filled with gold and it’s outer covering as well⁽²⁾.

(1) *Reginsmál*, in *Eddukvæði II: Hetjukvæði*, Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason (eds.), Reykjavík 2014, pp. 296-302, here, p. 296: prose, The Lay of Regin, in *The Poetic Edda. A New Translation by Carolyne Larrington*, Oxford 1996, pp. 151-156, here, p. 151 ff., A. NEY, *Bland ormar och drakar. Hjätemyt och manligt ideal i berättartraditioner om Sigurd Fafnesbane*, Lund 2017, pp. 151-251.

(2) *Reginsmál*, p. 296 ff., The Lay of Regin, p. 151 ff.

Deep down in the waterfall, a dwarf called Andvari has a golden treasure. He is also a shapeshifter: he dives in the fall in a shape of a pike. Loki borrows a net from the sea-goddess Ran and catches Andvari. After some kind of negotiations (or threat), he fetches the gold and set Andvari free. However, before diving into the deep, Andvari curses the treasure. The gold is accepted as ransom, but since Hreidmar refuses to share it with his sons (there is a third brother, Regin (*Reginn*), he is killed by Fafnir. However, Fafnir in his turn keeps the gold for himself, and after having shifted shape into a dragon⁽³⁾, he places himself upon the golden hoard to watch over it. The story does not end there, but continues in another direction with heroic deeds by the young Sigurd (*Sigurðr*), also named Dragonslayer. Since Regin wants revenge for being excluded from his father's legacy, he persuades Sigurd to kill the dragon⁽⁴⁾.

Otter and Fafnir are male human-animal shapeshifters. No one uses magic on them. They turn themselves into creatures, but it is not explicitly told how they do it, thus there is no emphasis on the process itself. Otter is connected to water, and actually is an animal only at day time. In the evening, as retransformed, he brings the catch home to his father. His shapeshifting seems to be physical, but due to the saga, he in many ways also behaves like an otter. For example he "ate alone with his eyes shut, because he could not stand seeing his food diminish" ("ok

(3) The Icelandic word *ormr*, m., means 'dragon, serpent', *Norrøn Ordbok*, 3. utgåva av Gamalnorsk ordbok, Heggstad, Leiv, et al. (eds.), Oslo 1975. (NO), p. 326.

(4) *Reginismál*, p. 296 ff., The Lay of Regin, p. 151 ff., *Fáfnismál*, in *Eddukvæði II: Hetjukvæði*, Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason (eds.), Reykjavík 2014, pp. 303-312, here, p. 303-308, The Lay of Fafnir, in *The Poetic Edda. A New Translation* by Carolyne Larrington, Oxford 1996, pp. 157-165, here, p. 157 ff.

át blundandi ok einn saman, því at hann mátti eigi sjá, at þyrri”⁽⁵⁾. The lay is more brief regarding the eating and does not comment on Otter’s behaving, but the space for eating (*árbakkanum*) is mentioned and also that he is killed at the same moment. In the saga, the eating with eyes shut seems to be a more general remark⁽⁶⁾. But why bother this shape-shifting? It obvious was practical and functional, since it seems to be a simplified method for more fish to catch. Concerning Fafnir, he moves into the wilds with the golden hoard, and as it seems, there he just “became” a dragon (“*ok varð at inum versta ormi*”⁽⁷⁾). Distinctive for both is a kind of greedy character, and the consequence for these shapeshifters is deadly.

2. Sources

With otter’s ransom as a point of departure, the context of shapeshifting in some other sources will be studied. Besides from *The Poetic Edda* and *The Saga of Volsungs*, *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki* (*Hrólf’s saga kraka ok kappa hans*) and *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* are used. These sagas are defined as Legendary Sagas (*Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*), written down by anonymous saga-writers during the Middle

(5) *Völsunga saga*, in *Fornaldar Sögur Norðurlanda* vol. 1, Guðni Jónsson (ed.), Reykjavík 1959, pp. 107-218, here, p. 143, *The Saga Of Volsungs. The Norse Epic Of Sigurd The Dragonslayer*. Introduction and Translation by Jesse L. Byock, Berkeley et al. 1990, p. 57.

(6) *Reginmál*, p. 296, *The Lay of Regin*, p. 151, *Völsunga saga*, p. 143, *The Saga of Volsungs*, p. 57.

(7) *Völsunga saga*, p. 145, *The Saga of Volsungs*, p. 57, L.D. PERABO, “Shapeshifting in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature”, in *Roda da Fortuna: Electronic Journal about Antiquity and Middle Ages* 6:1, 2017, pp. 136-158, here p. 138.

Ages, mostly in the 13th-14th centuries. It is a genre with unrealistic and supernatural elements with influences from folklore⁽⁸⁾. There are also themes of shapeshifting in The Family sagas (Íslendingasögur), for example in *Gull-Þóris saga*, *Egils saga Skallagrímsson* and *Eyrbyggja saga* (*The Saga of the Ere-dwellers*). These sagas are written down almost at the same time as The Legendary sagas, but in contrast, they are about people and places in Iceland during the Viking Age. Some sagas are family chronicles, other tell more of individuals, both men and women. The main protagonists are male land-takers and chieftains, and their aspiration for power and wealth, their feuds, travels and negotiations at the thing assemblies, as well as their marriage, household and children, are the common features of the sagas. The writers of the sagas are male, maybe with one possible exception⁽⁹⁾.

There is a gap between the period told of and the Medieval saga-writing, and how to handle the gap is an issue discussed over the years. Modern discussions of the importance of source criticism were of course not at stake

(8) Hrólfs Saga Kraka Ok Kappa Hans, In *Fornaldar Sögur Norðurlanda* vol. 1, Guðni Jónsson (ed.), Reykjavík 1959, pp. 1-105, here, p. 50 ff., The Saga Of King Hrolf Kraki. Translated with an Introduction by Jesse L. Byock, London *et al.* 1998, p. 40 f., L. LÖNNROTH, "Inledning", in *Den poetiska Eddan. Gudadikter och hjältedikter efter Codex Regius och andra handskrifter*. Översättning med inledning och kommentar av Lars Lönnroth, Stockholm 2016, pp. 9-20, S.A. MITCHELL, *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages*, Philadelphia & Oxford 2011, p. 76 ff., Ney, *Bland ormar och drakar...*, p. 54 f.

(9) A. NEY, *Vänskap mellan kvinnor på vikingatiden. Om urval och historieskrivning i de isländska sagorna*, Lund 2023, pp. 27-37, JÓNAS KRISTJÁNSSON, *Eddas and Sagas. Iceland's Medieval Literature*. Translated by Peter Foote, Reykjavík 1988, p. 231 f., 265 ff., 287 f., *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, in *Fornaldar Sögur Norðurlanda* vol.2, Guðni Jónsson (ed.), Reykjavík 1959, pp. 1-71.

during the Middle Ages, but the saga-writers certainly had their own contemporary demands on how to write history and at the same time how to entertain an audience, for instance with remarkable episodes. According to Ármann Jakobsson (2013), the sagas are significant sources for ideologies and cultural history, but for achieving this, their context and the narrative itself must be understood⁽¹⁰⁾. The interpretation of the sagas is in many ways a challenge, however, when it comes to values and mentalities, important aspects that indeed change very slowly, it may be somewhat easier to achieve.

3. Terminology

In linguistic terms, the shapeshifting from human to otter is expressed with *í ótrs líki* ('in the form of an otter'). It is used both in prose and poetry. According to Lyonel Perabo (2017), *líki* means just an alteration of appearance and not a change of skin into a pelt. He also discusses the term *vera* (be) and *verða* (become) as counterparts to *líki*⁽¹¹⁾. Áðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir (2007) also comments on *líki*, meaning that a human's soul takes on the likeness (*líki*), while the body may shift into a physiological skin of the animal (*hamr*), that is a difference between a physiological transformation (*líki*) and the physiological *hamr*/skin. The term *líkjast* (*líkjast vörgum*), used when spells are cast, thus means "resemble wolves"⁽¹²⁾. In my opinion, the context

(10) ÁRMANN JAKOBSSON, *Nine Saga Studies...*, p. 11 ff., cf. Mitchell, *Witchcraft and Magic...*, p. 76 ff., 85 ff., 93 ff., Ney, *Vänskap mellan kvinnor...*, p. 32 f.

(11) PERABO, "Shapeshifting..." p. 138.

(12) ÁÐALHEIÐUR GUÐMUNDSDÓTTIR, "The Werewolf in Medieval

with Loki's killing of Otter and the ransom itself points towards both a psychological transformation and a shifting of skin.

Additionally, the term *verða að* depicts the shape-shifting of Fafnir in the prose narrative: "ok varð síðan at inum versta ormi" ('became the most evil serpent'), however in the lay the term is *í orms líki* ('in the form of a dragon'), a significant difference, maybe due to genre and/or a change in beliefs (in spite of *la longue durée* of mentalities)⁽¹³⁾. However, concerning the dwarf Andvari, it is told that he had spent a long time *í geddu líki* ('in the form of a pike'), thus the same terminology is used both in prose and poetry, as for the earlier mentioned Otter⁽¹⁴⁾.

Terminology regarding shapeshifting has among others also been analysed by Gwendolyne Knight (2020). She discusses the words that predominate within shape-shifting in Old Norse literature: *hamr* (pelt, skin, outer covering), *hugr* (emotion) and *fylgja* (soul)⁽¹⁵⁾. As has been argued before, the word *hamr* refer to the visible form, but also to "the shape, which a soul may take or occupy"⁽¹⁶⁾.

Icelandic Literature", in *Journal of English and German Philology*, vol.106:3, University of Illinois 2007, pp. 277-335, here, p. 279 ff.

(13) P. BURKE, *Annaleskolan. En introduction*. Översättning Gustaf Gimdal & Rickard Gimdal. Förord: Birgitta Odén, Göteborg 1992, p. 153 f.

(14) *Reginmál*, p. 296, 300, *The Lay of Regin*, p. 151 ff., *Völsunga saga*, p. 143, 145, *The Saga of Volsungs*, p. 57 ff.

(15) G. KNIGHT, "Categorizing the Werewolf: or, the Peopleness of Shapeshifters", in *Margins, Monsters, Deviants: Alterities in Old Norse Literature and Culture*, Rebecca Merkelbach (ed.), Turnhout 2020, pp. 27-44, cf. G. Knight, *Broken Order. Shapeshifting as Social Metaphor in Early Medieval England and Ireland*, Diss. History, Stockholm University, Stockholm 2019, p. 84 ff. ÁRMANN JAKOBSSON, *Nine Saga Studies. The Critical Interpretation of the Icelandic Sagas*, Reykjavík 2013, p. 83.

(16) KNIGHT, "Categorizing the Werewolf...", p. 27-44, cf. ÁRMANN JAKOBSSON, *Nine Saga Studies...*, p. 146.

Such interpretation indicates that a shapeshifted human transformed into an un-human skin (*hamr*) also may turn into a particular mental or emotional state. In his article on shapeshifting, Lyonel Perabo (2017) above all pay attention to the term *hamr* and comments on the meaning of it: "All in all, while the concept of *hamr* could appear as somewhat eclectic, beyond the strict definition of *hamr* as a pelt or skin, the lack, alteration or substitution thereof seems to denote psychological or even physical instability."⁽¹⁷⁾

Perabo divides supernatural transformation into three groups: mytic-heroical, far-northern and chivalric transformation motifs. The first category above all handles shapeshifting of the pagan gods, the second mostly of Sámi magic and legendary kings, and the third one deals with motifs inspired by chivalric romances. After comparing shapeshifting episodes from these categories, he for example points out that while Odin shifts shape in order to overcome obstacles, shapeshifting motifs in late chivalric influenced narratives seldom do. The reason why may be due to Christian author's unwillingness for presenting supernatural phenomenon and magic in a positive light. Since shapeshifting certainly was connected to "far away lands and eras", it was improper for chivalric heroes to use magic themselves, but all right to have a supernatural helper⁽¹⁸⁾.

In the present article, my focus is on the outer covering, the *hamr*, how this magic transformation is done and into what kind of animal or un-human shapes. This study is not comprehensive, however it may be read as an input for further analysis. Time, space and the consequences of

(17) PERABO, "Shapeshifting..." p. 136 ff.

(18) PERABO, "Shapeshifting..." pp. 138, 150.

shifting shape may be important aspects for analysing this magic phenomenon, as well as the following questions:

- Is shapeshifting in Old Norse literature only a physical transformation, into a different skin, and still being a human in heart and soul?
- Is the change in nature due to self-shifting or external influence – and how was it done? By special words or gestures? Are there typical (or untypical) patterns?
- Is shapeshifting to some extent connected with social categories, even with a hierarchical perspective?
- Shapeshifting in poetry and sagas seems to be gendered, and in this connection, one purpose of my paper is to comment in what way. My hypothesis is that male shape-shifting may be closer connected to wild nature and female closer to domestic fields.

4. In bear's shape (bjarnarhamr)

The word *hamr* is noted in the compound *bjarnarhamr* ('a bear's form') used in a shape-shifting episode told of in *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*. A man called Bjorn ('Bear'), a son of a king up in the north of Norway, and a young girl, Bera ('She-bear'), love each other. Bjorn has a stepmother, Queen White (*Hvít*). Due to the saga, she is the daughter of a Sámi King from the Finnmark region in northern Norway. The Queen tries to seduce Bjorn, but in vain. When he refuses to be her lover, she gets harmed and punishes him with witchcraft: "She then struck him with her wolfskin gloves, telling him to become a cave bear, grim and savage, and he will never be released from the

spell. ” (”Hún lýstr nú til hans með úlfhanzka ok segir, at hann skyldi verða at einum híðbirni ólmum ok grimmum, [...]”)⁽¹⁹⁾.

Bjorn disappears, and no one knows where to and why. But one day Bera encounters a bear. The bear is approaching, but without threatening her. She recognizes his eyes, and follows him into his cave. Since Bjorn was transformed into a bear only by day, he was ”re-transformed” at night. Bera stays with him in the cave, but one night, Bjorn tells her, that he will be hunted the next day and killed, so this will be their last night. He warned her for Queen White, because she will try to make her eat of the bear’s meat. This she must not do, since she is pregnant and will give birth to three boys, and if she tastes the meat, it will affect the children. Notable is that Bjorn in his human shape can predict the future⁽²⁰⁾.

Soon the bear-shape comes over Bjorn again. He leaves the cave, but hunters are waiting outside. A large pack of hounds are in the front of the men. The bear tries to escape, but the men form a ring around him. After slaying all the dogs and one man, the bear gets exhausted and in the end, he is killed. Queen White prepares a great feast with the bear’s meat for the hunters – and on this feast, she forces Bera to taste the meat. She swallows a small bit of it, but when the queen cuts another piece and puts it directly

(19) Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans, p. 47, The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki, p. 37, A. Ney, ”The role of bears in Old Norse Literature – a bestiary concept? ”, in *Bear and Human. Facets of a Multi-Layered Relationship from Past to Recent Times, with Emphasis on Northern Europe*, vol. 3.3, Oliver Grimm *et al.* (eds.), The Archaeology of Northern Europe, vol. 3, Paul S. Johnson & Sam Turner (eds.), Turnout, Belgium 2023, pp. 839-850, PERABO, ”Shapeshifting...” p.148.

(20) Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans, p. 48 ff., The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki, p. 37 ff.

into Bera's mouth, she again swallows a small bit and then spits the rest out. 'It may be,' said the queen, 'that this bit will be enough,' and she burst out laughing⁽²¹⁾.

When Bera gives birth to the triplets, the first boy is half a man, half an elk. He is an elk below the navel, the second boy has dog's feet, but the third boy, Böðvarr, is without any blemish on him. He takes revenge and kills the queen. I will leave the rest of the story, but Böðvarr, according to the saga, as his father, is connected with a transformation into bear-shape⁽²²⁾.

Notable is, when Bjorn is a bear, the saga-writer does not call him by his name, but "the bear" (*björninn*)⁽²³⁾. When Bjorn is in *bjarnarhamr*, he acts as a wild beast, but together with his outer state, it also seems that an inner transition follows. Thus, in this episode, *hamr* seems to refer both to the transition of the skin as of the mental state. Also notable is that the shapshifted person's name is of an aptonym kind: Bjorn (*Björn*, Bear), as the name of the earlier mentioned otter (Otter)⁽²⁴⁾.

5. In wolve's shape (*úlfahamr*)

(21) Hrólf's saga kraka ok kappa hans, p. 49, The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki, p. 39.

(22) Hrólf's saga kraka ok kappa hans, p. 50 ff., The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki, p. 40 f.

(23) For bear and noa-names, see M.C. LOMBARDI, "Bears, kennings and skaldic poetry", in *Bear and Human. Facets of a Multi-Layered Relationship from Past to Recent Times, with Emphasis on Northern Europe*, vol. 3.3, Oliver Grimm *et al.* (eds.), The Archaeology of Northern Europe, vol. 3, Paul S. Johnson & Sam Turner (eds.), Turnout, Belgium 2023, pp. 826-837.

(24) A. Ney, "Ett namn för den vilda? Om kvinnonamnet *Bera* i den fornisländska litteraturen", in *Namn och namnvård. Vänskrift till Annette C. Torensjö på 60-årsdagen den 18 november 2020*, Staffan Nyström *et al.* (red.), Namn och samhälle 31, Uppsala universitet, Uppsala 2020, pp. 103-108.

In *The Saga of Volsungs*, a father and son, king Sigmund (*Sigmundur*) and Sinfjotli (*Sinfjötli*) live as wolves for a time. This shapeshifting episode begins when both are together out in the forest and suddenly discover a house. Inside are two men, sons of king, sleeping. Due to the saga-writer a spell has been cast on them, but it is not said by whom and why. However, wolfskins are hanging over them, and they can be put off only every tenth day. Sigmund and Sinfjotli try the skins, but it is impossible to get them off. Instead, both start to howl like wolves and set out in the forest, but they have an agreement: if they are attacked by more than seven men, they shall howl for help from each other. They are attacked, and maybe unexpected, Sigmund bites Sinfjotli in the windpipe, when he is approaching to help him. He is dangerously wounded and Sigmund carries him to the house and in the end they got off the skins⁽²⁵⁾.

The word *hamr* used for transition in this episode, on the one hand refers to the shape of skin, on the other hand, Sigmund and Sinfjotli also start to howl and attack like wolfs. However, they kept their ability to speak. The transition is not described in detail, other than that the spell cast on the men in the house, is transferred to Sigmund and Sinfjotli in the same moment as they put on the skins⁽²⁶⁾.

One of my questions is whether shapeshifting is gendered. In *The Saga of Volsungs* this seems not to be the case, for example when Sigmund and his nine brothers are taken prisoners after a battle against a king Siggeir, an old she-wolf comes at night and kills one of them, every night until only one is left. Due to the saga-writer this wolf was the

(25) Völsunga saga, p. 123 f., *The Saga of Volsungs*, p. 44 f., cf. ÁÐALHEIÐUR GUÐMUNDSDÓTTIR, "The Werewolf...", p. 284 f.

(26) Völsunga saga, p. 123 f., *The Saga of Volsungs*, p. 44 f.

king's mother who shifted into this shape:"through witchcraft and sorcery"⁽²⁷⁾.

Shifting into a wolve's shape is thus not gendered, but in both episodes, the figures involved are king, sons of king, and possibly a king's mother. In an earlier episode from *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, the shapeshifted bear is also a son of a king. Shapeshifting thus seems to interact with specific social categories. Not to forget, the genre itself helps to explain the focus on kings. The main characters are often kings and queens, their sons and daughters.

6. In bird's shape

In *The Saga of Volsungs*, shape-shifting from human into a bird is exemplified from an episode, in which king Rerir, the grandfather of the earlier mentioned Sigmundr, and his wife are helped by a bird with connection to Odin. They want to have a child, but do not succeed in their tries. They implore the gods, and the goddess Frigg hears them and passes on to Odin. He then sends one of his wishmaidens (*óskmeyjar*), a daughter of a giant, to help. She shifts shape into a crow and flies to Rerir with an apple. He visits the queen and eats some of the fruit. As expected the queen soon discovers that she is with child. The word for this shape-shifting is also *hamr* – in the compound *krákuhamr*⁽²⁸⁾.

Shape-shifting into birds also occurs in the eddic Lay of Volund (*Völundarkviða*), where three women are sitting on

(27) Völsunga saga, p. 119, *The Saga of Volsungs*, p. 41 f., cf. ÁÐALHEIÐUR GUÐMUNDSDÓTTIR, "The Werewolf..." , p. 280.

(28) Völsunga saga, p. 111 f., *The Saga of Volsungs*, p. 36 f.

the shore with their swan's garments (*álptarhamir*) close. It is told in the poem that they are valkyries. They are occupied with spinning, when Volund (*Völundr*) and his brothers discover them and bring them to their home, where they live together for seven years, until the swan-maiden fly away for participating in battles⁽²⁹⁾. As in the *bjarnarhamr*-episode, this episode occurs up in the North. We are told that Volund and his brothers are sons of a Sámi king, and that they move to a place called *Úlfdalr* ('Wolf-dale') and a lake called *Úlfsjá* ('Wolf-lake'). Although the place-names indicate a surrounding with wild nature, no wolves are told of, but bears to be hunted⁽³⁰⁾. The Sámi association with magic is discussed by Sirpa Aalto (2010), among other the shamanism, which is considered to contain control of weather, healing, prophecies, but also shapeshifting⁽³¹⁾. In the present article, motifs of spelling and shapeshifting in connection with Sámi derives from both prose and poetry, especially the queen's spell in *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, who uses her wolfskin gloves for the transformation of Bjorn into bear.

The mentioned examples of shapeshifting into birds are female, but transitions into birds are also related to male. Wellknown is for example Odins transition into a falcon in "Gátur Gestumblinda" in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, where a competition in knowledge between king Heidrek (*Heiðrekr*) and Odin is going on. Odin is under cover, but reveals himself in the end, and takes the shape of a falcon

(29) Völundarkviða, p. 428, The Lay of Volund, p. 102.

(30) Völundarkviða, p. 428, The Lay of Volund, p. 102.

(31) S. AALTO, *Categorizing Otherness in the Kings' Sagas*, Publications of the University of Eastern Finland. Dissertations in Social Sciences and Business Studies No 10, Joensuu 2010, pp. 123 ff., 190 ff., 200 ff.

(í vals líki) and flies away⁽³²⁾. "Gátur Gestumblinda" is far from the only source telling of Odin's different shapes, and for instance in *Ynglinga saga*, the shifting process is described as follows: when his body lays down as if he is sleeping or dead ("sofínn eða dauðr"), he goes errands far away, as a bird, an animal, a fish or a serpent⁽³³⁾.

7. Hamhleypa and hamrammr

The feminine noun *hamhleypa* ('she who lets her *hamr* run') is depicted for a person that changes into another shape. In for example *Gull-Þóris saga* a woman named *Kerling*, meaning 'old woman', is depicted as skilled in magic and as a *hamhleypa*. In one episode she is attacked by a great sow. However, the attacking animal is not explicitly defined as *hamhleypa*, but at the same time, another woman, *Thurid drikkin* (*Þurid drickinn*), due to the saga very cunning, is sleeping in the near. Dag Strömbäck (1935) refers to the connection between sleeping and shapeshifting (as Odin mentioned above) and interprets the attacking pig as *Thurid*, who were asleep, but wakes up and starts to fight with *Kerling*⁽³⁴⁾. The attack is a defending action, because

(32) *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* (with Gátur Gestumblinda), p. 50.

(33) *Ynglinga saga*, in *Heimskringla*, vol. I, Bjarni Aðalbarnason (ed.), Íslenzk fornrit, vol. 26, Reykjavík 1941/ <https://sacred-texts.com/neulheim/02ynglga.htm>, ch. 7, ÁRMANN JAKOBSSON, *Nine Saga Studies...*, p. 115 ff.

(34) *Gull-Þóris Saga*/Þorsfirðinga Saga, udgivet for Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk literatur ved Kr. Kålund, Köpenhamn 1898, p. 37 f., GULL-ÞÓRIS SAGA, in *Islánninga sagorna. Samtlíga sláktsagor och fyrtionio tatar*, vol. 3, transl. Birgit Falck-Kjällquist, Kristinn Jóhannesson et al. (red.), Reykjavík 2014, pp. 341-366, here, pp. 341-342, Strömbäck, *Sejd. Textstudier i nordisk religionshistoria*, Nordiska texter och undersökningar, vol. 5, Uppsala, Bengt Hesselman (ed.) Lund 1935, in *Sejd och andra studier i nordisk själsuppfattning*

Kerling, her father and twenty other men are on their way to Gull-Thorir (*Gull-Þórir*) for revenge for his earlier deed⁽³⁵⁾.

In this saga, there is a male correspondence to *hambleypa* called *hamrammr* ('he with a strong *hamr*'). A man is called Galti, from the word *galtr*, meaning 'male pig', thus another name of an aptonym kind. According to the saga, Galti is a shapeshifter (*hamrammur*). He and two other men are out riding, however not in animal shape, in order to attack their enemy Gull-Thorir. When they meet Thorir, who also is riding, Galti gives him a cut. Thorir thereafter sets off the horse, and it is told that he shifted shape for the first time ("hann *hamaðist* þá hið fyrsta sinn"). In what shape, and only his soul? In the Swedish translation the verb *hamast* is translated with "*gick bäsärk*" ('went beserk'), and this is also the case when it comes to Galti and his "*bäsärka-raseri*" ('beserk-rage'), when attacking Thorir⁽³⁶⁾. According to *Norrøn Ordbok*, the pronoun *hamrammr* is used for shapeshifting or go berserk. The feminine noun *hambleypa* depicts one that goes around in another shape or a witch/sorcerer, thus it seems that both terms have a double meaning⁽³⁷⁾.

A more famous *hamrammr* is told of in *Egils saga Skallagrímsson*. This *hamrammr* is Egil's grandfather, called Kveld-Ulf (*Kveld-Úlfr*, 'Night -Wolf'), since he was very tired in the evening: "But everyday as evening drew on, he became sullen, so that few could come to speak with

av Dag Strömbäck, Getrud Gidlund (red.), Acta Academiae Regiae Gustavi Adolphi LXXII, Hedemora 2000, pp. 1-236, here, p. 188.

(35) *Gull-þóris saga*, pp. 176, 205, 216 f., *Gull-þóris saga*, pp. 341-342, Ney *Vänskap mellan kvinnor...*, p. 61, STRÖMBÄCK, *Sejd...*, p. 162.

(36) *Gull-Þóris saga*, p. 364.

(37) *Gull-Þóris saga*, p. 42 (in ed. Kr. Kälund, the cited phrase is: "hann hamadzist þa it fyrsta sinn"), NO, p. 168 f., ÁRMANN JAKOBSSON, *Nine Saga Studies...*, p. 103, 143 ff., STRÖMBÄCK, *Sejd...*, p. 162 f.

him. He was an evening-sleeper, and it was commonly said that he was very shape strong." ("að hann væri mjög hamrammur")⁽³⁸⁾. Kveld-Ulfr's son Skalla-Grim (*Skalla-Grímr*) and grand-son Egil (*Egill*) were of the same shape. The verb *hamast* ('going berserk') is used for Skalla-Grim's attack on his own son. His thrall-woman stops him from doing any harm and bursts out: "Hamast þú nú, Skalla-Grímr, að syni þínum." (Do you now, Skalla-Grim, go berserk against your son?)⁽³⁹⁾. After all, the word *hamrammr* is not frequent, and the berserk explanation for *hamr* makes it different to define *hamr* only with skin and the outer covering, so maybe it sometimes refer only to a shape which a soul may take or occupy.

A comment on shapeshifting made by the writer of *Eyrbyggja saga* throws light upon the relation between the medieval audience and the Saga of Icelanders. In connection with a depiction of a man called Thrand (Þrándr) Stigandi, it is said that he was a shapeshifter when he was a heathen, but for most people such things disappeared, when they were baptized ("eigi einhamur meðan hann var heiðinn en þá tók af flestum tröllskap er skírðir vor")⁽⁴⁰⁾. A possible influence of cristianization is thus another aspect when interpreting shapeshifting episodes, thus they may be told of as a heathen occurrence.

9. Conclusions

(38) *Egils Saga Skallagrímsson*, Íslenzk fornrit, vol. 2, Guðni Jónsson (ed.), Reykjavík 1933, p. xx., EGIL'S SAGA. Translated by Rev. W.C. Green (1893), in *The Saga Hoard. Icelandic Sagas*, vol. 1, Liberty/ Missouri 2010, pp. 294-440, here, p. 294.

(39) *Egils saga*, p. 101, (the English transl. is my own), cf. Egil's saga, p. 340.

(40) *Eyrbyggja Saga*, Íslenzk fornrit, vol. 4, Einar Ól. Sveinsson (ed.), Reykjavík 1957, pp.1-184, cf. ÁRMANN JAKOBSSON, *Nine Saga Studies...*, p.139f.

Episodes concerning metamorphosis and magic are recurrent in Old Norse literature, and shapeshifting a rather frequent topic both in prose and poetry. However, concerning shapeshifting as only a physical transformation, and still a human in heart and soul, there are so far not an unambiguous answer. In for example the mentioned fight between Galti and Thorir, their outer shape seems to be human, while their mind seems is out of control. This so called *hamrammr*-episode has indeed been interpreted as if they went berserk, meaning involved in a wild and extreme fight. In comparison, Sigmund and Sinfjotli transformed into wolf's shape, do act dangerous and wild, but they keep their ability to speak.

The change from human to un-human seems to be due to self-shifting and external influence, but there is a majority for the former. Magic spell preceedes only one shapeshifting, as when Queen White takes her gloves on. So far, the typical pattern leans to self-shifting, but the process into the un-human shape is not depicted in details, just mentioned with significant terms as *hamr* or *í líki*.

There is no typical structure concerning time and space for shapeshifting. Although Kveld-Ulf changes his shape in the evening, there are no other significant creatures of the night in this study, nor does it give a complete answer whether shapeshifting seems to be gendered or not. Thus, it does not support that male shape-shifting is closer connected to wild nature and female closer to domestic fields. Shifting shape is rather related to social categories, and it seems to be a connection between wealthy individuals and animal species, for example, son of kings are transformed into bear and wolves. A contributory cause is the genre itself. In the Legendary Sagas, kings and queens are often main characters, so as in poetry. In the more

realistic Sagas of Icelanders with mainly episodes on farms, the shapeshifting seems to refer both to domestic animals and supernatural creatures.

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SAN MATTEO E I MAGHI NELLA DOCUMENTAZIONE OMILETICA IN INGLESE ANTICO

CARLA RIVIELLO

ABSTRACT: The celebration of Matthew within the large Old English homiletic tradition is evidenced by an anonymous text entitled *Sancte Andreae* and by Ælfric's *Natale Sancti Mathei Apostoli et Evangelistae*. Written in different contexts, these two texts used different sources and specific modes of rewriting. However, in both cases, the apostle's missionary work in faraway lands such as Myrmidonia and Ethiopia is met with hostility from pagan magicians. Through an analysis of the two homilies and a comparison with their potential sources and analogues, this essay aims to demonstrate that both stories share, despite their peculiarities, a representation of magic as a feature of an unsettling "Elsewhere that Christianisation", as a process of assimilation and erasure of otherness, can transform into a comforting "Here".

Nell'ampia tradizione agiografica medievale la presenza di maghi e sortilegi offre argomentazioni utili per polarizzare in modo netto lo scontro tra gli inganni demoniaci e malvagi degli stregoni e l'affermazione limpida e trasparente del verbo insita nella verità del miracolo compiuto dai santi. Così gli apostoli nel predicare il Vangelo in terre remote, ovvero nel mettere in pratica il compito affidato loro da

Cristo risorto⁽¹⁾, sono costretti talvolta a combattere anche contro temibili e pericolosi maghi, a sanare i danni provocati da questi agli uomini.

Matteo, per esempio, nelle sue molteplici peregrinazioni missionarie, registrate nei testi apocrifi, affronta e sconfigge più di una volta effetti e azioni compiuti da miscredenti pagani dediti alla magia. In particolare, in Mirmidonia l'apostolo deve fronteggiare un popolo di cannibali sanguinari che lo accecano, lo imprigionano imponendogli di bere una velenosa pozione magica, mentre in Etiopia, nella città di Naddaver, annienta il potere dei maghi Zaroes e Arfaxat⁽²⁾. In entrambi i casi la magia è pratica diffusa tra stranieri pagani; è cioè impiegata come elemento connotativo nella rappresentazione temibile dell'Altro, del diverso deviato dal maligno e minacciosamente deviante per la comunità. La missione di Matteo ha il compito di ribaltare la negatività del contesto, interrompere il potere del diavolo, in una visione che percepisce e propone la cristianizzazione soprattutto come processo di assimilazione, di annullamento dell'alterità.

(1) La lontananza e la vastità dei territori da cristianizzare sono espresse con chiarezza negli *Atti degli Apostoli* «et eritis mihi testes in Hierusalem et in omni Iudea et Samaria et usque ad ultimum terra» (1, 8) e nel *Vangelo di Marco* «euntes in mundum universum praedicate evangelium omni creaturae» (16,15); mentre nel *Vangelo di Matteo* si insiste soprattutto sul compito didattico loro assegnato: «euntes ergo docete omnes gentes baptizantes eos in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti, docentes eos servare omnia quaecumque mandavi vobis» (28,19-20), le citazioni dalla *Bibbia* sono tratte da R. WEBER, R. GRYSOON (ed.), *Biblia Sacra Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem*, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart 2007.

(2) Per una rassegna dei testi della tradizione apocriфа dedicati a Matteo si vedano G.T. ATENOLFI (a cura di), *I testi medioevali degli Atti di S. Matteo l'Evangelista*, Carlo Bestetti Edizioni d'Arte, Roma 1958, nonché M. ERBETTA (a cura di), *Gli apocriфи del Nuovo Testamento. Atti e Leggende*, Marietti Editore, Genova 1978, pp. 490-526.

Nella tradizione omiletica dell'Inghilterra anglosassone questi due episodi sono rielaborati rispettivamente in un testo anonimo *Sancte Andreae*, tramandato nel Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 198⁽³⁾, e nel *Natale Sancti Mathei Apostoli et Euangelistae* dedicato alla celebrazione del giorno di nascita del santo e appartenente alla seconda serie delle *Catholic Homilies* di Ælfric (CH II, XXXII)⁽⁴⁾. Nell'inevitabile opacità della tradizione agiografica in entrambi i casi non sono individuabili in modo preciso le rispettive fonti, appartenenti a linee narrative diverse.

L'omelia anonima, in cui già il titolo lascia intuire il ruolo secondario svolto da Matteo, narra della evangelizzazione della Mirmidonia iniziata da Matteo e proseguita con successo da Andrea. Tra le varie versioni tramandate, la storia rielaborata nel testo in inglese antico trova corrispondenze significative soprattutto in una redazione greca nota come Πράξεις Ἀνδρέου καὶ Ματθαια εἰς τὴν πόλιν τῶν ἀνθρωποφάγων (P) e in una latina *Acta Andreae et Matthiae apud anthropophagos*, nota anche come *Casanatensis* (C)⁽⁵⁾: presumibilmente nell'Inghilterra anglosassone cir-

(3) Cfr. D. SCRAGG, *The Corpus of Vernacular Homilies and Prose Saints' Lives before Ælfric*, in P.E. SZARMACH (ed.), *Old English Prose. Basic Readings*, Garland, New York 2000, pp. 73-150, in particolare pp. 90-91 e F.C. CASSIDY, R.N. RINGLER (ed.), *Bright's Old English Grammar and Reader*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York 1971, pp. 205-219. Un altro testimone è tramandato come frammento tra le *Blickling Homilies*, XVIII S. *Andreas*, (cfr. R.J. KELLY ed., *The Blickling Homilies: Edition and Translation*, Continuum, London-New York 2003, pp. 158-163 e pp. 193-195). La vicenda è rielaborata secondo gli stilemi della poesia dell'inglese antico anche nell'*Andreas*, conservato nel Vercelli Book (cfr. R. NORTH, M.D.J. BINTLEY eds., *Andreas. An Edition*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool 2016).

(4) Cfr. M. GODDEN (ed.), *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The Second Series*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1979, pp. 271-279.

(5) Cfr. F. BLATT (Hrsg.), *Die lateinischen Bearbeitungen der Acta Andreae et Matthiae apud Antropophagos*, Töpelmann, Giessen-Copenhagen 1930. È opportuno precisare, inoltre, che un breve frammento in latino, ritrovato

colavano uno o più testi in latino riconducibili a queste tradizioni⁽⁶⁾.

Le aberranti abitudini alimentari dei Mirmidoni e la spaventosa accoglienza che questi pagani riservano agli stranieri definiscono per l'auditorio l'ambientazione:

Segð þonne þæt þā men þe in þære ceastre wæron þæt
 hī(e) hlāf ne æton, ne wæter ne druncon, ac æton manna
 lichaman and heora blōd druncon. And æghwylc man þe
 on þære ceastre cōm alþēodisc, segð þæt hīe hine sōna
 genāmon and his ēagan ūt āstungan and hīe him sealdon
 āttor drincan þæt mid myclen lybcraefte wæs geblanden
 and mid þȳ þe hīe þone drenc druncon, hraþe heore
 heorta wæs tōlēsed and heora mōd onwended. (rr. 3-9 =
 P, C cap. 1)⁽⁷⁾

Dicono che gli uomini di quella città non mangiavano pane né bevevano acqua, ma mangiavano i corpi degli uomini e bevevano il loro sangue. E qualsiasi straniero arrivava in quella città, dicono che lo prendevano subito

in un palinsesto dell'XI sec., il cosiddetto Codex Vallicelensis, presenta corrispondenze ancora più significative con l'omelia in inglese antico (cfr. M. BONNET ed., *Acta Andreae et Matthiae Apostolorum*, in C. TISCHENDORF ed., *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, rev. R.A. LIPSIUS, M. BONNET, vol. II.1, Olms, Hildesheim 1898, pp. 85-88).

(6) Si veda in merito F.M. BIGGS (ed.), *Sources of Anglo-Saxon Literary Culture: The Apocrypha*, Medieval Institute Publications, Kalamazoo 2007, pp. 40-41, nonché il lavoro di E.B. BAUMLER, *Andrew in the City of the Cannibals: A Comparative Study of the Latin, Greek, and Old English Texts*, Unpublished PhD Diss. University of Kansas 1985.

(7) Qui e nelle citazioni successive si segue l'edizione di F.C. CASSIDY, R.N. RINGLER, *op. cit.*; si indicherà altresì la corrispondenza di contenuto tra il passo dell'omelia e i relativi capitoli della redazione greca (P) e di quella latina (C), secondo l'edizione di F. BLATT, *op. cit.*, nella quale le due opere sono disposte come testi a fronte.

e gli cavavano gli occhi e gli davano da bere una pozione velenosa che era stata mescolata con arti magiche. E quando bevevano questa bevanda, immediatamente il loro cuore si disgregava, il loro animo mutava⁽⁸⁾.

La magia è presentata come strumento funzionale all'antropofagia dei Mirmidoni, un mezzo atto a sostenere e facilitare la trasformazione dei prigionieri da esseri umani pensanti in animali da macellare e mangiare. La pozione agisce in un processo di bestializzazione⁽⁹⁾: le vittime private della vista e dunque della capacità di guardare verso l'esterno, perdono poi anche il dominio sul proprio intelletto, diventano incapaci di guardare nella propria interiorità, di scrutare nella propria anima, non sono più in possesso della facoltà che distingue gli uomini dagli animali. Come si avrà modo di notare, nella nostra omelia questo aspetto, ribadito più volte nelle redazioni di P e C, non sarà più sottolineato.

Dunque Matteo subisce il medesimo trattamento, ma con effetti diversi:

Se ēadiga Mātheūs þā in ēode on þā ceastre, and hraðe hīe hīe genāmon and his ēagan ūt āstungan. And hīe him sealdon āttor drinccan and hīe sendon on carcerne. And hīe hīe hēton þæt āttor etan and hē hit etan nolde, for þon þe his heorte næs tōlēsed ne his mōd onwendend; (rr. 10-13 = P, C cap. 2)

(8) Le traduzioni dall'inglese antico sono a cura di chi scrive.

(9) In C tale processo è esplicitato in modo chiaro: «retrusi in carcere, fenum ut boves vel pecora conmedebant» (cap. 1, p. 33, rr. 18-19). Anche nell'*Andreas* si describe la condizione dei prigionieri «ac hīe hig ond gærs // for melteāste / mēðe gedrehte.» (vv. 38b-39) 'esausti per la mancanza di cibo, li tormentavano invece fieno ed erba'.

Allora il beato Matteo arrivò in città, e subito lo presero e gli cavarono gli occhi. E gli diedero da bere la pozione e lo portarono in carcere. Gli ordinarono di mangiare la pozione ed egli non volle mangiarla, perciò il suo cuore rimase fermo e il suo animo non mutò.

Il santo accecato, non ha più modo di vedere quello che lo circonda, ma saldo nella fede, conserva le proprie facoltà intellettive: la neutralizzazione degli effetti nefasti di veleni ingeriti del resto rientra tra i cinque segni promessi da Cristo risorto nel *Vangelo di Marco*⁽¹⁰⁾. Il confronto con le fonti, in particolare con P dove Matteo rifiuta di mangiare il fieno, ma beve la pozione⁽¹¹⁾, consente di ascrivere a un errore della trasmissione manoscritta l'incongruenza della pozione associata al verbo *etan* 'mangiare', piuttosto che ipotizzare una rielaborazione originale dell'omelia in volgare⁽¹²⁾.

(10) «signa autem eos qui crediderint haec sequentur in nomine meo daemonia eicient linguis loquentur novis serpentes tollent et si mortiferum quid biberint non eos nocebit super aegrotos manus inponent et bene habebunt» (Mc 16, 17-18).

(11) «καὶ μετὰ τὸ ἐξενεγκεῖν ἐπότισαν αὐτὸν τὸ φάρμακον τῆς μαγικῆς αὐτῶν πλάνης, καὶ ἀπήγαγον αὐτὸν ἐν τῇ φυλακῇ, καὶ παρέθηκαν αὐτὸν χόρτον ἐσθίειν, καὶ οὐκ ἤσθιεν. μεταλαβὼν γὰρ ἐκ τοῦ φαρμάκου αὐτῶν οὐκ ἠλλοιώθη ἡ καρδία αὐτοῦ οὔτε ὁ νοῦς αὐτοῦ μετηλλάγη» (P cap. 2, p. 34, rr. 3-6) 'e dopo avergli cavato gli occhi, gli fecero bere la pozione dell'inganno magico, e lo condussero in prigione, e gli diedero da mangiare il fieno ma non ne mangiò. Benché avesse preso la loro bevanda, ma il suo cuore non si alterò e la sua mente non si trasformò'.

(12) Così sembrerebbe suggerire R. BOENIG (transl. by), *The Acts of Andrew in the Country of the Cannibals: Translations from the Greek, Latin, and Old English*, Garland, New York-London 1991, p. 57, n. 2, mentre F.C. CASSIDY, R.N. RINGLER, *op. cit.*, avevano già opportunamente notato: «It is useless to conjecture when the corruption in the OE arose—whether in the course of transmission of the lost intermediary or in the process of translating it into OE—though we may perhaps hazard a guess that the error was occasioned by the similarity between the Latin words *fenum* and *venenum*» (.).

Nel consueto parallelismo figurale usato nelle agiografie tra le gesta del santo e quelle di Cristo, la sofferenza fisica di Matteo imprigionato rimanda alle sofferenze subite dal Salvatore nella Passione⁽¹³⁾. L'apostolo rivela la propria fragilità di uomo; piangendo copiosamente, ricorda la sua dedizione e lamenta la condizione in cui si trova, quindi chiede al Signore di riacquistare la vista per rendersi conto in modo immediato di quello che gli sta accadendo:

ac hē waes simle tō Drihtne biddende mid myclum wōpe and cwæþ tō him: “Mīn Drihten Hælend Crīst, for þon wē ealle forlēton ūre cnēorisse and wæron þē fylgende and þū eart ūre ealra fultum, þā þe on þē gelyfað, beheald nū and geseoh hū þās men þinum þēowe dōð. And ic þē bidde, Drihten, þæt þū mē forgife mīnra ēagna lēoht þæt ic gesēo þā þe mē onginnað dōn on þisse ceastre þā weorstan tintrego; and ne forlæt mē, mīn Drihten Hælend(e) Crīst, ne mē ne sele on þone bitterestan dēaþ.” (rr. 13-20 = P, C cap. 2)

ma egli pregava continuamente il Signore piangendo molto e gli disse “mio Signore, Cristo Salvatore, poiché abbiamo lasciato tutti i nostri parenti e ti abbiamo seguito, e tu sei il sostegno di tutti noi che crediamo in te, guarda ora e vedi cosa questa gente fa al tuo servitore. Io ti chiedo Signore di darmi la luce dei miei occhi che io possa vedere in questa città quelli che mi tormentano; e non abbandonarmi o mio Signore Gesù Cristo, non mi consegnare alla morte più amara”.

(13) Cfr., tra gli altri, EARL J.W., *Typology and Iconographic Style in Early Medieval Hagiography*, in H. KEENAN (ed.), *Typology and English Medieval Literature*, AMS Press, New York 1992, pp. 89-120.

La debolezza di Matteo sembra essere amplificata in questa supplica rispetto alle redazioni di P e C dove il santo proclama comunque la propria disponibilità a essere divorato dai cannibali, se questa sarà la volontà divina⁽¹⁴⁾. In P, inoltre, la sofferenza e il disagio dell'evangelista sono sottolineati anche dall'accusa di essere stato reso simile alle bestie, con un chiaro riferimento alla disumanizzazione tentata dai cannibali ai suoi danni⁽¹⁵⁾.

Dio mostra la propria vicinanza al santo, donandogli nuovamente la vista e assicurandogli la futura salvezza grazie all'arrivo di Andrea:

Mid þý þe hē þis gebed se ēadiga Mātheūs gecweden hæfde, mycel lēoht and beorht onlēohte þæt carcern and Drihtnes stefn wæs on þæm lēohte cwepende: “Mātheūs min se lēofa, beheald on mē”. Matheus þā lōciende, hē geseah Drihten Crīst. (rr. 21-24 = P, C cap. 3)

Quando il beato Matteo ebbe pronunciato la sua preghiera, una grande luce splendente illuminò la prigione e la voce del Signore era in quella, dicendo: “Matteo, mio amato, guardami.” Matteo allora volgendo lo sguardo, vide il Signore Cristo.

Riacquistata la vista, confortato dalle parole del Signore, Matteo comprende che la propria aderenza alla fede dovrà manifestarsi, più che nell'azione diretta, nell'attesa paziente affinché il progetto stabilito per lui dall'Altissimo giunga a compimento. Accetta, quindi, la propria condizione di prigioniero dei terribili cannibali e per tutelarsi dalla loro

(14) Tale affermazione è esplicitata anche nei versi 70-75 dell'*Andreas*.

(15) «πῶς παρεπιησιασάν με τοῖς κτήνεσιν» (P p. 34, r. 10).

ferocia, nasconde l'avvenuto miracolo; quando arrivano i carcerieri finge di essere ancora cieco, mostrando un'astuzia che, ancora una volta, lo rende profondamente umano:

Se ēadiga Māthēus þā betȳnde his ēagan þȳ lās þā cwel-
 leras gesāwan þæt his ēagan geopenede wǣron. (rr. 33-34
 = P, C cap. 3)

Il beato Matteo chiudeva i suoi occhi, di modo che i carcerieri non vedessero che erano aperti.

La pazienza di Matteo sarà premiata: allo scadere dei trenta giorni di detenzione previsti dai cannibali prima di trasformare i prigionieri in cibo, Andrea arriva in Mirmidonia, libera il confratello e le altre persone incarcerate, restituendo loro vista e intelletto. L'omileta sembra seguire le fonti in modo piuttosto fedele accogliendo dunque una narrazione in cui la vittoria del bene si concretizza attraverso miracoli strabilianti in un'atmosfera favolistico-meravigliosa⁽¹⁶⁾. Con la sola preghiera Andrea provoca la morte repentina dei sette carcerieri; con il segno della croce apre le porte della prigione e trova Matteo sereno che intona i salmi:

(16) Cfr. F. BLATT, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-17. Più in generale è opportuno ricordare come i racconti delle gesta dei santi condividano numerosi elementi con il romanzo medievale di derivazione ellenistica, si veda, per esempio A. CAMERON, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse*, California University Press, Berkeley 1991, pp. 89-119, nonché con specifico riferimento all'agiografia prodotta nell'Inghilterra medievale Th.D. HILL, *Imago Dei: Genre, Symbolism, and Anglo-Saxon Hagiography*, in P.E. SZMARMACH, *Holy Men and Holy Women. Old English Prose Saints' Lives and their Contexts*, State University of New York Press, Albany 1996, pp. 38-41; H. MAGENNIS, *Approaches to Saints' Lives*, in P. CAVILL, *The Christian Tradition in Anglo-Saxon England: Approaches to Current Scholarship and Teaching*, D.S. Brewer, Cambridge 2004, pp. 163-183.

Mid þī þe hīe cōmon tō þæs carcernes duru, hīe þær gemētton seofon hydras standan. Se hāliga Andrēas þā gebæd on his heortan and raðe hīo wāron dēade. Se hālgā Andrēas þā ēode tō þæs carcernes duru and hē worhte Crīstes rodetācen, and raþe þā dura wāron ontȳnede. And hē in ēode on þæt carcern mid his discipulum and hē geseah þone ēadigan Māthēus ænne sitton singende. (rr. 134-139 = P, C cap. 19)

Quando essi [Andrea e i suoi discepoli] arrivarono alle porte della prigione trovarono sette guardie in piedi. Sant' Andrea allora pregò nel suo cuore e quelli improvvisamente caddero morti. Sant' Andrea poi si avvicinò alle porte del carcere e fece il segno della croce di Cristo e le porte si aprirono all'improvviso. Ed egli entrò dentro con i suoi discepoli e vide il beato Matteo che stava lì seduto cantando.

L'omileta sembra sottolineare il diverso ruolo svolto dai due apostoli nel racconto appellando in modo quasi sistematico Andrea come 'santo', *hālig* e Matteo come 'beato', *ēadig*⁽¹⁷⁾. È infatti ancora una volta Andrea ad annullare

(17) L'uso variato dei due aggettivi potrebbe forse intenzionalmente distinguere la condizione di forza o di debolezza in cui si trovano Matteo e Andrea. Nella scena in cui i due apostoli, ritrovatisi, pregano insieme il Signore, *hālig* definisce entrambi: «Se hālgā Andrēas þā and se hālgā Māthēus gebādon tō Drihtne» (r. 152); mentre, nella sezione successiva del racconto, Andrea incatenato e torturato dai Mirmidoni è indicato come *ēadig* (cfr. rr. 207-211). Questa diversa connotazione non sembra trovare corrispondenza nelle versioni di P e C dove tendenzialmente i nomi degli apostoli o non sono preceduti da connotazioni specifiche oppure, come in C *beatus* è impiegato più volte sia per Matteo che per Andrea, cfr. per es. cap. 19, p. 69, rr. 16-17: «Tunc beatus andreas cepit introire in carcere, circumducens oculos suos et vidit beatum matheum», oppure cap. 21, p. 71, r. 26: «Et statim exurgens beatus andreas, unacum beatus matheus».

la disumanizzazione provocata dalla magia sui prigionieri. Con l'imposizione delle mani sugli occhi e sul cuore ridona loro la vista e l'intelletto⁽¹⁸⁾:

And æfter þon gebede se hāliga Andrēas sette his hand ofer þāra wera ēagan þā þær on lande⁽¹⁹⁾ wæron, and gesihþe hīe onfēngon. And eft hē sette his hand ofer hiora heortan, and heora andgiet him eft tō hwirfde. (rr. 152-155 = P, C cap. 21) E dopo la preghiera Sant'Andrea pose la sua mano sugli occhi di quelle persone che allora erano in prigione ed essi ricevettero la vista. E poi pose la sua mano sui loro cuori e ad essi ritornò l'intelletto.

Prima di compiere il miracolo, nel passo corrispondente della redazione greca e di quella latina (P, C cap. 20) Andrea inveisce contro il diavolo ed elenca le colpe perpestrate dal maligno a danno dell'umanità, esprimendo in tal modo il proprio sdegno accorato nel vedere gli uomini ridotti allo stato di bestie. Messi in salvo Matteo e i suoi, Andrea riuscirà quindi a concludere la missione.

Rispetto al racconto attestato nelle versioni di P e di C, nella sezione analizzata la riscrittura in volgare ripropone

(18) Per la possibile corrispondenza dei passi citati con motivi e lessico liturgici si veda B. FRIESEN, *Legends and Liturgy in the Old English Prose Andreas*, in «Anglo-Saxon England», 2014, 43, pp. 209-229, in particolare pp. 214-217.

(19) Che la locuzione *on lande* potesse indicare in senso traslato 'in prigione' era stato già suggerito da R. MORRIS (ed.), *The Blickling Homilies*, Oxford University Press, London 1874-1880, pp. 239-240. Anche nella redazione P si specifica infatti che i miracolati si trovano ἐν τῇ φυλακῇ (cap. 21, p. 70, r. 26) 'in carcere'; non appare pertanto condivisibile l'emendamento proposto da R. BOENIG, *op. cit.*, p. 63, n. 21, secondo il quale *on lande* sarebbe da correggere in *on blinde* con riferimento alla condizione di cecità dei prigionieri.

dunque i dati essenziali della vicenda. L'omissione di molti dettagli è forse imputabile alla fonte latina effettivamente utilizzata o rientra nelle strategie omissive impiegate dagli omileti nel tradurre adattando il testo latino alla tipologia dell'auditorio ovvero alle finalità della predicazione in specifici contesti⁽²⁰⁾. L'assenza di riferimenti espliciti e significativi alla disumanizzazione dei prigionieri per effetto della pozione magica potrebbe perciò essere riconducibile alla decisione di non soffermarsi troppo su questo aspetto, non insistere eccessivamente sulla forza della magia, sul potere destabilizzante di queste pratiche, per concentrare l'attenzione piuttosto sul miracolo che sana le menomazioni subite.

Si conserva però nell'insieme la contestualizzazione improntata al fantastico: la lotta tra il bene e il male è presentata in una narrazione avvincente nel corso della quale apparenti sconfitte sono straordinariamente ribaltate in effettive vittorie. Il dinamismo degli avvenimenti segue anche l'evoluzione dei protagonisti: oltre al cambiamento dei Mirmidoni, l'omileta non trascura l'evoluzione sia di Andrea che di Matteo. I due apostoli, infatti, in momenti

(20) E.G. WHATLEY, *Lost in Translation: Omission of Episodes in some Old English Prose Saint's Legends*, «Anglo-Saxon England», 1997, 26, pp. 187-208, per esempio nota: «Abbreviating a text, [...] can be a means of controlling its meaning and averting possibly undesirable effects on the readers or listener» (p. 189); sull'argomento si vedano, tra gli altri, anche H. MAGENNIS, *The Exegesis of Inebriation: Treading Carefully in Old English*, in «English Languages Notes», 1986, 23, pp. 3-6; M. SWAN, *Men ða leofestan: Gendre, the Canon, and the Old English Homiletic Tradition*, in P. CAVILL (ed.), *The Christian Tradition in Anglo-Saxon England: Approaches to Current Scholarship and Teaching*, D.S. Brewer, Cambridge 2004, pp. 185-192, in particolare pp. 185-186; nonché, con specifico riferimento al testo in esame, B. FRIESEN, *Visions and Revisions: the Sources and Analogues of the Old English Andreas*, Unpublished PhD Diss. University of Toronto 2008, p. 265 e pp. 288-290.

diversi, manifestano la propria insicurezza, la paura di non riuscire ad affrontare il compito loro affidato. I cambiamenti emotivi di Matteo, come si è visto, sono efficacemente descritti: protetto dalla fede resiste agli effetti che la magia avrebbe dovuto avere sul suo corpo, ma si dispera per la sofferenza fisica, per la perdita della vista, per la paura dei cannibali; Dio sana la sua menomazione e sostiene il suo dolore, l'evangelista si rasserena e attende pregando l'aiuto salvifico del suo confratello. Analogamente Andrea accoglie titubante e timoroso la missione che Dio vuole affidargli, ma tranquillizzato dal suo Signore (rr. 37-54 = P, C cap. 4) la condurrà con coraggio e fermezza. Arrivato in Mirmidonia, infatti, dopo torture, lotte contro il diavolo e altri miracoli eccezionali, i Mirmidoni accoglieranno la parola di Cristo, abiurando i loro tratti mostruosi.

Affascinato dal susseguirsi di magiche meraviglie, rassicurato dall'umanità dei santi che non nascondono debolezze e timori terreni, il pubblico recepisce il messaggio di una fede da acquisire e mettere in pratica affrontando e superando ostacoli e difficoltà nel corso di un processo in continuo divenire. L'avvenuta assimilazione al mondo dei giusti annienta la loro alterità definita dal cannibalismo e dalla magia, il cupo *Altrove* in cui erano confinati si trasformerà in un confortante luminoso *Qui* animato dalla fede.

Molto diverso è, invece, il contesto narrativo dell'omelia ælfriciana. In primo luogo Matteo è l'unico protagonista: nella parte iniziale Ælfric rielabora il passo evangelico relativo alla chiamata del santo (Mt 9, 9-13), accogliendo argomentazioni esegetiche principalmente dalla *Homelia XXVI Quadragesima* di Beda⁽²¹⁾; nella seconda sezione,

(21) Per le fonti relative a questa prima parte cfr. soprattutto M. GODDEN (ed.) *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: Introduction, Commentary and Glossar*, Oxford

indicata come *Passio*, riprende il racconto della predicazione e del martirio del santo in Etiopia, impiegando come fonte soprattutto la *Passio Matthei* tramandata nel VII libro di quella raccolta di *historiae apostolicae* attribuite a un certo Abdia vescovo di Babilonia, indicato dalla critica moderna come PseudoAbdia. L'omileta sembra operare una scelta da più testimoni o utilizzare un testo in cui erano già confluiti dettagli, elementi rinvenibili in redazioni diverse della tradizione manoscritta pervenuta⁽²²⁾.

Seguendo l'impianto narrativo della fonte, dunque, il pubblico è informato dell'arrivo di Matteo in Etiopia e dell'incontro con due maghi:

Ðes ylca apostol and godspellere becóm þurh Godes
sande æfter drihtnes upstige to heofenum to ethiopian

University Press, Oxford 2000, pp. 605-608, nonché C.R. DAVIS, *Two New Sources for Ælfric's Catholic Homilies*, in «The Journal of English and Germanic Philology» 1942, 41, pp. 510-513 e C.L. SMETANA, *Ælfric and the Early Medieval Homiliary*, in «Traditio», 1959, 15, pp. 163-204, in particolare p. 200. L'omelia di Beda è consultabile nell'edizione di D. HURST (ed.), *Beda Venerabilis Opera. Pars III Opera Homiletica*, Brepols, Turnholt 1955, pp. 148-155.

(22) Cfr. M. GODDEN, *ivi*, p. 606 e pp. 608-613 per un confronto puntuale tra i testi. Come noto, l'impiego dello PseudoAbdia per molte omelie ælfriciane era stato individuato in modo sistematico già da M. FÖRSTER, *Über die Quellen von Ælfric's Homiliae Catholicae: I. Legenden*, C. Vogt's Buchdruckerei, Berlin 1892, pp. 16-26; lo stesso Ælfric d'altronde indicava Abdia come fonte della *Passio Simonis et Jude* (CH II, XXXIII, rr. 275-282), traducendo evidentemente questa informazione da una redazione latina dell'opera (cfr. M. GODDEN, *ivi*, pp. 621-622). È opportuno ricordare, inoltre, come questo filone narrativo fosse stato già accolto da altri autori latini familiari alla cultura anglosassone, come Gregorio Magno nelle *Expositiones in librum primum Regum libri VI* (cfr. P. VERBRAKEN ed., *Sancti Gregorii Magni Expositiones in canticum canticorum in librum primum Regum*, Brepols, Turnholt 1963, p. 327 r. 1240), e lo stesso Beda nell'omelia già citata (in particolare HURST D., *ivi*, p. 154, rr. 221-225). Si veda infine ATENOLFI G.T., *op. cit.*, per una presentazione relativa alla tradizione matteana dello PseudoAbdia (pp. 13-24), per un'edizione del testo con traduzione in italiano (pp. 58-81).

þæt is ðæra Silhearwena⁽²³⁾ rice. and gemette ðær twegen drymen. Zaroes and Arfaxað. dweliende þæt folc mid heora drycraefte; Hwæt ða MATHEUS arasode heora deofles craft. and ealle ða gehalde þe hí alefedon. and fela oðre untrume ðærtoeacan. þurh þæs hælendes naman, þe hine ðider asende; (rr. 81-86 = F pp. 637-638)⁽²⁴⁾.

Questo stesso apostolo e evangelista giunse, mandato da Dio, dopo l'Ascensione del Signore in cielo, in Etiopia, questo è il regno dei Silhearwas, e incontrò due maghi Zaroes e Arfaxat che traviavano quel popolo con le loro magie. Allora Matteo svelò la loro abilità demoniaca e sanò tutti quelli a cui essi avevano fatto del male e anche molti altri malati in nome del Salvatore che lo aveva mandato lì.

Nel testo dello PseudoAbdia, però, si sottolinea anche l'ampio credito attribuito a Zaroes e Arfaxat e dal popolo e dallo stesso sovrano, si elencano poi nel dettaglio i danni inflitti sulle persone con i loro incantesimi — paralisi, cecità,

(23) Sull'uso del composto *sigel-wara* nella documentazione in inglese antico per indicare l'Etiopia e i suoi abitanti si veda il dettagliato contributo di J.R.R. TOLKIEN, *Sigelwara Land*, in «Medium Ævum», 1932, 1, pp. 183-196 e 1934, 3, pp. 95-111. Non del tutto convincente, invece, l'ipotesi di J. KILBURN, *The Contrasted 'Other' in the Old English Apocryphal Acts of Matthew, Simon and Jude*, in «Neophilologus» 2003, 87, pp. 137-151, secondo la quale l'etno-toponimo avrebbe probabilmente assunto una valenza dispregiativa evocando una regione remota con i tratti inquietanti dell'*Altrove*: «exotic mysterious and magic» (p. 138).

(24) Qui e nelle citazioni successive si segue l'edizione di M. GODDEN, *op. cit.*; si indicano altresì le collocazioni dei passi corrispondenti nell'edizione dello PseudoAbdia curata da J.A. FABRICIUS (ed.), *Codex Apocryphus Novi Testamenti*, vol. II, Hamburg 1743, pp. 636-668 (F), il cui testo M. GODDEN, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: Introduction* cit., p. 606, individua come quello più vicino all'omelia ælfriciano. Il volume digitalizzato è disponibile al link <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k91000358/f750.item# >.

sordità, morsi dei serpenti, false cure —, e, specularmente, i miracoli compiuti da Andrea per sanare queste infermità.

In Ælfric, invece, la scena appare sintetizzata in modo essenziale: non si insiste sulla specifica consistenza dei malevoli inganni perpetrati dai due, piuttosto si svela la natura demoniaca del loro operato. Quindi l'apostolo ne annulla gli effetti nefasti ed estende la propria benevolenza miracolosa alla guarigione di altri malati. Con questa ultima informazione Ælfric sembra liquidare anche un successivo riferimento ai maghi presente nel testo latino. Se infatti nella nostra omelia Matteo è accolto da un uomo già convertito, un *cniht* del re (rr. 86-90 = F pp. 639-640), interessato a sapere come gli apostoli riescano a predicare tra tanti popoli e a comprendere lingue diverse (rr. 91-92 = F p. 640), nella fonte l'uomo, indicato come l'eunuco Candace, manifesta anche la propria gioia per l'arrivo del santo che potrà liberare la città dal potere dei maghi; Matteo predica e converte riparando ancora una volta le storture provocate dai maghi, i quali a loro volta fingono di imitare il potere taumaturgico del santo, di fatto cessano semplicemente di fare del male; infine: «Matthæus [...] non solum hos curabat, quos illi lædebant, sed etiam omnes qui ad eum ferebantur, & fuerant infirmitatibus diversis obsessis» (F p. 640).

Del racconto proposto in queste due prime scene della *Passio*, Ælfric riporta esclusivamente gli elementi essenziali: Matteo, sostenuto da Dio e dunque dalla fede, mostra la vacuità del potere di Zaroës e Arfaxat e guarisce tutti i malati. Si preoccupa, però, di sottolineare l'identificazione tra magia e diavolo, specificando come gli impostori agiscano grazie a competenze diaboliche, *deofles cræft*.

Anche del successivo incontro con i maghi la narrazione ælfricana rielabora solo le azioni principali. Dopo la

risposta di Matteo alla domanda del suo ospite (rr. 92-105 = F pp. 640-642), si legge:

Æfter þyssere spræce comon ða drymen and hæfdon
him mid twegen ormæte dracan. ðæra orðung acwealde
þæt earme mennisc. ac se apostol matheus þa dracan
geswefode. and siððan of ðam lande adræfde. swa þæt hī
næfre siððan þær gesewene næron; (rr. 106-110 = F pp.
642-644)

Dopo questo discorso arrivarono i maghi e avevano con loro due draghi enormi il cui respiro uccideva quella povera gente, ma l'apostolo Matteo addormentò i draghi e poi li cacciò via da quella regione, cosicché essi da allora non furono mai più visti lì.

Nella fonte la scena presenta un'articolazione drammatica particolarmente vivace: l'arrivo dei maghi con i loro temibili accompagnatori è preannunciato prima da un uomo della comunità che li ha già avvistati, poi si forniscono informazioni dettagliate sul loro aspetto e sulla loro pericolosità⁽²⁵⁾.

Matteo si fa il segno della croce e si prepara ad affrontarli mentre Candace, spaventato, tenta di fermarlo e gli suggerisce di parlare loro dalla finestra. Matteo ovviamente esce dalla porta, maghi e draghi si avvicinano a lui e i draghi cadono addormentati. A questo punto il santo si rivolge direttamente a Zaroes e Arfaxat, chiede loro di risvegliare i mostruosi animali, specificando che se non li avesse

(25) «*Dracones autem erant galeati & flatus eorum flammiferum ardorem emittebat, sulphureasque spargebant auras è naribus, quorum odor homines interficiebat.*» (F p. 643)

addormentati i draghi avrebbero rivolto proprio contro di essi il veleno destinato originariamente a lui. La gente spaventata chiede a Matteo protezione, l'apostolo rassicura i presenti e invocando Cristo risveglia i draghi che, del tutto ammansiti, si allontanano per sempre dalla città. Il racconto di Ælfric è privo di qualsiasi tensione narrativa, non ci sono dialoghi, la successione temporale dei fatti è ridotta al minimo; la paura per questi animali minacciosi, la compassione per la gente, che può essere uccisa dal loro respiro sono appena accennati da un'esile aggettivazione, *ormæte dracan, earme mennisc*. Non indulge sulla rappresentazione dei draghi, di questi animali minacciosi, tipici dell'Etiopia secondo l'indicazione di Isidoro⁽²⁶⁾, componenti significativi dell'immaginario faunistico medievale⁽²⁷⁾, notoriamente associati al maligno nella cultura teologica⁽²⁸⁾.

(26) Il vescovo di Siviglia li descrive in modo piuttosto dettagliato e ne colloca l'origine in Etiopia e in India, cfr. *Etymologiae sive Origines*, a cura di A. VALASTRO CANALE, UTET, Torino 2004, XII, IV, 4-5 e XIV, V, 15.

(27) Cfr. M. PASTOUREAU, *Bestiaires du Moyen Âge*, Seuil, Paris 2011, pp. 122-125, o con specifico riferimento alle letterature germaniche medievali C. RAUER, *Beowulf and the Dragon: Parallels and Analogues*, D.S. Brewer, Cambridge 2000 e J.T. LIONARONS, *The Medieval Dragon: the Nature of the Beast in Germanic Literature*, Welsh Academic Press, s.l. 2024.

(28) È appena il caso di ricordare come nell'*Apocalisse* il drago compaia tra i sette segni («et visum est aliud signum in caelo et ecce draco rufus magnus, habens capita septem et cornua decem et super capita sua septem diademata» *Ap.* 12, 3) e sia indicato come la bestia identificata con Satana e con il diavolo contro cui combattono Michele e i suoi angeli («et factum est proelium in caelo, Michael et angeli eius ut proeliarentur cum dracone et draco pugnavit et angeli eius et non valuit neque locus inventus est eorum amplius in caelo et proiectus est draco ille magnus serpens antiquus qui vocatur Diabolus et Satanas qui seducit universum orbem proiectus est in terram, et angeli eius cum illo proiecti sunt» *Ap.* 12, 7-9), ma si vedano anche *Ap.* 13, 2-4 e 20, 1-10, nonché *Genesis* 3, 1-5 e 14-15. Sulla valenza del drago nella simbologia cristiana cfr. H. RAHNER, *Symbole der Kirche. Die Ekklesiologie der Väter*, O. Müller, Salzburg 1964, pp. 292-296, P. VON GEMÜNDEN, N. HARRIS, *Tiersymbolik*, in H. BALZ et al. (hrsg.), *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, 33, de Gruyter Berlin–New York

Evidentemente, in questo contesto non è necessario rappresentare la forza di Matteo amplificando la spaventosità, la pericolosità dei suoi nemici. Il racconto non mira a coinvolgere emotivamente il pubblico; le azioni di Matteo sono disposte lungo una traiettoria lineare, estranea alla complessa caoticità della vita terrena; l'estrema sicurezza con cui il santo già nella fonte opera i suoi miracoli, nel testo in volgare sembra amplificata da una narrazione focalizzata esclusivamente su quelli che Ælfric considera i fatti centrali della vicenda. È però interessante notare come, nell'abbreviare in sole due frasi il confronto di Matteo con i draghi, l'omileta espliciti la partecipazione attiva dell'apostolo all'azione. Nella fonte i due animali semplicemente escono dalla città: «Ad hanc vocem elevantes capita serpentes coeperunt ire, atque apertis portis egressi publice & omnibus videntibus, numquam amplius comparuerunt» (F p. 644); nell'omelia invece sono cacciati via dall'evangelista: «matheus þa dracan geswefode. and siððan of ðam lande adræfde»⁽²⁹⁾.

Il definitivo allontanamento dei maghi avviene, invece, come nella fonte, solo nell'episodio successivo, quando alla corte del re Eglesippo la loro perfidia ingannevole è

2002, https://www.degruyterbrill.com/database/tre/entry/tre.33_534_15/html, nonché per un'analisi di alcune testimonianze nella documentazione in inglese antico C. DI SCIACCA, *Feeding the Dragon: The Devouring Monster in Anglo-Saxon Eschatological Imagery* «SELIM. Journal of the Spanish Society for Medieval English Language and Literature», 2019, 24, pp. 53-104.

(29) L'episodio, nella documentazione in inglese antico, è riportato anche tra le brevi note biografiche che precedono il racconto del martirio di Matteo nell'*Old English Martyrology*: «And of Sigalwar<um> he flemdem tw<e>genn dryas ða þar worhton micel scinlac mid twam dracum» (C. RAUER ed., *The Old English Martyrology: Edition, Translation and Commentary*, D.S. Brewer, Cambridge 2013, p. 186 e p. 293) 'E mise in fuga due maghi etiopi che praticavano magia con due draghi'. In questo caso la sintesi ancor più stringata è chiaramente motivata dalla tipologia testuale.

definitivamente smascherata e annientata, unitamente all'idolatria pagana di cui sono promotori. Anche in questo caso il materiale agiografico appare riassunto in modo considerevole, secondo criteri che mirano a evidenziare soprattutto l'assoluta aderenza del santo ai principi della dottrina, la sua umiltà, la consapevolezza di poter agire, compiere i suoi miracoli, solo in quanto esecutore della volontà divina.

Nella prima scena Ælfric ripropone piuttosto fedelmente la fonte:

Æfter ðisum þærrihthe gewát þæs cynges sunu. and ða drymen stodon at his forþsiðe, leasetende þæt hí woldon hine eft to life aræran; Ða ða / him þæs ne speow ða sedon hí ðam cyninge þæt hé wære gelæht to heora godum. and sceolde beon an þæra goda. and hé wurðe wære þæt him man worhte anlicnyse and templ arærde; (rr. 110-115 = F p. 649)

Dopo di ciò, improvvisamente morì il figlio del re e i maghi erano lì al momento del suo trapasso, fingendo che lo avrebbero riportato in vita. Poiché questo non riuscì loro, dissero al re che egli era stato preso dai loro dei e sarebbe stato uno degli dei; e che meritava che gli fosse costruita una statua con le sue sembianze e gli fosse eretto un tempio.

Il passo propone un argomento caro ad Ælfric, la stigmatizzazione e la ridicolizzazione di magia e credenze pagane qui assimilate nelle figure mendaci di Zaroes e Arfaxat: incapaci di resuscitare il defunto, i due tentano di far credere al sovrano che il figlio sia diventato un dio da venerare attraverso la costruzione di vacui, inutili simulacri⁽³⁰⁾.

(30) Per esempio nella sezione conclusiva della *Passio Sancti Bartholomei Apostoli* (CH I, XXXI, rr. 303-334, P. CLEMOES ed., *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies*:

Matteo, invece, convocato a corte su consiglio di Candace, ridona la vita al giovane:

Ʒæs cynges cniht ða se ðe hæfde geinnod þone godspel-
lere matheum æt his huse. sæde ðære cwene be him; Se
cyning ða Eglippus sende his arwurðoston ðegenas to
ðam apostole. and he com ða, and þone aðeling Euffranón
on drihtnes naman, of deaðe arærde; (115-119 = F pp.
649-651)

Quel servitore del re, presso la cui casa alloggiava l'evan-
gelista Matteo, parlò alla regina di questi. Il re Eglippo
allora mandò il suo attendente più valoroso dall'apostolo
ed egli arrivò e in nome del Signore resuscitò dalla morte
il nobile Euffranon.

Nel testo ælfriciano il racconto è costruito su una scar-
na successione dei fatti. Eliminando il discorso diretto e la
relativa tensione drammatica, si elimina anche la veemen-
te e al contempo feroce esortazione di Candace che chiede
alla regina di imprigionare i maghi e, se Matteo riuscirà a
ridonare la vita al ragazzo, di bruciarli, poiché «omnia mala
per ipsos in civitatem nostram eveniunt» (F p. 649); ana-
logamente non c'è spazio per la lunga preghiera di Matteo
che precede il miracolo (F pp. 650-651), né per il contatto
fisico tra l'apostolo e il giovane, «Et adprehendes manum
defuncti ait» (F p. 651). Non è evidentemente necessario
soffermarsi sullo spirito punitivo–vendicativo del credente
Candace; e il miracolo non ha nulla di *meraviglioso* perciò

The First Series, Text, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1997), Ælfric si sca-
glia più volte contro la venerazione di idoli demoniaci, pagani, *deofolgyld* (r.
306), *hæpengyld* (r. 315). Sull'argomento si veda anche A.L. MEANEY, *Ælfric
and Idolatry*, in «The Journal of Religious History», 1984, 13, pp. 119-135.

non deve essere descritto nel suo progressivo manifestarsi anche attraverso la liturgia di parole e gesti, piuttosto è inserito in un'atmosfera di ordinaria normalità perché a essere straordinari sono soltanto la forza di Dio, il potere della fede, le relative manifestazioni che non richiedono orpelli, contestualizzazioni, commenti⁽³¹⁾.

Nella seconda parte dell'episodio la reazione del sovrano rimanda ancora una volta alla contrapposizione tra gli errori devianti del paganesimo e la verità assoluta della fede. Egli, stupito ritiene Matteo un dio (rr. 119-122) e per questo fa accorrere la gente da ogni parte del regno con ricchi doni (rr. 122-124 = F p. 651); l'evangelista spiega con umiltà e chiarezza il proprio ruolo invitando alla conversione:

Ne eom ic na god. ac ic eom godes ðeowa. se asende me to eow þæt ge bugon fram eowerum hæðengilde to ðam soðan scyppende. se ðe ana is god (rr. 125-128 = F p. 652)

Io non sono un dio ma sono servitore di Dio. Egli mi ha inviato a voi affinché vi volgiate dalla vostra idolatria verso il vero Creatore, colui che è l'unico Dio.

Li esorta quindi a usare i doni preziosi a lui tributati per costruire una chiesa (rr. 128-130). Messa in pratica questa richiesta (rr. 131-132 = F p. 652), il trionfo definitivo della fede sull'idolatria e dunque anche sui maghi è sancito con il sacramento del battesimo impartito dal santo al re, alla regina e ai loro figli (rr. 138-141 = F p. 653). Intanto il pubblico è informato che:

(31) Cfr. in merito GODDEN M., *Ælfric's Saints' Lives and the Problem of Miracles*, in «Leeds Studies in English», 1985, 16, pp. 83-100.

Pa twegen drymen Zaroes and Arfaxað, wurdon gescynde of *ðam earde*. swa hraðe se æþeling of deaðe aras (rr. 141-142 = F p. 653)

I due maghi Zaroes e Arfaxat erano stati mandati via dalla regione, appena il principe era risorto.

Questo riferimento a un avvenimento già accaduto chiude opportunamente il racconto della conversione per sancire la separazione tra magia e fede, ricordando al contempo come il perverso potere dei due impostori avesse rivelato la propria inefficacia con la resurrezione del principe. Nello PseudoAbdia si specifica: «Interea magis timentes, fugerunt ad Persas» (F p. 653). Ælfric, invece, pone l'attenzione sulla loro messa al bando, piuttosto che su un'uscita di scena connotata emotivamente e comunque, per quanto determinata dalle circostanze, "volontaria". Nessun accenno neanche alla Persia, il successivo *Altrove* in cui i due maghi saranno definitivamente annientati da Simone e Giuda, come racconta lo PseudoAbdia nel libro VI (F pp. 608-636) e lo stesso Ælfric nell'omelia successiva, *Passio Simonis et Jude* (CH II, XXXIII).

Nella sezione conclusiva dedicata al martirio del santo, la presenza dei maghi è circoscritta a un'unica scena. Irtaco, il re pagano decreta la morte di Matteo poiché l'apostolo difende Ifigenia, la principessa che, consacrata a Dio, rifiuta di sposare il sovrano. Questi allora chiede aiuto ai maghi, ovviamente senza risultato:

þa clypode se cyning him drymen to. and wolde mid drycraefte hí to his willan geweman. Eft ða ða him þyses ne speow. (rr. 198-200 = F p. 665)

Allora il re convocò presso di lui i maghi, avrebbe voluto sedurla con arti magiche per sottometerla alla propria volontà. Ma questo non accadde.

Inseriti nel racconto originario come presenze abituali nelle corti orientali tardo-antiche, nella loro incapacità di agire con efficacia, i maghi ribadiscono qui la ridicola protervia di Irtaco e l'inconsistenza del suo potere. Nella fonte sono convocati per rapire la donna con l'aiuto dei demoni, «Quod cum penitus non posset, convocavit magos, ut daemonum illam ministerio raperent.» (F p. 665)⁽³²⁾. Indipendentemente dalla possibilità che *Ælfric* abbia consultato una redazione diversa, l'immagine proposta in inglese antico appare nel confronto più subdola. Irtaco non aspira tanto, o meglio, non aspira solo al dominio del corpo, ma anche a quello della mente, chiede ai maghi di usare le loro arti, *dry*, *drycraft*, per sedurre la donna, *geweman*, ovvero per sottometerla alla sua volontà, convincendola ad accettare con l'inganno della magia una condizione altrimenti inaccettabile. Matteo ovviamente anche dopo il martirio protegge Ifigenia e gli altri credenti, il re malvagio sarà punito con un'orribile malattia, mentre il nuovo sovrano ripristinerà la parola di Dio nel regno (rr. 209-225 = F p. 666-668). Nell'economia della narrazione, la salita al trono di Irtaco, dopo la avvenuta cristianizzazione dell'Etiopia, mostra al credente la necessità di continuare a impegnarsi per perseguire il bene poiché la sconfitta del male non è mai acquisita in modo definitivo; può ritornare nelle vesti di un sovrano malvagio, pagano, che si avvale dell'aiuto di maghi, parte integrante di questo scenario negativo.

(32) Così anche nell'edizione di G.T. ATENOLFI, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

Ælfric, dunque, segue l'impianto narrativo della fonte, privilegiando quegli aspetti del racconto che gli consentono di rappresentare Matteo come modello di santità esemplare, esente dall'errore e dall'imperfezione⁽³³⁾. L'apostolo attua la propria missione evangelizzatrice, senza titubanze, mostrando sempre una tranquilla e consapevole sicurezza nel superare gli ostacoli incontrati, per accogliere poi serenamente il martirio. Il pubblico percepisce con chiarezza che gli avversari dell'evangelista non costituiscono mai una reale minaccia per le forze del bene di cui Matteo è *strumento* attivo; il suo potere appartiene a una sfera tanto elevata da non essere paragonabile a quello dei suoi antagonisti.

I racconti rielaborati nei due testi analizzati definiscono dunque scenari narrativi diversi nel presentare il rapporto di Matteo con la magia. Al santo Ælfriciano non appartiene evidentemente la fragile emotività dell'apostolo che, imprigionato dai Mirmidoni è in grado di offrire solo

(33) H. MAGENNIS, *Ælfric's Apostles*, in «Anglo-Saxon England», 2016, 44, pp. 181-199, nota: «Ælfric writes prolifically about the saints, among whom the apostles receive particularly close attention, but bringing them to life as struggling human beings is not part of his agenda as religious teacher.» (p. 199). Sulle peculiari modalità con cui Ælfric costruisce la rappresentazione degli apostoli nei suoi testi, si vedano anche M. GODDEN, *Experiments in Genre: The Saints' Lives in Ælfric's Catholic Homilies*, in P.E. SZARMACH, *Holy Men and Holy Women: Old English Prose Saints, Lives and their Contexts* State University of New York Press, New York 1996, pp. 261-287; DE GREGORIO S., *Ælfric, Gedwyld, and Vernacular Hagiography: Sanctity and Spirituality in the Old English Lives of SS Peter & Paul*, in D. SCRAGG (ed.), *Ælfric's Popes*, «Old English Newsletter, Subsidia», 2001, 30, pp. 75-98; E.G. WHATLEY, *Pearls before Swine: Ælfric, Vernacular Hagiography, and the Lay Reader*, in T.N. HALL (ed.), *Via Crucis: Essays on Early Medieval Sources and Ideas in Memory of J.E. Cross*, West Virginia University Press, Morgantown 2002, pp. 158-184; nonché H. MAGENNIS, *Cristes leorningnihtas: Traditions of the Apostles in Old English Literature*, in M. CESARIO, H. MAGENNIS (eds.), *Aspects of Knowledge: Preserving and Reinventing Traditions of Learning in the Middle Ages*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2018, pp. 97-115.

una resistenza difensiva-passiva alla magia e alla crudeltà dei suoi carcerieri⁽³⁴⁾. Nell'omelia anonima, la vittoria del bene avverrà solo con l'intervento di Andrea e solo dopo una serie di altre complicate avventure, fonte di estrema sofferenza fisica e psicologica⁽³⁵⁾. La spiccata inclinazione al meraviglioso e l'umana debolezza degli apostoli – il pianto disperato di Matteo, i dubbi di Andrea – non sono recepibili da un autore che presumibilmente avrebbe collocato il testo tra quelle false tradizioni, *lease gesetnyssa*, quei libri pieni di errori devianti, *dwollican bec*, diffusi dagli eretici, *dwolmenn*, e condannati dai padri della Chiesa⁽³⁶⁾. Nella

(34) Forse Ælfric non conosceva questa fonte, sicuramente non la utilizzò neanche nell'omelia *Natale Sancti Andreae* (CH I, XXXVIII, cfr. anche M. GODDEN, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: Introduction* cit., pp. 318-329); sull'argomento si vedano i contributi di S. DE GREGORIO, *Pegenlic or Flæsclic: The Old English Prose Legends of St. Andrew*, in «The Journal of English and Germanic Philology», 2003, 102, pp. 449-464 e F.M. BIGGS, *Ælfric's Andrew and the Apocrypha*, in «The Journal of English and Germanic Philology», 2005, 104, pp. 473-494.

(35) È interessante ricordare come, secoli dopo, nella *Legenda Aurea* Iacopo da Varranze citi l'episodio (II *De sancto Andrea apostolo*, 13-21), ma ne ponga apertamente in dubbio la veridicità: «Hoc autem quod dicitur de huiusmodi orbatione Mathei et restitutione duorum luminum per Andream non puto dignum fide ne in tanto euangelista minoratio infirma denotetur, quasi sibi non potuerit obtinere quod Andreas ei tam facile impetrauit.» (II, 22, G.P. MAGGIONI a cura di, *Iacopo da Varazze, Legenda Aurea. Con le miniature del codice Ambrosiano C 240 inf.*, SISMEL Edizioni del Galluzzo, Firenze 2007, pp. 30-43).

(36) Così nel celebre passo che conclude l'omelia *Assumptio Sanctae Mariae Virginis* (CH II, XXIX rr. 120-133). Come noto, l'argomento è affrontato più volte soprattutto nei paratesti (cfr. J. WILCOX ed., *Ælfric's Prefaces*, Durham Medieval Texts, Durham 1996), accanto alla necessità di preservare la fedeltà della trasmissione manoscritta (cfr. D. FARACI, *Convenzioni retoriche nelle Prefazioni di Ælfric*, in V. DOLCETTI CORAZZA, R. GENDRE ed., *Lettura di Ælfric*, Edizioni dell'Orso, Alessandria 2012, pp. 171-222). E tuttavia nell'uso delle fonti l'ortodossia delle sue scelte appare di difficile definizione secondo criteri moderni; A. O'LEARY, *An Orthodox Old English Homiliary? Ælfric's Views on the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, in «Neuphilologische Mitteilungen», 1999, 100, pp. 15-26, conclude la sua analisi scrivendo:

CH II, XXXII, infatti, il santo sconfigge Zaroes e Arfaxat senza intraprendere una lotta concreta contro di essi, non ha contatti diretti, né parla con loro; semplicemente mostra l'inermità dei loro malefici, ne annienta il potere con la forza della sua fede anche quando sono accompagnati dai draghi.

Nel mostrare la variegata ricchezza delle fonti agiografiche circolanti nell'Inghilterra anglosassone, le due testimonianze analizzate rivelano al contempo contesti di redazione e trasmissione diversi. Da un lato un'omelia anonima, tramandata in un codice degli inizi dell'XI sec., inserito in forma frammentaria anche in una raccolta di incerta datazione, sicuramente antecedente alla produzione ælfriciana; un'omelia destinata presumibilmente a un pubblico laico⁽³⁷⁾, abituato a recepire più agevolmente la verità della dottrina attraverso racconti di facile fruizione, di immediata godibilità, perché ricchi di avvenimenti strabilianti, eccezionali. Dall'altro un testo concepito come componente di una collettanea strutturata, completata presumibilmente

«Enthusiasm, therefore, not criticism, characterised his adoption of apocryphal *acta* into his own homiliary» (p. 22). Sulla specifica valenza che il concetto di apocrifo assume nel contesto culturale anglosassone si vedano invece F.M. BIGGS, *An Introduction and Overview of Recent Work*, in K. POWELL, D. SCRAGG (eds.), *Apocryphal Texts and Traditions in Anglo-Saxon England*, D.S. Brewer, Cambridge 2003, pp. 1-25 e J. HILL, *The Apocrypha in Anglo-Saxon England: The Challenge of Changing Distinctions*, in *ivi*, pp. 165-168.

(37) Nell'impossibilità di ricostruire il contesto di redazione della singola omelia, si vedano comunque le principali ipotesi formulate sulla raccolta *Blickling*, da D. SCRAGG, *Homilies of the Blickling Manuscript*, in M. LAPIDGE, H. GNEUSS (eds.), *Learning and Literature in Anglo-Saxon England: Studies presented to Peter Clemoes on the Occasion of his Sixty-fifth Birthday*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1985, pp. 299-316; M. CLAYTON, *Homiliaries and Preaching in Anglo-Saxon England*, in P.E. SZARMACH (ed.), *Old English Prose. Basic Readings*, Garland, New York 2000, pp. 151-198, in particolare 168-171; M. GATCH, *The Unknowable Audience of the Blickling Homilies*, in «Anglo-Saxon England», 1989, 18, pp. 99-115.

poco dopo il 994 da uno degli intellettuali più importanti, noti e prolifici dell'Inghilterra anglosassone, un testo destinato verosimilmente a un auditorio più colto, prevalentemente ecclesiastico⁽³⁸⁾.

Tanto più interessante allora è rilevare come le due omelie, ciascuna a proprio modo interpretino comunque un immaginario condiviso nel quale la magia è intesa come pratica pagana, nemica della cristianità, sostenuta dal diavolo ed è percepita soprattutto come tratto connotativo dell'*Altrove*. In entrambi i casi la missione del santo si attua in terre lontane, tra stranieri ostili; l'alterità disturbante di questi contesti è amplificata da tratti mostruosi quali l'antropofagia dei Mirmidoni, la presenza di draghi in Etiopia. Indipendentemente dal tipo di racconto scelto e dalle modalità di rielaborazione adattate alle esigenze di pubblici diversi, la celebrazione del santo si compie in modo significativo attraverso la sua capacità di annientare la magia per assimilare l'*Altro* grazie alla conversione.

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(38) Si veda M. GODDEN (ed.), *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: Introduction*, cit., per la datazione pp. xxix-xxxvi, in particolare p. xxxv e per il pubblico p. xxvi.

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HÚSFRÚ MEÐ DRYKKJARHORN MAGIC POTIONS, RITUAL AND POWER IN THE VÖLSUNGA SAGA AND THE GUÐRÚNARKVIÐA ÖNNUR

CONCETTA SIPIONE

ABSTRACT: On several occasions, within the Völsung-Niflung cycle, a magic potion is used for various purposes (to strengthen memory, to inspire courage and determination, to induce oblivion or to suppress pain and hostility). In these situations, characters such as Sigrdrífa/Brynhildr and Grímhildr play a crucial role. They appear not only as an ancient manifestation of the typically female function of “drink offering”, associated with the rituals of the Germanic *Männerbund* (M. Enright, *Lady with a Mead-Cup*, 1988), but also as inspirers and manipulators. Particularly Grímhildr, who in the *Völsunga saga* (chap. XXVI) is referred to as *in fjölkunnga* and *grimmhugud kona*, is shown as the deviser of strategies aimed at consolidating the family and dynastic position. The analysis and comparison of these episodes in the *Eddic* poems and the *Völsunga saga* will be the subject of my paper.

In diverse occasioni, all'interno della narrazione nibelungico-volsungica, viene fatto ricorso a una pozione magica con finalità diverse (per consolidare la memoria, per infondere coraggio e determinazione, oppure per provocare l'oblio o sopire dolore e animosità). In queste situazioni personaggi come Sigrdrífa/Brynhildr e Grímhildr svolgono

un ruolo determinante, non solo come riflesso ancestrale della funzione, tipicamente femminile, di “mescitrici di bevande”, protagoniste dei rituali connessi al *Männerbund* germanico (M. Enright, *Lady with a Mead-Cup*, 1988), ma anche come ispiratrici e manipolatrici e, specie nel caso di Grímhildr, definita in *ffolkunnga e grimmbuguð kona* nella *Völsunga saga* (cap. XXVI), come artefice di strategie di potere e di piani volti al consolidamento della posizione familiare e dinastica. L’analisi e il confronto, nei carmi eddici e nella *Völsunga saga*, di questi episodi in cui espedienti magici, rituali e esercizio del potere si intrecciano strettamente, sarà oggetto del mio contributo.

1. Introduzione

All’interno del ciclo nibelungico-volsungico diversi episodi descrivono un personaggio femminile che offre una bevanda in una coppa o in un corno potorio. Alcune di queste scene, presenti nella *Völsunga saga* (VS)⁽¹⁾, non hanno alcuna corrispondenza nei carmi dell’*Edda poetica*⁽²⁾. Si

(1) Composta nella seconda metà del secolo XIII, è tramandata principalmente in un codice membranaceo datato intorno al 1400, NKS 1824b 4°, conservato a presso la Biblioteca Reale di Copenhagen, oltre che in manoscritti cartacei più tardi, privi di valore critico-testuale autonomo. La saga è una compilazione inerente al ciclo nibelungico-volsungico, bastata su una raccolta di carmi eroici analoga a quella dell’*Edda poetica*. La lacuna presente nella silloge eddica, dovuta alla perdita di un fascicolo di otto pagine, è in parte ricostruibile, almeno per quanto riguarda il contenuto, tramite i capitoli 24-31 della saga; cfr. M. MELI (a cura di), *La Saga dei Volsunghi*, Edizioni dell’Orso, Alessandria 1993, pp. 9-14.

(2) È contenuta nel *Codex Regius*, GKS 2365 4to, attualmente custodito presso l’Istituto “Árni Magnússon per gli studi islandesi” a Reykjavík; redatto nella seconda parte del secolo XIII (intorno al 1270) il manoscritto islandese fu conservato dal 1662 al 1971 presso la Biblioteca Reale di Copenhagen,

vedano, ad esempio, i passi in cui Brynhildr, nella reggia di Heimir, offre del vino a Sigurðr (capitolo 25)⁽³⁾, o in cui questi osserva Guðrún mescere da bere, apprezzandone la bellezza e le buone maniere (capitolo 28)⁽⁴⁾. Tali scene, probabilmente dovute al compilatore della saga, potrebbero denotare il suo interesse per i dettagli di natura mondana e concreta. Ci sono poi delle situazioni analoghe nella *VS* e nei carmi eddici ma, spesso, dal confronto, emerge che l'autore della saga ha operato delle aggiunte o ha inserito delle brevi frasi allo scopo di armonizzare o arricchire la narrazione. Talvolta, poi, la bevanda offerta è contraffatta o arricchita di ingredienti, metaforici o concreti, che hanno lo scopo di rafforzare la memoria, oppure indurre una forma di amnesia parziale o selettiva. Due di questi episodi, tramandati sia nella *VS* che nella silloge eddica, saranno oggetto di analisi in questo contributo: l'offerta della "bevanda del ricordo" (*minnisveig*) che la valchiria Sigrdrifa porge a Sigurðr e della "pozione dell'oblio" (*óminnisveig*) che Grímhildr somministra a Guðrún.

Nel gesto di offrire da bere a un eroe o a un sovrano si scorge il riflesso del ruolo, esercitato da figure femminili altolocate che, "memori delle usanze", all'interno del

dove giunse come regalo da parte del vescovo Brynjólfur Sveinsson al re di Danimarca; nell'aprile del 1971 fu trasferito in Islanda. Introduzione e informazioni sul Codex Regius sul sito delle *Éditiones Armagnæane Electronicae*: <https://eae.ku.dk/q?p=eae/vols/text/1>.

(3) «Síðan reis hon upp ok fjórar meyjar með henni, ok gekk fyrir hann með gullker ok bað hann drekka.», «Poi si alzò, le quattro ancelle con lei, e gli offrì una coppa dorata, pregandolo di bere.»; testo da R.G. FINCH (ed.), *The Saga of the Volsungs*, Nelson, London 1965, p. 42; ove non altrimenti specificato, le traduzioni dai testi originali sono a cura dell'autrice.

(4) «Ok eitt kveld skenkir Guðrún. Sigurðr sér at hon er væn kona ok at gllu in kurteisasta.», «Una sera, mentre Guðrún mesceva da bere, Sigurðr si accorse che era una bella donna e, sotto ogni aspetto, la più dotata di buone maniere.»; R.G. FINCH, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

comitatus di tradizione germanica, avevano il compito, nella sala, di rendere onore al leader e distinguere il valore e l'importanza dei guerrieri del seguito, delineando così la gerarchia vigente all'interno della comunità. L'esempio paradigmatico, tratto dal *Beowulf*, è l'episodio in cui la regina Wealhþēow, incedendo in maniera solenne, nella cornice festosa di Heorot, saluta per primo Hrōþgār, porgendogli la coppa e augurandogli di godere del banchetto:

Ēode Wealhþeo forð
 cwēn Hrōðgāres cynna gemyndig,
 grētte goldhroden guman on healle,
 ond þā frēolic wif ful gesealde
 ærest Ēast-Dena ēpelwearde,
 bæd hine bliðne æt þære bēorþege,
 lēodum lēofne [...] (vv. 612b-618a)⁽⁵⁾

Wealhþēow avanzò,
 la regina di Hroþgār, memore delle usanze.
 Salutò, ingioiellata, gli uomini nella sala
 e poi la nobile signora offrì la coppa
 per primo al custode della patria dei Danesi dell'Est,
 augurò di essere felice, durante quella festa,
 al re, caro al suo popolo [...]

La coppa viene poi offerta alla truppa, prima ai veterani e poi ai giovani guerrieri e, infine, a Beowulf che, da ultimo

(5) Citazione da R.D. FULK, R.E. BJORK, J.D. NILES (edd.), *Klaeber's Beowulf. Fourth Edition*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2014, p. 23. Commento al passo citato in M.J. ENRIGHT, *Lady with a Mead-Cup. Ritual, Group Cohesion and Hierachy in the Germanic Warband*, «Frühmittelalterliche Studien» 22 (1988), pp. 170-203, qui pp. 171-177; il saggio ha anche ispirato il titolo di questo contributo.

arrivato, non ha ancora dimostrato il suo valore né conquistato il ruolo che gli spetta all'interno della schiera dei seguaci; viene tuttavia salutato dalla regina con grande onore, come segno di riconoscenza per l'aiuto che ha promesso ai Danesi contro Grendel⁽⁶⁾.

2. La minnisveig nei *Sigrdrífumál*

Il gesto con cui Sigrdrífa⁽⁷⁾ offre a Sigurðr, che l'ha appena destata dal torpore fatato cui Odino l'ha condannata, la bevanda del ricordo, richiama il cerimoniale compiuto dalle dame del *comitatus*. La scarna narrativa del carne, dal titolo convenzionale di *Sigrdrífumál*⁽⁸⁾ (*Sd.*), riassume in una annotazione in prosa il gesto della valchiria; la

(6) Il poema gnomico *Maxims I*, B vv. riporta un cerimoniale analogo: «[...] symle æghwær / eador æpelinga // ærest gegrêtan, / forman fulle // tō frēan hond / ricene geræcan [...]», «[...] sempre e ovunque, nei convivi, [la sovrana] si accosti subito al protettore dei guerrieri, offra prontamente a lui per primo la coppa [...]»; testo da T.A. SHIPPEY, *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English*, Brewer, Cambridge 1976, p. 68.

(7) Il composto *sigr-drifa*, “colei che conduce alla vittoria”, è un nome molto appropriato per una valchiria. Tuttavia, almeno in origine, il termine non sarebbe stato un nome proprio ma, piuttosto, una parafrasi del concetto di “valchiria”. Ricorre anche nei *Fáfnismál*, strofa 445, dove sarebbe stato utilizzato come un appellativo, da lì, probabilmente sarebbe nato il fraintendimento, poiché il compilatore della raccolta eddica, non comprendendone esattamente il significato, lo avrebbe interpretato come un nome proprio; cfr. H. GERING, B. SIJMONS, *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, vol. II, Buchhandlung des Waisenhauses, Halle a. d. Saale 1931, p. 208.

(8) La *VS* riporta piuttosto fedelmente le strofe 5-21 dei *Sd.*, che si interrompono alla strofa 29,2, in corrispondenza della lacuna del *Codex Regius*; le strofe 29,3-37 sono tramandate dai codici cartacei della *VS*. Sulla natura “composita” del carne e sul genere di appartenenza cfr. J. HARRIS, *Sigrdrífumál*, in P. PULSIANO, *Medieval Scandinavia. An Encyclopedia*, Garland Publishing, New York, London 1993, pp. 581-582; M. BATTAGLIA, *Edda poetica. Mito, eroismo e tragedia nel Medioevo scandinavo*, Meltemi, Milano 2025, pp. 140-144.

bevanda ha una funzione specifica, è un liquido che rafforza la memoria:

Hon tók þá horn fullt mjaðar ok gaf honum minnisveig⁽⁹⁾.

Prese il corno, riempito di idromele, e gli offrì la bevanda del ricordo.

La solennità del gesto è accompagnata da un'invocazione agli elementi naturali e agli dèi per ottenerne vittoria, eloquenza e saggezza, oltre alla capacità di dare la guarigione (strofe 3 e 4). In una strofa successiva (5) si ripete in maniera più articolata l'offerta della bevanda con cui Sigrdrífa, accogliendo la richiesta dell'eroe di infondere in lui la saggezza (*speki*), lo saluta come rappresentante eccelso della schiatta dei combattenti:

“Bjór færi ek þér, brynþings apaldr,
magni blandinn ok megintíri;
fullr er hann ljóða ok líknstafa,
góðra galdra ok gamanrúna.”⁽¹⁰⁾

“Birra ti porgo, o albero della battaglia,
unita a potenza e grande fama,
colma di incantesimi e di lettere salvifiche,
di magie propizie e di rune di piacere.”

L'apprendista riceve, attraverso la bevanda, definita in precedenza *minnisveig* “la bevanda del ricordo”⁽¹¹⁾, non

(9) Citazioni dei carmi eddici da G. NECKEL, H. KUHN, (edd.), *Edda. Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern. I. Text*, 5., verbesserte Auflage, C. Winter, Heidelberg 1983, p. 189.

(10) G. NECKEL, H. KUHN, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

(11) *minnisveig* è un composto di *minni* “ricordo, memoria” e *veig*, “bevanda (molto) inebriante”. La definizione di J. FRITZNER, *Ordbog over det gamle norske*

soltanto un sostegno alle sue facoltà cognitive, ma anche un potenziamento delle sue conoscenze: il liquido inebriante (*bjórr*) si compone infatti di quegli stessi fondamenti di sapienza universale e conoscenze occulte che la donna vuole trasmettere all'eroe, come gli incantesimi e le magie (*ljóð, góðar galdrar*); il corno è al contempo ornato con segni scritti, (*líkn-stafir, gaman-rúnar*) incisi materialmente su di esso, che sono insieme metafora e traccia visibile, latori di messaggi di salvezza e di gioia. La sapienza immersa nel mezzo liquido si unisce al gesto propiziatorio dell'incisione runica, unendo al fluido la materialità fisica delle rune tracciate sul corno⁽¹²⁾.

Nella *VS* (capitolo 21), in cui l'identificazione tra la valchiria liberata da Sigurðr e Brynhildr è ormai avvenuta, la profferta della donna di istruire l'eroe nell'arte delle rune e in altri argomenti che possano essergli utili è formulata ancora più chiaramente e si accompagna, come nel carme eddico, all'invocazione delle divinità e all'augurio che l'eroe possa acquistare fama e vantaggio attraverso i suoi insegnamenti. La funzione della pozione di rafforzare il ricordo, viene sottolineata dalla donna nell'atto di porgere la bevanda:

sprog, Feilberg & Landmark, Christiania 1867, p. 449 è: «Drik som gives en for at han derved kan komme til at gjenvinde sin tabte Bevidsthed eller Hukommelse», «Bevanda somministrata a qualcuno per aiutarlo a riacquistare la coscienza o la memoria perduta». Il termine ricorre solo qui e nella *Göngu-Hrólfs Saga*, una saga leggendaria, risalente all'inizio del secolo XIV, per indicare l'antidoto necessario a restituire la memoria a una donna, vittima dell'incantesimo del mago Mǫndul Pattason. *minnisveig* ricorda *minnisöl*, "birra della memoria", che Freyja richiede alla gigantessa Hyndla, come ausilio affinché il suo protetto Ottarr possa ricordare gli oltre settanta nomi che compongono la sua genealogia (*Hyndluljóð*, 451).

(12) Cfr. J. QUINN, *Liquid Knowledge: Traditional Conceptualisations of Learning in Eddic Poetry*, in S. RANCOVIC, L. MELVE, E. MUNDAL (edd.), *Along the Oral-Written Continuum: Types of Texts, Relations and their Implications*, Brill, Turnhout 2010, pp. 182-183.

“[...] ok drekkum bæði saman, ok gefi goðin okkr góðan dag, at þér verði nyt ok frægð at mínum vitrleik ok þú munir eftir, þat er vit ræðum.”⁽¹³⁾

“[...] adesso beviamo, noi due insieme, e che la divinità ci conceda un giorno favorevole, in modo che a te giungano, attraverso la mia sapienza, vantaggio e gloria, se ti ricorderai ciò di cui parliamo.”

Qui l'efficacia della bevanda che favorisce il ricordo sembra essere relativizzata e resa sotto una luce più ambigua: la capacità di Sigurðr di ricordare gli insegnamenti che gli verranno impartiti sembra dipendere anche dal favore degli dèi, piuttosto che unicamente dalla potenza della bevanda preparata dalla valchiria.

Altrove, il gesto generoso e salvifico di Sigrdrífa viene rovesciato nel suo opposto; il rituale dell'offerta della bevanda viene così sovvertito e deprivato della sua valenza propizia e disinteressata. La solennità del gesto di porgere da bere, al fine di elevare chi riceve il corno e con esso il liquido prezioso della saggezza e del ricordo, ha il suo opposto nella somministrazione della *ómínnisveig*, la bevanda che conferisce l'oblio.

3. Grímhildr, in fjólkunnga

Artefice, nel ciclo nibelungico-volsungico, della sovversione del rituale è Grímhildr, madre dei Gjúkunghi, la cui caratterizzazione nella *VS* assume contorni assai più negativi che nei carmi eddici. Nella saga (capitolo 26) la regina

(13) R.G. FINCH, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

viene definita *grimmhuguð kona* “donna assai malvagia” e *in fjölkunnga* “esperta di magia”, “strega, fattucchiera”:

Giúki átti Grímhildi ina fjölkunngu. [...] Grímhildr var grimmhuguð kona⁽¹⁴⁾.

Giúki era sposato con Grímhildr, donna esperta di magia. [...] Grímhildr era donna d'animo assai malvagio⁽¹⁵⁾.

La figura di Grímhildr è al centro di vari complotti che costituiscono il vero motore dell'azione; la regina ne è anche, di solito, l'ispiratrice. L'autore della saga crea l'immagine di una donna priva di scrupoli, che non esita a servirsi dei figli per raggiungere i suoi scopi, rendendoli talvolta anche partecipi delle sue macchinazioni. Tali manovre hanno come scopo di consolidare la posizione familiare e intrecciare politiche matrimoniali volte a dare prestigio alla stirpe. Grímhildr non esita a servirsi di pozioni magiche e bevande contraffatte, allo scopo di manipolare le facoltà cognitive e di influenzare la volontà delle sue vittime. L'episodio più noto nella tradizione volsungica vede coinvolto il giovane Sigurðr, individuato dalla regina come il partito ideale per la figlia Guðrún.

4. Il *meinblandinn mjöð* nella *Völsunga saga*

L'eroe, già da qualche tempo presso la corte di Gjúki, appare a Grímhildr come un valido alleato per accrescere

(14) Ivi, p. 44.

(15) In termini simili si esprime Brynhildr. Prima di morire la donna predice a Gunnarr «Sættast munu þit Guðrún brátt með ráðum Grímhildar innar fjölkunngu.», «Vi riconcilierete presto con Guðrún, grazie ai maneggi di Grímhildr, la strega.» (VS, capitolo 32; ivi, p. 60).

l'importanza della sua famiglia. Le sue enormi ricchezze poi, derivate dalla sottrazione del tesoro di Fáfnir, hanno un ruolo determinante nella sua decisione di accogliere il giovane tra i figli di Gjúki (capitolo 28):

Þat finnr Grímhildr, hvé mikit Sigurðr ann Brynhildi, ok hvé opt harm getr hennar; hugsar fyrir sér, at þat væri meiri gífta, at hann staðfestisk þar ok ætti dóttur Gjúka konungs, ok sá, at engi mátti við hann jafnast, sá ok, hvert traust at honum var, ok hafði ofr fjár, miklu meira en menn vissi dæmi til. ⁽¹⁶⁾

Grímhildr aveva notato quanto Sigurðr amasse Brynhildr, dato che era solito ricordarla; pensava tra sé, che la cosa migliore fosse dargli una moglie, che si stabilisse là e che prendesse in sposa la figlia del re Giúki, dal momento che si rese conto che nessuno poteva rivaleggiare con lui. Inoltre, vedeva in lui un appoggio sicuro e con una ricchezza immensa, di gran lunga superiore a qualsiasi altra mai sentita prima.

Ma un ostacolo si frappone al raggiungimento del suo obiettivo: Sigurðr è infatti molto attratto da Brynhildr. Per fare in modo che la dimentichi e sia disposto a sposare senza indugio Gúðrun, Grímhildr gli offre una bevanda che provoca l'amnesia, accompagnandola con una solenne proposta di amicizia duratura e un'apparente dimostrazione di affetto. Grímhildr accoglie così Sigurðr nella sua famiglia, ma il gesto perde la sua valenza originaria e viene svilito perché compiuto in modo subdolo, con secondi fini non dichiarati. L'inganno e il tradimento determinano così l'andamento della narrazione.

(16) Ivi, p. 47.

Eitt kveld, er þeir sátu við drykk, ríss dróttning upp ok gekk fyrir Sigurð ok kvaddi hann ok mælti, “Fögnuðr er oss á þinni hérvist, ok allt gott viljum vér til yðar leggja. Tak hér við horni ok drekk.” Hann tók við ok drakk af. Hún mælti, “Þinn faðir skal vera Gjúki konungr, en ek móðir, bræðr þinir Gunnarr ok Høgni ok allir, er eiða vinnið, ok munu pá eigi yðrir jafningjar fást.” Sigurðr tók því vel, ok við þann drykk munði hann ekki til Brynhildar.

Una sera, mentre sedevano e bevevano insieme, la regina si alzò, si recò da Sigurðr e, rivolgendosi a lui, disse: “Siamo compiaciuti della tua presenza e desideriamo condividere con voi ogni bene. Accetta questo corno e bevi”. Egli accettò il corno e bevve. Disse Grímhildr “Il re Gjúki sarà tuo padre, e io tua madre, Gunnar e Høgni saranno tuoi fratelli, e tutti voi stringerete dei giuramenti, e nessuno sarà alla pari con voi”. Sigurðr accettò di buon grado e, con quella bevanda, perse ogni ricordo di Brynhildr.

L’episodio non ha purtroppo corrispondenza alcuna nei carmi eddici esistenti, il poema relativo sarebbe andato perduto a causa della lacuna del *Codex Regius*⁽¹⁷⁾. La *VS* è l’unica fonte che riporta l’episodio, ma se ne trova una menzione indiretta nel carme *Grípispá*, (strofa 31) in cui Grípir, zio materno di Sigurðr, predice che⁽¹⁸⁾:

(17) Il compilatore della saga avrebbe utilizzato un poema, ricostruito, e andato perduto, la *Sigurðarkviða in meiri* (“Carme maggiore di Sigurðr”). Cfr. A. HEUSLER, *Die Lieder der Lücke im Codex Regius der Edda*, in *Germanistische Abhandlungen, Hermann Paul dargebracht*, ed. da IDEM et al., K.J. Trubner, Strassburg 1902, pp. 1-98, qui pp. 63-64. Il carme avrebbe narrato del precedente fidanzamento di Brynhildr e di Sigurðr e dell’azione cospiratrice di Grímhildr ai danni del giovane.

(18) R.G. FINCH, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

“Íþ munuð alla eiða vinna
fullfastliga, fá munuð halda;
verið hefir þú Gjúca gestr eina nótt,
mantattu horsca Heimis fóstro.”⁽¹⁹⁾

“Voi tutti stringerete giuramenti
assai saldamente; pochi ne manterrete.
Sei stato ospite di Gjúki per una notte,
non ti ricorderai della saggia pupilla di Heimir.”

La profezia di Grípir trova conferma nelle parole di Brynhildr, al capitolo 27 della *VS*, in cui la donna interpreta il sogno premonitore di Guðrún come anticipazione del matrimonio con Sigurðr, esito dell’inganno ordito da Grímhildr:

“Ek mun ráða sem eftir mun ganga: Til ykkar mun koma Sigurðr, sá er ek kaus mér til manns. Grímhildr gefr honum meinblandinn mjöð, er öllum oss kemr í mikit stríð. Hann muntu eiga ok hann skjótt missa. Þú munt eiga Atla konung. Missa muntu bræðra þinna, ok þá muntu Atla vega.”⁽²⁰⁾

“Interpreterò proprio come si svolgeranno gli eventi: Sigurðr, che ho scelto come mio marito, verrà da te. Grímhildr gli darà dell’idromele contraffatto. Questo porterà grande dolore a tutti noi. Lo sposerai e presto lo perderai. Poi sposerai il re Atli. Perderai i tuoi fratelli e poi ucciderai Atli.”

(19) G. NECKEL, H. KUHN, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

(20) R.G. FINCH, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

La bevanda contraffatta con cui Sigurðr dimentica Brynhildr è menzionata anche in occasione del litigio tra Guðrún e Brynhildr, in cui quest'ultima imputa a Grímhildr di essere la causa prima di tutti i mali (capitolo 30):

“Hún veldr ǫllum upphöfum þess þóls er oss bítr. Hún bar Sigurði grimmt ǫl, svá at eigi mundi hann mitt nafn.”⁽²¹⁾

“È lei la responsabile dell'inizio di questa disgrazia che ora ci affligge. Lei servì a Sigurðr la birra fatale, in modo che dimenticasse il mio nome”.

La bevanda che procura l'oblio è ignota alla materia nibelungica continentale e, d'altro canto non avrebbe ragione d'esistere lì, dato che nel *Nibelungenlied* Siegfried non intrattiene alcuna relazione amorosa con Brünhild, né si è impegnato con lei in precedenza. Il dispositivo del *Vergessenheitstrank*, infatti, è un elemento narrativo strettamente connesso con il fidanzamento di Sigurðr e Brynhildr, motivo centrale della tradizione nordica, e ha lo scopo di rendere verosimile la rottura dei patti stretti tra i due e il tradimento di Sigurðr. Sulla base delle formulazioni usate nella *VS* per indicare la bevanda, evidentemente frutto di dizione poetica (*meinblandinn mjöð, grimmt ǫl*), oltre ad altri elementi, come il riferimento indiretto contenuto nella *Grípispá*, A. Heusler, esclude che il ricorso al *Vergessenheitstrank* sia un'invenzione del compilatore della saga⁽²²⁾. Si può comunque osservare che l'amnesia (parziale) dell'eroe si verifica proprio in corrispondenza dell'incontro

(21) Ivi, p. 52.

(22) A. HEUSLER, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

di filoni narrativi appartenenti a tradizioni diverse o di complessi narrativi non omogenei; nel caso di Sigurðr in occasione della confluenza tra la materia burgundica e il racconto delle avventure del giovane eroe, mentre nel caso di Guðrún, come si vedrà in seguito, nel passaggio dalla versione narrativa di provenienza meridionale alla sua rielaborazione nordica, da cui si origina, come conseguenza, un'immagine contraddittoria della protagonista⁽²³⁾. La critica ha in passato considerato l'espedito della pozione magica come un elemento relativamente recente e perciò di valore secondario, estraneo alla materia nibelungico-volsungica originaria⁽²⁴⁾.

Infine, nelle mire di Grímhildr entra anche Brynhildr che, in maniera autoritaria, impone a Gunnar come futura sposa (capitolo 28), forse un altro elemento narrativo appartenente al carne disperso a causa della lacuna:

“Yðart ráð stendr með miklum blóma fyrir utan einn hlut, er þér eruð kvánlausir. Biðið Brynhildar. Þat er gofgast ráð, ok mun Sigurðr riða með yðr”⁽²⁵⁾.

(23) Cfr. J. GRAGE, *Der Vergessenheitstrank. Zur Funktion der magischen Amnesie in der Nibelungenüberlieferung*, in A. Heitmann (ed.), *Arbeiten zur Skandinavistik. 14. Arbeitstagung der deutschsprachigen Skandinavistik, 1-5.9.199 in München*, Lang, Frankfurt am Main 2001, pp. 499-507, qui p. 506.

(24) O.L. Jiriczek, più di un secolo addietro, ha cercato di dimostrare che il motivo sarebbe radicato in uno strato molto antico e mitico della materia, che i Gjúkunghi rappresenterebbero in realtà una stirpe demoniaca, di cui Sigurðr diviene vittima a causa della pozione e che queste circostanze originarie si sarebbero confuse nel corso del tempo, dando esito a una rifunzionalizzazione della pozione stessa. I testi che lo studioso cita a dimostrazione di questa ipotesi sono però più recenti dei carmi eddici tramandati nel *Codex Regius*. Cfr. O.L. JIRICZEK, *Der Vergessenheitstrank in der Nibelungensage*, «Zeitschrift für vergleichende Litteraturgeschichte» 7 (1894), pp. 49-59.

(25) R.G. FINCH, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

“Prosperate sotto ogni punto di vista, eccetto che per un particolare: non avete moglie. Chiedete in sposa Brynhildr! Questo è il matrimonio più consono, Sigurðr verrà con voi.”⁽²⁶⁾

Per poter conquistare Brynhildr, com'è noto, Gunnar e Sigurðr si scambiano di aspetto. Gunnar infatti non è in grado di oltrepassare il fuoco che circonda la sala di Brynhildr, neanche in sella a Grani, il cavallo di Sigurðr. Sarà allora questi a superare la fiamma divampante assumendo le sembianze del cognato: anche in questa circostanza a Grímhildr viene attribuito un ruolo nel suggerire il modo in cui questo scambio “magico” si sarebbe potuto realizzare⁽²⁷⁾.

L'attivismo di Grímhildr tra i capitoli 27 e 31 è particolarmente enfatizzato: basti pensare che viene menzionata in almeno sette occasioni. Tale predilezione, secondo A. Heusler, non deriva dal compilatore⁽²⁸⁾, ma presumibilmente deve essere il riflesso del carne o dei carmi che sono andati perduti nella lacuna. Per i passi in cui si può fare un confronto con i componimenti del *Codex Regius*, infatti, secondo lo studioso, il compilatore della VS nomina la regina solo in corrispondenza

(26) L'aversione di Brynhildr per Grímhildr è uno dei *leitmotiv* della VS. Si esprime con durezza nei suoi confronti nel corso della disputa con Guðrún, «Dyliumst eigi við, at ek hygg Grímhildr eigi vel.», «Non ti nascondo che non penso bene di Grímhildr.» (capitolo 30, R.G. FINCH, *op. cit.*, p. 52) e nel dialogo successivo con Gunnar, «Nú erum vér eiðrofa, er vér eigum hann eigi, ok fyrir þetta skal ek raðandi þíns dauða. Ok eigum vér Grímhildi illt at launa. Henni finnst engi kona huglausari né verri.», «Ora sono una spergiura, perché lui non è mio, e per questo motivo mediterò se darti la morte e far sì che Grímhildr paghi per il male commesso. Non troverai donna più meschina o peggiore.» (capitolo 31; Ivi, p. 53).

(27) «Gunnar má nú eigi ríða þenna eld. Skipta nú litum, sem Grímhildr kenndi þeim Sigurði og Gunnari.» (VS, capitolo 29; ivi, p. 46), «Così Gunnar non poté cavalcare attraverso il fuoco. Sigurðr e Gunnar si scambiarono quindi le sembianze, come Grímhildr aveva insegnato loro.»

(28) Cfr. A. HEUSLER, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

della fonte eddica in cui è presente. Tuttavia, in almeno un caso, è possibile ipotizzare che l'azione di Grímhildr sia stato “ampliata” rispetto ad una possibile fonte eddica.

Nel *Brot af Sigurðarkviða* Gutthormr viene istigato a uccidere Sigurdr per conto dei suoi fratelli. Alla preparazione dell'omicida viene dedicata una sola, ma densa strofa (4), elaborata stilisticamente e caratterizzata nel primo verso lungo da rima e doppia allitterazione⁽²⁹⁾:

Sumir úlf sviðo, sumir orm sniðo,
sumir Gothormi af gera deildo;
áðr þeir mætti, meins of lystir
á horskom hal hendr of leggja⁽³⁰⁾.

Alcuni arrostirono il lupo, altri tagliarono il serpente,
altri diedero a Gutthormr da mangiare dell'animale rapace,
finché essi poterono, desiderosi del male,
mettere le mani su quell'uomo valoroso.

Il capitolo 32 della *VS* ha per questo episodio una serie di dettagli molto più ampia, come il confabulare dei fratelli, la chiara accusa nei confronti di Sigurðr e la decisa manifestazione della volontà di Gunnar di farlo assassinare. La *VS* riporta una versione apparentemente difettosa o incompleta della strofa sopra citata, che differisce anche per l'impiego di alcuni elementi lessicali, come il ricorso a una *kennung* (*viðfiskr* “pesce della selva” = “serpente”) e un *heiti* poetico (*vitnir* “lupo”). Anche qui al potenziale assassinio sono imbandite le carni di animali selvatici:

(29) Per una disamina puntuale delle caratteristiche di questa strofa si rimanda a K. VON SEE *et al.*, *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*. Bd. 6: Heldenlieder, C. Winter, Heidelberg 2009, p. 161.

(30) G. NECKEL, H. KUHN, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

Sumir viðfiska tóku, sumir vitnishræ skífðu,
 sumir Guttormi gáfu gera hold
 við mungáte ok marga hluti
 aðra í tyfrum.

Ok við þessa fæðlu varð hann svá æfr ok ágjarn ok allt
 saman ok fortqlur Grímhildar at hann hét at gera þetta
 verk. Þeir hétu honum ok mikilli sæmð í móti⁽³¹⁾.

Alcuni presero il pesce della selva, altri fecero a pezzi la carne del lupo, altri diedero a Gutthormr la carne della bestia ingorda, insieme alla birra e molti altri ingredienti in quell'intruglio magico.

Tutto insieme con tale nutrimento e le macchinazioni persuasive di Grímhildr divenne talmente ardimentoso e feroce che promise di compiere l'opera. E, inoltre, gli avevano promesso che avrebbe guadagnato molto onore in cambio.

La consumazione di carni di lupo e di serpente, come nel *Brot*, ha lo scopo di conferire coraggio e acume all'omicida. Il pasto è poi accompagnato da birra (*mungát*), insieme ad altri ingredienti non specificati, mescolati a formare un intruglio contraffatto (*tyfr*)⁽³²⁾. Nella prosa che segue viene evidenziato il ruolo di Grímhildr nell'incitare Gutthormr: con il termine *fortqlur* "persuasioni, argomentazioni"⁽³³⁾ il compilatore sottolinea le male arti con cui la donna riesce ad ammaliare il figlio. Gli studiosi non hanno individuato per questa sezione del capitolo 32 della *VS* una fonte riconducibile a quelle già note, ma fanno riferimento al poema ricostruito *Sigurdarkviða in*

(31) R.G. FINCH, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

(32) *tyfr* "pozione magica", cfr. H. Gering, *Vollständiges Wörterbuch zu den Liedern der Edda*, Buchhandlung des Waisenhauses, Halle a. d. S. 1903, colonna 1049.

(33) Cfr. R. CLEASBY, Gudbrand VIGFÚSSON, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1874, p. 166.

meiri, ovviamente senza alcuna possibilità di riscontro oggettivo⁽³⁴⁾. Tuttavia, dal confronto con il pur frammentario *Brot* e, tenendo conto del testo della saga, si potrebbe aggiungere alle già conclamate trame ordite da Grímhildr, anche il coinvolgimento, certamente non da artefice principale, ma da mediatrice, nel complotto per eliminare Sigurðr.

5. Una óminnisveig per Guðrún

La somministrazione della bevanda dell'oblio a Guðrún, un altro momento tipico della vicenda volsungica, anche se meno noto dell'analogo episodio che vede protagonista Sigurðr, è anticipata nel brano in prosa dal titolo *Drap Niflunga*. Qui sono riepilogati gli eventi futuri e le ragioni dell'odio di Atli nei confronti dei Gjúkunghi:

Gunnarr ok Høgni tóku þá gullit allt, Fáfnis arf. Ófriðr var þá í milli Gjúkunga ok Atla. Kenndi hann Gjúkungum völd um andlát Brynhildar. Þat var til sætta, at þeir skyldu gífta hánom Guðrúno, ok gáfo henni óminnisveig⁽³⁵⁾ at drekka, áðr hon játti at giptaz Atla⁽³⁶⁾.

(34) Cfr. M. MELI, *op. cit.*, p. 262, nota 275.

(35) Nella *Rómverja saga* (capitolo 61), una rielaborazione islandese di opere di Sallustio e Lucano, risalente al primo quarto del secolo XIV, ricorre un altro esempio di *óminnisveig*. Questa volta "la bevanda dell'oblio" non è intesa nella sua forma materiale, ma come espressione metaforica per tradurre, in modo più appropriato, la locuzione latina *Lethaeae obliuia ripae* "l'oblio della riva del Lete". L'impiego in luogo di un'espressione metaforica conferisce al termine dignità letteraria. Cfr. K. VON SEE *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 583. Analogo all'*óminnisveig* è il termine *óminnisql* che ricorre nel titolo del capitolo 28 della *VŠ*: «Sigurdi var blandat óminnisql», «La birra dell'oblio venne preparata per Sigurdr».

(36) G. NECKEL, H. KUHN, *op. cit.*, p. 221.

Gunnar e Hogni presero allora tutto l'oro, l'eredità di Fáfñir. Odio sorse allora tra i Gjúkunghi e Atli. Egli riteneva i Gjúkunghi colpevoli della morte di Brynhildr. Fu deciso che gli avrebbero dato in moglie Guðrún e le diedero da bere la bevanda dell'oblio prima che acconsentisse a sposarsi con Atli.

Di particolare interesse è la menzione della bevanda che Guðrún riceve, l'*ó-minnis-veig* "la bevanda del non ricordo", messa in relazione diretta con il suo consenso, in buona misura estorto, a sposare Atli. Nella *Guðrúnarkviða qunnur*⁽³⁷⁾ (*Gðr. II*) l'episodio monopolizza la parte centrale del carme (strofe 17-36) e alla descrizione del liquido, dei suoi ingredienti e del recipiente che lo contiene sono dedicate tre strofe (21-23)⁽³⁸⁾:

“Fœrði mér Grímildr full at drekka
svalt ok sárlikt, né ek sakar munðak;
þat var um aukit urðar magni,
sva/klöldom sæ ok sónar dreyra.

Vóro í horni hvers kyns stafir
ristnir ok roðnir, – ráða ek né máttak -
lyngfiskr langr, lanz Haddingia
ax óskorit, innleið dýra.

Vóro þeim bíóri þol mǫrg saman,
urt allz viðar ok akarn brunnin,
umdoegg arins, iðrar blótnar,
svíns lifr soðin, þvíat hon sakar deyfði.

(37) Alcuni editori utilizzano anche il titolo convenzionale di *Guðrúnarkviða in forná*.

(38) G. NECKEL, H. KUHN, *op. cit.*, pp. 227-228.

Mi porse Grimildr da bere una coppa
 fredda e amara, e io non ricordai le ragioni dell'astio,
 era rafforzata con la potenza del fato,
 il mare gelido e il sangue del sacrificio.

C'erano sul corno lettere di ogni tipo
 incise e colorate di rosso, non mi riusciva di leggerle:
 il sottile pesce di brughiera della terra degli Haddinghi
 una spiga non mietuta, le fauci di animali.

Erano in quella birra molti mali insieme
 erbe dell'intero bosco e ghiande arrostitite,
 la rugiada del focolare, le viscere di animali,
 il fegato cotto di maiale che offusca i motivi di lite.

La pozione è potente e misteriosa⁽³⁹⁾, in essa figurano ingredienti metaforici e concreti come la forza del destino⁽⁴⁰⁾, il mare gelido e il sangue di animali sacrificati. Inoltre, il recipiente, identificato prima come *fullr* ("coppa") e poi come *horn* ("corno potorio"), è inciso con segni runici che Guðrún non è in grado di decifrare (*ráða ek né máttak*), descritti visivamente attraverso *kenningar* di difficile interpretazione⁽⁴¹⁾. Se nei *Sd.*, tali incisioni erano semplicemente

(39) Il secondo *helmingr* della strofa 22 ricorre simile nel *Hyndluljóð* e permette di emendare il testo difettoso dei vv. 7-8: «Sá var aukinn/ljarðar megni, / svalkǫldom sæ//ok sónar dreyra.», «Forte era stato creato, con la forza della terra, con il mare gelido e il sangue sacrificale.»

(40) La locuzione *urðar magni* "la potenza del fato" viene talvolta emendata in *jarðar magni* "la forza della terra", come si legge nella *VS*, capitolo 34, e nei versi sopra riportati del *Hyndluljóð*.

(41) H. GERING, B. SIJMONS, *op. cit.*, p. 304 forniscono l'ipotesi più soddisfacente per l'interpretazione delle rune incise sul corno: esse costituirebbero, prese insieme, la parola *SUF*, cioè l'imperativo del verbo *sofa* "dormire", per indurre al sonno e all'oblio.

menzionate, qui, invece, sembrano contribuire, attraverso le loro forme suggestive e misteriose, all'efficacia della pozione. Altrettanto stravaganti e oscuri sono gli ingredienti aggiunti al *bjórr* stregato: erbe, ghiande bruciate, fuliggine, viscere di animali e fegato di maiale bollito. L'ultimo ingrediente merita una attenzione particolare, poiché ne viene anche specificato l'effetto: la sua azione permette di ottundere le animosità, le *sakar* che Guðrún al v. 21⁴ afferma di avere rimosso dopo aver bevuto: «né ek sakar mundak», «e io non ricordai le ragioni dell'astio»⁽⁴²⁾. Qui il riferimento è evidentemente alla sua inimicizia nei confronti dei fratelli, responsabili della morte del marito e della successiva sottrazione del tesoro di Fáfñir. Di conseguenza, l'effetto del liquido magico non è quello di provocare un'amnesia totale o di farle dimenticare il marito (infatti, la donna ricorderà poi, alla strofa 39, Sigurðr e la sua fine terribile e sarà, inoltre, in grado di recitare alla fine l'intero componimento, inclusi gli eventi accaduti prima di bere la pozione) ma, piuttosto, di rendere Guðrún arrendevole e disposta a acconsentire alla volontà dei suoi familiari di sposare Atli⁽⁴³⁾.

Alcuni studiosi ritengono l'*óminnisveig* somministrato a Guðrún un fallimento⁽⁴⁴⁾: avrebbe dovuto avere lo stesso

(42) Il termine *spk* f. può significare “causa legale, disputa” o anche “la causa di una disputa”; potrebbe indicare anche “rancore, astio, animosità”. Cfr. H. KUHN, *Kurzes Wörterbuch*, C. Winter, Heidelberg 1968, p. 200.

(43) Cfr. D. CRONAN, *A Reading of Guðrúnarkviða Qnnor*, «Scandinavian Studies» 57 (1985), pp. 174-187, qui p. 178: «The potion is not intended to make Gudrun forget Sigurðr, or his murder, or even her grief for him. Its purpose is to make her forget her quarrel with her brothers, to dull the animosity she feels towards them, and to settle her dispute with them.»

(44) Così, tra gli altri, R. ZELLER, *Die Gudrunlieder der Edda*, W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart 1939, p. 59 considera la pozione «eine leere geste»; J. DE VRIES, *Das Zweite Gudrunlied*, «Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie» 77 (1958), pp. 176-199, qui p. 190, giudica l'episodio «ein blindes Motiv»; R.J. GLENDINNING, *Guðrúnarkviða Forná: A Reconstruction and Interpretation*, in

effetto dell'idromele tossico offerto a Sigurðr, e cioè cancellare del tutto la memoria del marito ucciso. Ma la situazione è qui del tutto diversa: l'eroe è già morto quando Guðrún beve la pozione e non c'è alcun motivo che essa sia così potente da cancellare del tutto la memoria dell'amato, dal momento che Grímhildr ha solo intenzione di riconciliare la figlia con i fratelli. Al contrario, invece, Sigurðr deve dimenticare Brynhildr perché è ancora viva e perché, nelle intenzioni di Grímhildr, Gunnar la chiederà in sposa, contando sull'aiuto di Sigurðr per conquistarla per conto del cognato. Inoltre, data l'efficacia selettiva della pozione, non è contraddittorio il fatto che la donna rammenti ancora Sigurðr e la sua morte, come non costituisce un aspetto illogico che ella faccia il resoconto di eventi precedenti. Entrambe le *óminnisveigar*, dunque, hanno esito soltanto per ciò che è richiesto dalle rispettive narrazioni. Gli effetti della pozione data a Guðrún sono limitati, come è limitato, d'altro canto, l'effetto della pozione somministrata a Sigurðr, circoscritto nel tempo e in relazione alla situazione da obliare: egli infatti non si ricorderà di Brynhildr e dello scambio di promesse per il tempo necessario, poiché la memoria ritornerà, non appena saranno celebrate le nozze con Gunnar⁽⁴⁵⁾.

L'episodio della *óminnisveig*, insieme con il resto del carne, viene rielaborato nel capitolo 34 della *VS* ed è

IDEM, H. BESSASON (edd.), *Edda. A Collection of Essays*, University of Manitoba Press, Manitoba 1985, pp. 258-282, qui p. 270, considera il fallimento della pozione come un esito deliberatamente voluto dall'autore.

(45) Si veda «Eigi munda ek þitt nafn [...] ok eigi kennda ek þik, fyrr en þú vart gift, ok ek þetta inn mesti harmr.» «Scordai il tuo nome [...] né ti riconobbi prima che tu fossi sposata, ecco il mio maggiore tormento.» (*VS*, capitolo 31, R.G. FINCH, *op. cit.*, p. 56); «Ok er lokit er þessi veizlu, minnir Sigurð alla eiða vid Brynhildi ok lætr þó vera kyrt.» «Ma quando il banchetto ebbe fine, Sigurðr si ricordò di tutti i giuramenti che aveva stretto con Brynhildr e ammutoli.» (*VS*, capitolo 29, *ivi*, p. 50).

largamente dipendente da una versione della *Gðr. II* molto prossima a quella conservata nel *Codex Regius*⁽⁴⁶⁾. Saputo della sua permanenza presso Þora in Danimarca, Grímhildr decide di raggiungere la figlia per farla riconciliare con i fratelli e offrirle un risarcimento materiale per la perdita di Sigurðr. Nella *VS* l'atteggiamento risoluto della donna viene messo particolarmente in evidenza:

Þetta spýrr Grímhildr hvar Guðrún er niðr komin, heimtir á tal sonu sína ok spýrr, hverju þeir vilja bæta Guðrúnu son sinn ok mann, kvað þeim þat skylt. [...] Grímhildr ræzk í ferð með þeim, ok segir þeira ørendi svá fremi fullgert munu verða at hon siti eigi heima⁽⁴⁷⁾.

Grímhildr venne a sapere dove si trovava Guðrún. Chiamò i suoi figli per parlare con loro e chiese in qual modo intendessero compensare Guðrún per la perdita del figlio e del marito. Affermò che erano tenuti a fare ciò. [...] Grímhildr decise di partire con i suoi poiché sosteneva che la spedizione avrebbe riportato successo completo soltanto se lei non fosse rimasta a casa⁽⁴⁸⁾.

Il compilatore della *VS* sottolinea nei suoi commenti l'atteggiamento assai più duro e intransigente di Grímhildr rispetto al carne:

(46) La saga riporta le strofe 199-12, 22-23 della *Guðrúnarkviða 9nnur* con differenze minime tra le due versioni.

(47) R.G. FINCH, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

(48) L'aggiunta del compilatore serve a rendere meno brusco il passaggio, che si riscontra nella *Gðr. II*, tra la dimora di Þora (strofa 16) e la sala dei Gjúkunghi (strofa 171-3): «Þá frá Grímildir, // gotnesk kona, / hvat ec væra // hyggjuð» «Seppe allora Grímhildr, donna dei Goti / cosa avessi nell'animo»; cfr. D. CRONAN, *op. cit.* p. 175.

Grímhildi varð við hennar fortölur illa við um sonu sína
[...]⁽⁴⁹⁾.

Grimhildr si adirò nel sentire le predizioni sui suoi figli
[...].

Diversa è nella *Gðr. II* (strofa 32) la reazione di Grímhildr alle profezie di Guðrún sul destino incomben-
te sui suoi fratelli:

Grátandi Grímildr greip við orði,
er burom sínom þölvu vætti
ok mögom sínom meina stórra⁽⁵⁰⁾.

Tra le lacrime Grímhildr prese a parlare,
poiché per i figli suoi temeva sventure,
e per i suoi parenti terribili disgrazie.

Altrove il compilatore sottolinea la determinazione della
donna:

Hennar orð stóðusk svá mikit at þetta varð fram at
ganga⁽⁵¹⁾.

Le sue parole avevano un peso tale che doveva essere così.

Questo commento, che segue l'ultima e definitiva prof-
ferta di territori e ricchezze a Guðrún, se accetterà di sposa-
re Atli, sembra costituire la motivazione per cui la giovane

(49) R.G. FINCH, *op. cit.* p. 64.

(50) G. NECKEL, H. KUHN, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

(51) R.G. FINCH, *op. cit.* p. 64.

si arrende alle insistenze della madre, accettando senza ulteriori rimostranze il matrimonio, anche se contro la propria volontà⁽⁵²⁾.

La descrizione dettagliata degli ingredienti e del corno, nella *Gðr. II* (e nella *VS*), contribuisce innanzitutto ad accentuare la dimensione magica della pozione; al tempo stesso, essa rende ancora più evidente rispetto all'episodio di Sigurðr, come la vittima della manipolazione sia esclusa dalla piena comprensione della portata e degli effetti del gesto. In questa prospettiva, il significato dei segni incisi sul corno, pur chiaramente distinguibili e descrivibili sul piano visivo, rimane per Guðrún del tutto indecifrabile. Analogamente, la bevanda offerta a Sigurðr da Grímhildr viene accettata dal giovane come un atto di accoglienza dal valore cerimoniale, mentre il suo autentico significato e le sue conseguenze restano per lui nascosti.

Su un piano più ampio, la bevanda dell'oblio svolge inoltre la funzione di manipolare in modo parziale e selettivo non solo la "memoria del testo"⁽⁵³⁾, ma anche quella del pubblico. La *Gðr. II* in questo senso è particolarmente significativa. Da un lato, vi sono unificate le due sezioni del ciclo nibelungico, relative all'uccisione di Sigurðr per volontà dei cognati e alla successiva morte di questi per mano di Atli; dall'altro, il poema mette in luce con particolare forza il carattere intrinsecamente contraddittorio e inconciliabile di Guðrún⁽⁵⁴⁾, sospesa tra il ruolo di vedova addolorata di Sigurðr e quello di vendicatrice dei fratelli.

(52) Cfr. D. CRONAN, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

(53) Cfr. J. GRAGE, *op. cit.*, p. 506.

(54) D. SÄVBORG, *Gudrunarkvida II*, in *The Literary Encyclopedia*, [https://www.litencyc.com, first published 05 February 2024].

Conclusioni

L'analisi degli episodi relativi all'offerta rituale di bevande nella *VS* e nei carmi eddici ha mostrato come un gesto apparentemente codificato e mondano, quale il porgere da bere a un eroe o a un sovrano, assuma, nella tradizione nordica, una forte valenza simbolica e narrativa, soprattutto quando è declinato attraverso il filtro della magia e dell'intervento femminile. La *húsfrú með drykkjarhorni* non è soltanto la depositaria di un ruolo cerimoniale radicato nelle consuetudini del *comitatus* germanico, ma diviene un'agente attivo di trasmissione, manipolazione o soppressione della memoria, con effetti decisivi sull'andamento della vicenda narrata.

Nel caso di *Sigrdrífa*, l'offerta della *minnisveig* a *Sigurðr* si configura come un atto fondativo e propizio: la bevanda del ricordo, accompagnata dall'invocazione agli dèi e dall'incisione runica sul corno, rafforza le facoltà cognitive dell'eroe e ne legittima l'ingresso in una sfera di sapere superiore. Qui il rituale dell'offerta conserva la sua funzione originaria di riconoscimento e innalzamento del destinatario, saldando il piano sociale, quello iniziatico e quello magico in un gesto unitario e positivo.

All'opposto, la figura di *Grímhildr* incarna la sovversione di tale rituale. Le pozioni dell'oblio somministrate a *Sigurðr* e a *Guðrún* trasformano l'atto di accoglienza e integrazione in uno strumento di coercizione e inganno. La bevanda non rafforza la memoria, ma la altera selettivamente, in funzione di obiettivi politici e familiari: il matrimonio di *Sigurðr* con *Guðrún* e quello di *Guðrún* con *Atli*. L'analisi comparata delle fonti ha evidenziato come l'oblio indotto non sia mai totale, ma calibrato sulle esigenze

narrative, e come la sua efficacia, limitata nel tempo, contribuisca a rendere plausibili il tradimento, la rottura dei patti e la successiva catena di vendette.

Il confronto tra i carmi eddici e la *VS* ha inoltre messo in luce il ruolo attivo del compilatore della saga, che tende ad accentuare i tratti negativi di Grímhildr, ampliandone l'azione e sottolineandone la responsabilità morale nei principali snodi tragici del racconto. L'uso insistito di bevande contraffatte, intrugli magici e pratiche persuasive attribuite alla regina contribuisce a costruire una figura femminile potente ma ambigua, in netto contrasto con la valchiria Sigrdrífa, portatrice di una sapienza ordinatrice e salvifica.

Le scene di offerta della bevanda analizzate mostrano come memoria e oblio siano strumenti narrativi centrali nella tradizione volsungica, strettamente connessi al potere femminile e alla dimensione rituale. Attraverso la *minnisveig* e la *óminnisveig*, il gesto della donna che porge il corno si carica di una forza performativa capace di determinare alleanze, tradimenti e destini, rivelandosi uno dei dispositivi simbolici più efficaci per rappresentare il rapporto tra memoria, sapere, volontà e potere all'interno del ciclo nibelungico-volsungico.

Da un punto di vista narratologico, la *minnisveig* e la *óminnisveig* operano come veri e propri dispositivi di regolazione della memoria, funzionali alla progressione e alla coerenza interna del racconto. Essi consentono di motivare svolte decisive dell'intreccio che altrimenti risulterebbero problematiche sul piano della verosimiglianza, quali l'oblio di un giuramento solenne, l'accettazione di un matrimonio non desiderato o la temporanea sospensione di un legame affettivo profondo. In questo senso, le bevande

magiche agiscono come meccanismi di transizione, collocati nei punti di snodo della narrazione, che permettono il passaggio da una configurazione narrativa a un'altra senza spezzare la continuità causale degli eventi.

La *minnisveig*, in particolare, rafforza la funzione ordinatrice della memoria, assicurando la trasmissione del sapere e la continuità dell'identità eroica di Sigurðr; al contrario, la *óminnisveig* introduce una forma di oblio controllato e selettivo, che sospende temporaneamente la memoria senza cancellarla definitivamente. Tale sospensione non elimina il conflitto, ma lo rinvia, rendendolo narrativamente produttivo: il ritorno del ricordo, infatti, è ciò che riattiva la tensione tragica e conduce allo scioglimento violento della vicenda. Le pozioni non annullano dunque del tutto e per sempre la memoria, bensì la ritmano, scandendone l'emersione e l'occultamento in funzione delle esigenze del racconto.

In questa prospettiva, le bevande del ricordo e dell'oblio si configurano come strumenti narrativi che governano il rapporto tra passato e presente, consenso e costrizione, volontà individuale e destino. Attraverso di esse, la materia nibelugico-volsungica tematizza la fragilità della memoria umana e la sua esposizione a forze esterne, attribuendo al gesto rituale femminile il potere di orientare il corso degli eventi e di rendere narrativamente intelligibile la concatenazione delle colpe, delle perdite e delle vendette che caratterizzano il ciclo.

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THE ROLE OF EXCEPTIONALITY IN SERMONS

LETIZIA VEZZOSI

«Essentially, mythologies are enormous poems that are renditions of insights, giving some sense of the marvel, the miracle and wonder of life.»

— JOSEPH CAMPBELL⁽¹⁾

ABSTRACT: This paper investigates the semantic and rhetorical construction of the extraordinary in Middle English sermons, challenging the assumption that terms such as wonder, marvel, and miracle function as interchangeable synonyms within homiletic discourse. Through a qualitative analysis of a selected corpus of sermons—with a specific focus on exempla depicting female transgression and Eucharistic sacrilege—the study demonstrates that these lexical choices operate within a highly structured rhetorical economy designed to guide moral interpretation and enforce orthodoxy. The analysis reveals a functional triad: wonder acts as an operator of reception, marking the audience's affective and cognitive disturbance; marvel functions as a discursive operator, stabilizing exceptional events as narratable and interpretable units; and miracle serves as an operator of validation, anchoring events in explicit divine agency and theological certainty. By mapping these distinct semantic fields, the article argues that sermon literature actively reorganizes the vocabulary of the supernatural not merely to entertain, but to regulate lay perception, defend the doctrine of the Real Presence, and reinforce clerical authority against the threats of skepticism and heresy.

KEYWORDS: Middle English Sermons, Historical Semantics, The Extraordinary (Wonder, Marvel, Miracle), Exempla, Eucharistic Doctrine

(1) From an interview conducted with Michael Toms (later included in *The Hero's Journey: Joseph Campbell on His Life and Work*).

1. Introduction

The marvellous and the extraordinary occupy a structurally significant position in Middle English literature, where they are frequently articulated through supernatural beings or events that escape rational categorisation. Medieval critical tradition has long emphasised that such phenomena cannot be reduced to mere narrative ornamentation; rather, they participate in culturally and theologically determined systems of meaning that regulate the perception of alterity, exceptionality, and divine intervention⁽²⁾. The extraordinary, in this sense, designates not only what lies beyond the ordinary course of nature, but also what produces an affective and cognitive disturbance, oscillating between fascination and unease, wonder and moral anxiety.

From a semantic perspective, medieval representations of the extraordinary are embedded within a complex lexical network that encompasses notions of *mirabile*, *miraculum*, *merveille*, and *wunder*. As studies on the semantics of wonder have shown⁽³⁾, these terms do not merely denote astonishing events, but encode specific epistemological and emotional responses, marking phenomena as signs that demand interpretation rather than explanation. Within

(2) Cf. J. LE GOFF, *L'imaginaire médiéval*, Gallimard, Paris 1985; J.-C. SCHMITT, *Les revenants. Les vivants et les morts dans la société médiévale*, Gallimard, Paris 1994; B. BILDHAUER, *Medieval Blood*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff 2013.

(3) Cf. E. KÖHLER, *Das Wunderbare in der mittelalterlichen Literatur*, Max Niemeyer Verlag, Tübingen 2002; J.-D. MÜLLER, *Wunder und Erzählung. Studien zur Poetik des Wunderbaren im Mittelalter*, De Gruyter, Berlin–New York 2011. They are key theoretical studies on the poetics and narrative functions of the marvellous in medieval literature, which offer essential conceptual tools for situating the sermonic treatment of extraordinary events within broader medieval models of wonder, narrativity, and meaning-making.

narrative discourse, the extraordinary thus functions as a semiotic threshold, delineating the boundary between the familiar and the alien, the licit and the illicit, the divinely sanctioned and the morally deviant.

This dynamic is particularly evident in Middle English sermons, which constitute the primary object of analysis in the present study. Although sermons are fundamentally didactic in orientation, they represent a genre of considerable narrative density and theological sophistication. Within this context, the extraordinary is rarely presented for its own sake. Instead, it is predominantly mobilised through *exempla* — brief narrative units embedded within sermons — to support doctrinal, moral, or ecclesiological arguments. As has been widely recognised in sermon studies⁽⁴⁾, *exempla* operate as instruments of persuasion, designed to elicit affective reactions such as fear, awe, or wonder, while simultaneously directing the audience toward an orthodox moral interpretation. The extraordinary thereby acquires a functional role: it becomes a means through which abstract theological principles are rendered intelligible and emotionally compelling.

A closer examination of these *exempla* reveals two recurrent patterns that are central to the present investigation. The first concerns the marked prominence of transgressive female figures, who appear with notable frequency and narrative intensity in comparison with male characters. These women are often associated with behaviours

(4) Cf. N. BÉRIOU, *L'avènement des maîtres de la parole*, Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, Paris 1998; C. BREMOND; J. LE GOFF; J.-C. SCHMITT, *L'exemplum*, Brepols, Turnhout 1982, for understanding the rhetorical, narrative, and didactic functions of *exempla* within medieval preaching, providing the essential theoretical framework for analysing how extraordinary material is structured and mobilised in sermonic discourse.

perceived as morally or spiritually aberrant — such as sexual excess, infanticide, demonic alliances, or sacrilege against the Eucharist — and anticipate, at least on a discursive level, elements that would later converge in early modern constructions of witchcraft⁽⁵⁾. The second pattern relates to the lexical framing of the extraordinary itself. The choice of specific terms and semantic fields serves to classify events as exceptional, threatening, or divinely charged, thereby shaping both the emotional response of the audience and the moral evaluation of the narrated transgression.

Accordingly, after a brief overview of the state of the art and the methodological premises of the study, this paper will focus on the lexical expressions used to denote the extraordinary in a selected corpus of Middle English sermons — a textual domain that has only rarely been employed as a primary basis for systematic lexical analysis. The discussion will then concentrate on a group of sermons centred on crimes or transgressions attributed to women, with the aim of demonstrating how lexical choice contributes to the construction of otherness and functions as an indirect vehicle of moral instruction. Through this analysis, the paper seeks to show that the extraordinary in sermon literature is not merely a thematic motif, but a discursive tool through which normative boundaries are negotiated and reinforced.

(5) Cf. M.D. BAILEY, *Battling Demons. Witchcraft, Heresy, and Reform in the Late Middle Ages*, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park 2003; B.P. LEVACK, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 4th ed., Routledge, London–New York 2016. They provide foundational analyses of how late medieval discourses on heresy, sacrilege, and gendered transgression contributed to the construction of exceptional religious deviance, offering a broader historical framework for understanding the sermon representation of extraordinary female wrongdoing examined in this study.

1.1. *State of the art*

Research on semantic fields in Middle English has long constituted a central area of historical linguistic and philological inquiry. Such studies have traditionally privileged canonical literary corpora — most notably the works of Geoffrey Chaucer, John Gower, and the alliterative tradition, including texts such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* — as primary sites for investigating lexical change, semantic stratification, and multilingual contact between English, French, and Latin⁽⁶⁾. More recent scholarship has continued to refine these approaches through corpus-based and historically informed semantic analysis, while largely maintaining a focus on literary texts⁽⁷⁾.

Within this framework, the study of the vocabulary of the marvellous and the extraordinary has developed primarily in relation to courtly romance and learned narrative traditions. Foundational contributions have demonstrated that concepts such as *mirabile*, *merveille*, and *wunder* form part of a dense semantic and epistemological network through which medieval cultures articulated

(6) Cf. D. BURNLEY, *A Guide to Chaucer's Language*, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman 1983; HOROBIN, S., *Chaucer's Language*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2007; SYLVESTER, L., «The Vocabulary of the Alliterative Tradition», in *Medieval English Studies Presented to George Kane*, D.S. Brewer, Cambridge 1998, pp. 213-229. They are reference starting points for enquiries on Middle English lexical stratification, register, and genre-sensitive usage, as they also offer an essential comparative framework.

(7) Cf. R. INGHAM, *The Transmission of Anglo-Norman. Language History and Language Acquisition*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam 2012; L. SYLVESTER, «Studying Meaning in Middle English», in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of English*, edited by T. Nevalainen e E.C. Traugott, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014, as they provide essential methodological frameworks for analysing semantic change, lexical borrowing, and meaning construction in Middle English.

exceptionality, alterity, and divine or supernatural intervention⁽⁸⁾. Subsequent work has further emphasised the affective and cognitive dimensions of wonder, underscoring its role as a stimulus for interpretation rather than mere astonishment⁽⁹⁾. In Middle English studies, this line of inquiry has most often been pursued within romance literature, where the marvellous functions as a mediating category between the courtly world and the supernatural, as well as between narrative pleasure and moral testing⁽¹⁰⁾.

By contrast, research specifically addressing the semantic fields of the extraordinary within vernacular religious prose — and sermons in particular — remains comparatively limited, despite growing interest in non-literary genres and religious discourse in recent decades⁽¹¹⁾. While sem-

(8) Cf. J. LE GOFF, *op. cit.*, J.-C. SCHMITT, *OP. CIT.*, L. DASTON; K. PARK, *op. cit.*

(9) Cf. W.C. BYNUM, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, Zone Books, New York 2001; R. WARNING; NEUSCHÄFER, H.-J. (eds.), *Das Wunderbare in der mittelalterlichen Literatur*, Fink, Munich 2002. Indeed, they provide the theoretical framework for understanding ‘wonder’ not merely as an emotion, but as a cognitive and epistemological category. While Warning and Neuschäfer establish the literary phenomenology of the *marvellous* as a rupture in the ordinary that demands interpretation, Bynum specifically addresses the somatic and theological dimensions of *admiratio* in relation to metamorphosis and the Eucharist. Together, they substantiate the premise that medieval terminology for the extraordinary encodes a precise ‘horizon of expectation’ rather than serving as interchangeable ornamentation.

(10) Cf. M. SWEENEY, *Magic in medieval romance*, from Chrétien de Troyes to Geoffrey Chaucer, Four Courts Press, Dublin 2000; A. PUTTER, *An Introduction to the Gawain-Poet*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006.

(11) Cf. S. WENZEL, *Preachers, Poets, and the Early English Lyric*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2005; A. SPENCER-HALL; J. GUTT (eds.), *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2021: in particular, see Wenzel’s analysis of the fluid boundaries between homiletic and poetic registers, and the theoretical lens of Spencer-Hall and Gutt on non-normative embodiment.

inal studies such as G.R. Owst's *Literature and the Pulpit in Medieval England* (1933) have demonstrated the narrative richness and cultural significance of medieval preaching, their analytical focus lies primarily on social criticism and intellectual history rather than on systematic lexical investigation. Later scholarship on *exempla* and medieval homiletics⁽¹²⁾ has further clarified the rhetorical and narrative deployment of extraordinary material, yet without sustained attention to the vernacular lexical choices through which such material is framed and evaluated.

When the vocabulary of the extraordinary is addressed in religious contexts, it is most often subsumed within broader theological or devotional studies of *miracula*, signs, and divine intervention⁽¹³⁾. As a result, the specifically linguistic and rhetorical mediation of wonder for a lay audience — particularly in Middle English sermons — remains underexplored. Although essential lexicographical and digital tools such as the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the *Middle English Dictionary* provide an indispensable foundation for the study of medieval vocabulary, they often lack the

(12) Cf. C. BREMOND; J. LE GOFF; J.-C. SCHMITT, *op. cit.*; L. SCANLON, *Narrative, Authority, and Power*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1994.

(13) See B. WARD, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind: Theory, Record and Event, 1000-1215*, rev. ed., University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 1987, where the author extensively discusses Eucharistic Miracles, providing the historical context for *why* these specific stories became so popular (that is, to prove the doctrine of Transubstantiation against doubt) and explaining the shift from miracle as a “sign” to miracle as “proof”; R.C. FINUCANE, *Miracles and Pilgrims*, St. Martin's Press, New York 1995, for the “horizon of expectation” of listeners and for “popular belief”, as ordinary people often viewed miracles differently than the clergy did; KOOPMANS R., *Wonderful to Relate. Miracle Stories and Miracle Collecting in High Medieval England*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 2014, for her analysis of the *mirabile dictu*, that is, how oral stories were turned into written texts.

contextual granularity required to capture pragmatic and rhetorical variation across genres. In particular, they are not always equipped to distinguish between the semantic nuances of extraordinary terminology as employed in narrative fiction and its deployment within the homiletic discourse of instruction and moral persuasion.

The present study seeks to address this scholarly gap by offering a focused linguistic analysis of the semantic fields of the extraordinary within Middle English sermon literature. By examining how wonder is lexically constructed and rhetorically mobilised in the homiletic tradition, this paper aims to clarify the ideological functions of the extraordinary and its role in shaping moral perception and religious understanding.

2. Corpus and methodology

The methodology adopted for this study is primarily qualitative in its rhetorical and semantic orientation, while maintaining methodological rigour through the inclusion of quantitative steps aimed at demonstrating the non-randomness of lexical choice. This combined approach aligns with established models in historical semantics and discourse analysis, which emphasise the functional relationship between lexical selection, genre, and communicative purpose⁽¹⁴⁾.

The research process developed progressively, beginning with a broad mapping of the terminology used to denote the extraordinary in Middle English through consultation

(14) Cf. D. GEERAERTS, *Theories of Lexical Semantics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010; E.C. TRAUOGOTT; R.B. DASHER, *Regularity in Semantic Change*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002.

of major lexicographical resources, namely the *Middle English Dictionary* (MED), the *Anglo-Norman Dictionary* (AND), and the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED). This initial phase follows a lexicographical-semantic approach grounded in historical semantics, in which dictionary evidence is treated not as a fixed inventory of meanings, but as a heuristic tool for reconstructing semantic fields and their diachronic layering⁽¹⁵⁾. This preliminary survey revealed a bipartite lexical system. On the one hand, terms of Germanic origin — such as *selcouth*, *tokene*, and *wondre* — coexist with Romance and Anglo-Norman loanwords, including *miracle*, *monster*, *fantom*, *visioun*, and *merveille*. Many of these lexical bases are morphologically productive, giving rise to nominal, adjectival, and verbal forms. From a theoretical perspective, this distribution reflects what has been described as a stratified lexical economy in Middle English, in which etymological origin correlates with register, genre, and discursive function⁽¹⁶⁾.

At this stage, the aim was to establish whether a comparable lexical variety could also be found within Middle English sermon literature, or whether the homiletic genre exhibited a more restricted and functionally specialised vocabulary for the extraordinary. To address this question, the textual analysis was refined through the construction of a targeted sub-corpus of Middle English sermons, comprising John Mirk's *Festial*⁽¹⁷⁾, the Temporal sermons preserved in London, British Library, MSS Harley 2247 (H) and Royal

(15) P. DURKIN, *Borrowed Words. A History of Loanwords in English*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014.

(16) DURKIN, P., *op. cit.*; D. BURNLEY, *op. cit.*

(17) Th. ERBE (ed.), *John Mirk's Festial: A Collection of Homilies*, Early English Text Society, Extra Series 96, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., London 1905.

18 B XXV (R)⁽¹⁸⁾, *Jacob's Well*⁽¹⁹⁾, and the Sunday sermon cycle contained in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS e Musaeo 180⁽²⁰⁾. The use of a delimited corpus follows principles of genre-sensitive corpus analysis, whereby quantitative restriction is employed to enhance qualitative interpretability⁽²¹⁾.

The corpus-based investigation revealed a significant narrowing of the lexical field: only three lexemes are consistently and productively attested across the sermon material, namely *wondre*, *marvayl*, and *mirakel*, each occurring in nominal, adjectival, and verbal forms. This finding raised the question of whether these lexemes function as true synonyms within homiletic discourse or whether, despite their semantic proximity, they operate according to what may be described as a domain-specific preference. This concept draws on functional and usage-based approaches to synonymy, which stress that near-synonyms are rarely interchangeable across contexts, but tend instead to develop specialised pragmatic and evaluative profiles⁽²²⁾.

To address this issue, the analysis shifted from lexical inventory to functional usage, examining how these terms

(18) S. POWELL (ed.), *The Temporal Sermons of the Anglo-Norman Cycle: Sermons Preserved in London, British Library, MSS Harley 2247 and Royal 18 B XXV*, Anglo-Norman Texts 15, Anglo-Norman Text Society, London 1981.

(19) A. BRANDEIS (ed.), *Jacob's Well: An English Treatise on the Cleansing of Man's Conscience*, Early English Text Society, Old Series 115, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., London 1900.

(20) MORRISON S., *A Sunday Sermon Cycle from Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS e Musaeo 180*, Early English Text Society, Original Series 292, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1988.

(21) For a more detailed discussion about quantitative vs. qualitative analysis, see T. McENERY; A. HARDIE, *Corpus Linguistics. Method, Theory and Practice*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012.

(22) Cruse (in Cruse D.A., *Lexical Semantics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1986) Cruse indeed provides the classic theoretical foundation for analyzing near-synonymy, stating that lexical choices are driven by pragmatic necessity, not just stylistic variety.

contribute to the discursive construction of the extraordinary within sermons. In line with discourse-semantic approaches, particular attention was paid to the interaction between lexical choice, narrative framing, and evaluative stance⁽²³⁾. The analysis distinguishes between lexemes used to denote extraordinary events as such and those employed to encode affective responses of wonder, astonishment, or disturbance, as well as the specific theological and moral contexts in which each term appears.

For reasons of space and analytical focus, the discussion presented here is limited to the nominal forms of the three lexemes. The investigation concentrates on a specific narrative typology within the sermon corpus, namely *exempla* recounting the profanation of the consecrated host by a woman, in order to assess whether any pattern emerges in the use of three terms denoting unusual or extraordinary events or beings that lie beyond human comprehension. In other words, it asks whether lexical choice functions as a central rhetorical mechanism through which moral evaluation and audience interpretation are guided.

3. Lexical Markers of Wonder and Stupor

As already anticipated, the Middle English lexical field denoting the extraordinary, astonishing, and marvellous is both extensive and internally differentiated, comprising

(23) Cf. S. HUNSTON; G. THOMPSON (eds.), *Evaluation in Text. Authorial Stance and the Construction of Discourse*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000 for the framework to understand how lexical choice is not just descriptive but evaluative, and M. BEDNAREK, *Emotion Talk across Corpora*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2008 for her work on “emotion talk” essential for analyzing the affective dimension of the sermons.

a group of Germanic-rooted expressions (such as *selcouth*, *tokene*, *amase*, *wondre*) alongside a larger group of Latin or Romance borrowings (including *miracle*, *monster*, *monstrous* and *monstrosity*, *stupor*, *fantom* or *fantum*, *fantem*, *visioun*, as well as *merveille* and *merveillous*). This divergence also concerns the grammatical and semantic categories in which these terms occur: *wondre*, *amase*, *miracle* and *merveill(e)* can function both as nouns and verbs, designating at once the emotional response elicited by the extraordinary and the extraordinary phenomenon itself.

Despite this lexical richness, sermons consistently favour a limited subset of expressions to alert the audience that what follows departs from ordinary experience and demands heightened attention. In contrast to contemporary literary texts, the sermonic rhetoric of the extraordinary is dominated by *wondre*, *marvayl*, and *mirakel*, along with their respective derivatives. While these terms share overlapping semantic traits and are often treated as near-synonyms in lexicographical sources, their deployment in sermons suggests a domain-specific pattern of use, with each term tending to occur more frequently in particular rhetorical and thematic contexts. The following analysis therefore examines these words individually, considering their meaning, etymology, and sermonic usage in order to determine how lexical choice contributes to the construction and interpretation of extraordinary events within exempla.

3.1. *Miracle*

The word *miracle* is, perhaps unexpectedly, quite frequent. Deriving from Anglo-Norman and Old French word *miracle* (itself from classical Latin *mīrāculum* < *mirari* “to

wonder”), it is one of the earliest Romance (Latinate) borrowings to enter the Middle English vocabulary, as evidenced by its first attestations in the *Peterborough Chronicle* – Chron E 1126: ure Drihten wunderlice & manifælde miracles “our Lord”s wonderful and manifold miracles” – and in early thirteenth-century hagiographic texts – St. Katherine 1074 (c. 1200) Miracles þet beð maket 3et þurh him “Miracles that are yet made through him”. According to the *OED*, it was initially used to denote «a marvellous event not ascribable to human power or the operation of any natural force and therefore attributed to supernatural, especially divine, agency» (*OED sv. miracle*). Only from the time of Chaucer onward could it refer to a narrative account of such an event, and only from the sixteenth century did it come to mean «a remarkable, wonderful, or very surprising phenomenon or event» (*MED sv. miracle*): C1395 *To pleyes of myracles and to mariages* (Chaucer, *Wife of Bath’s Tale* l. 558) “To plays about miracles, and to mariages”. The term belonged primarily to the domain of religion and theology till the Modern era. This is confirmed by the sermons analysed, as *miracles* denote events attributed to divine or highly spiritual powers — namely God, Virgin Mary, Christ, and Saints — or to supernatural forces, primarily the Devil.

[...] he thoght on Saynt Wenefryd and her myracles
(Festial, Erbe 1905, ll. 14-15)

“He thought of Saint Wenefred and her miracles.”

Oure lady, in his syzte, fecchyd his hand & sett it azen
on his arme, & blyssed it & wente here wey. On þe mor-
we with alle his bretheryn he thankyd god & oure lady
& schewyd his arme & hand hool to all þe peple. Pe

emperor herde of þat miracle. (Jacob's Well, xliv. 15-19, Brandeis 1900, p. 279)

“Our Lady, before his eyes, took his hand and set it again on his arm, blessed it, and went her way. On the following morning, together with all his brethren, he thanked God and Our Lady and showed his arm and hand, whole, to all the people. The emperor heard of that miracle.”

God in his chapel of holy cherche makyth blynde men to se, crokyd to go, dombe to speke, deefe to here & to alle here ry3te wyttes; but þe feend in his chapel of þe tayerne schewyth his myraclys. He takyth away mannys feet, þat he may no3t go & his tunge þat me may no3t speke, alle his wyttes & his bodily strengthe. Þis myracles doth þe feend in þe tauerne. (Jacob's Well, xxii, Brandeis 1900, pp. 147-148)

“God, in his chapel of Holy Church, makes blind men see, the crippled walk, the mute speak, the deaf hear, and restores to all their right senses; but the fiend, in his chapel of the tavern, displays his miracles. He takes away a man's feet so that he cannot walk, and his tongue so that he cannot speak, along with all his senses and bodily strength. These miracles the fiend performs in the tavern.”

However, the sermons also attest to the established use of the word *miracle* to refer to the legendary narratives concerning miraculous events and involving exceptional characters.

At the same time, in formulaic expressions, such as binomials, *miracle* could appear alongside *wonder* and *marvel*, maybe denoting a remarkable surprising rather than miraculous event (or vice versa).

I rede yn þe myracles of oure lady how þer was a man þat was borne yn Fraunce, and come to London for certeyne nedys þat he had to do wyth oþer of his nacyon.

(Festial, Erbe 1905, p. 248, ll. 28-30)

“I read in the miracles of Our Lady that there was a man who was born in France and came to London for certain business that he had to carry out with others of his nation.” þay tolden of gret wondyrz and myrakles þat þay had seen. (Festial, Erbe 1905, p. 160, ll. 37-38)

“They told of great wonders and miracles that they had seen.”

3.2. *Wonder*

Wonder is of Germanic origin and enters English through Old English, where it primarily referred to something that causes astonishment, that is a “strange or marvellous thing, unheard-of or supernatural event or to something that causes perplexity, that is a conundrum”. The Proto-Germanic stem *wundra- is of unclear origin (Kluge 1989: 800). In Middle English, its semantic range expands to include not only the object of amazement but also the emotional response it evokes — specifically, a sense of astonishment mixed with perplexity or bewildered curiosity, often triggered by something novel, unexpected, or inexplicable. While the term appears across a wide range of texts, it is found primarily in works directed to a lay audience.

In our corpus, *wonder* occurs as a noun mainly to express the emotional response to something extraordinary⁽²⁴⁾. It appears frequently in prepositional phrases — cf.

(24) *Wonder* can also function as predicate — *þe wyse men wyth kyng Ahsauwdre wondryd on þis mervayle*. (Jacob’s Well, Brandeis 1900, p. 4) “The

for *wondyr and for fere* “out of wonder and out of fear”, for *wondyr and for joy* “out of wonder and out of joy” – or with the predicate *to have*.

Men þat herdyn þe feend þus spekyn, haddyn wonder why
þe feend seyde so (Jacob’s Well, Brandeis 1900, p. 31)
“The men who heard the fiend speaking thus had wonder
why the fiend spoke so”.

It often appears in binominal expressions alongside *marvel* or *miracle*, seemingly in accordance with a Middle English rhetorical habit of repetition and clarification, especially when one element is a Romance borrowing. In such constructions, *wonder* appears to reinforce or replicate the meaning of the other term, thereby sharing its semantic content.

for wondyrz and myracles þat God schowet ynto hor
sight (Festial, Erbe 1905, p. 27, ll. 28-29)
“For the wonders and miracles that God showed before
their eyes (lit. into their sight)”
þere was a Cristen man of Yngelond went into hethenes
to se mervelis and wondres of þat londe. (H 2247/48, f.
128r)
“There was a Christian man from England who went
into heathen lands to see the marvels and wonders of that
land”

wise men in the company of King Alexander marvelled at this extraordinary event” — and as an intensifier if in combination with an adjective — namely, *wondyr sore* “very sore / exceedingly painful”, *wondyr glad* “very glad / exceedingly joyful”, *wondyr fayr* “very fair / exceedingly beautiful”, *wondyr fayn* “very eager / very willing / exceedingly glad” —, functions which are however outside the aim of this paper, and therefore discarded from the present discussion.

The overlap with *miracle* occurs not only in binominals but also in phrases governed by the predicates *to work*, *to do*, and, less frequently, *to show*. The same happens with *merveille*, for instance occurring in collocation with the same verb *to have*.

3.3. *Marvel*

Connected with the same Latin root as *miracle*, *merveille* ultimately derives from Vulgar Latin *mirabilia*, a variant of Latin *mirabilia*, meaning “wonderful things” — the neuter plural of *mirabilis*, which meant “wonderful, marvellous, extraordinary; strange, singular”, and comes from the verb *mirari*, “to wonder at”. The word entered the English lexicon in the fourteenth century, with the meaning of “miracle” (a sense obsolete since 1626), as well as “a wonderful or astonishing thing, a wonder”.

From its adoption into English, *merveille* appears to be common in different textual genres, from devotional and moral literature to chivalric narrative, with a clear preference for the reference to the marvellous in lay narratives, that is the narrative mode in which extraordinary, supernatural, or impossible events are accepted as normal within the fictional world, without hesitation or rational explanation (Todorov 1975, pp. 41–57).

Pat treo ful sone upright him sette... þis merueile he
dude þer. (c.1300, Childhood of Jesus, l. 140)

“That tree very soon set itself upright for him; this marvel
he performed there.”

Til he wer born þat schuld do al, Fulfille þe meruails of þe
greal. (c.1330, Arthour and Merlin, l. 2222)

“Until he was born who was to accomplish all things, to fulfil the marvels of the Grail.”

King Richard after þis meruayl Went quic o lond saunfeyl. (c.1330 [?c.1300], Richard Coer de Lyon, l. 77)

“After this marvel, King Richard quickly went to the Holy Land.”

Hercules, Whos name schal ben endeles For the merveilles whiche he wroughte. (a.1393, Gower, Confessio Amantis IV.2059)

“Hercules, whose name shall be everlasting because of the marvels that he wrought.”

Both primary senses of the word — *miracle* and *wonder* — are attested in the sermons examined, where *merveille* frequently occurs in binominal patterns, paired with both *miracle* and *wonder*. But as it is clear from these two examples, the overlap is not limited to this formulaic pattern, but involves syntactic constructions and verbal dependencies. In particular, both *miracles* and *merveilles* could be worked, done and shown as well as *merveille* and *wonder* could be had (*to have X*).

Criste was [no] man for þe grete and infenyte myracles and merveilles that were wrought vpon erthe in his blessed birth and aft-ir in his life. (H 1/12/1-5)

“Christ was [no mere] man because of the great and infinite miracles and marvels that were wrought upon earth at his blessed birth and afterwards in his life.”

What woundir or merveill shulde man haue than þat, Permissiōe diuina, by þe sufferaunce and paciēce of God. (H 1/11/59-61)

“What wonder or marvel, then, should one have at that, by divine permission, through the forbearance and patience of God?”

In such a combination *merveille* like *wonder* denotes the emotional reaction of astonishment for something unexpected, novel, or difficult to explain. This semantic nuance, which is now lost, could be said to be predominant, as it is clear from the question and answer of the prophet (ex. 11).

þe holy prophete asketh a question of mervell [...] It is to witte þat whan men se a new þyng, wondirfull, lytyll or not seen before tyme, the merveyl is grete of it. (H 1/18/6-8)

“The holy prophet asks a question of marvel [...] that is to say, when men see a new thing, wonderful, little seen or not seen before, the marvel of it is great.”

In our sermons it is with that meaning that *merveille* occurs in the same prepositional phrases as *wonder* (e.g. *for grete merveille þerof* “because of the great marvel of it” or “on account of its great marvel”), as well in the same formulaic clause to express “it is/was no surprise”: *þer-of haue I no mervayle* “of that I have no marvel”, that is, “that is no wonder to me” or “I am not surprised by that”; *hit ys no wondyr* “it is no wonder” and *no marveil it was* “it was no marvel” or “it was not surprising”, all expressions where both no wonder and no marvel function idiomatically to deny the extraordinariness of an event, marking it as expected or readily explicable rather than exceptional.

4. The disbelieving woman

Before turning to the central inquiry of this paper — the comparative analysis of the terms — it is worth briefly outlining the doctrinal thema that underlies the *exempla* selected for analysis. These narratives address the dogma of the Real Presence, a central tenet of Eucharistic theology that is treated in John Mirk's *Festial* most explicitly in the sermon for the feast of Corpus Christi — London, British Library, MS Cotton Claudius A.ii (C) /041 —, which concludes with a sequence of four exempla designed to affirm Eucharistic doctrine through narrative demonstration. Among these is the well-known episode, transmitted in both Paul the Deacon's *Vita Beati Gregorii Papae* and the *Legenda aurea*, in which a woman laughs at Pope Gregory's words *Corpus Christi* when receiving the Eucharist, refusing to believe that Christ is truly present in what she recognizes as a loaf she herself had baked. In response to Gregory's prayer, the consecrated host is miraculously transformed into a bleeding child, prompting the woman's repentance and her subsequent return to Communion in full faith.

This *exemplum* also appears in two sermons preserved in independent homiletic collections — Oxford, Bodleian Library, eMus 180/031 and Cambridge, Gonville and Caius College, MS 54/028 —, where it is transmitted with minor narrative variations, such as differences in framing or supplementary backstory. By contrast, no close counterpart to this specific version appears either in the *Festial*'s Revision or in other independent sermon collections. Instead, sermons addressing the unbelieving woman motif in these contexts develop the theme along different lines, often reworking narrative material drawn from widely circulating exemplum

collections such as the *Speculum laicorum*, Caesarius of Heisterbach's *Dialogus miraculorum*, sermons attributed to Jacques de Vitry, or Étienne de Bourbon's *Anecdotes*.

The prominence of the Real Presence in these narratives must also be understood against the backdrop of late medieval theological and ecclesiological controversy. From the late fourteenth century onward, Eucharistic doctrine — especially belief in transubstantiation — was among the most fiercely contested issues in debates over the nature of the visible Church, particularly in the challenges posed by the Lollards⁽²⁵⁾. Lollard theology repeatedly questioned or denied the substantial presence of Christ in the consecrated host, interpreting the Eucharist instead in symbolic or memorial terms, thereby directly challenging both sacramental theology and clerical authority⁽²⁶⁾. Within orthodox

(25) Cf. A. HUDSON, *The Premature Reformation. Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1988 and F. SOMERSET, *Feeling Like Saints. Lollard Writings after Wyclif*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 2016. Hudson's book is the seminal authority on the Wycliffite controversy, which establishes the historical backdrop of the Eucharistic anxiety that permeates late medieval sermons. The *exempla* of the disbelieving woman function as a direct, orthodox counter-narrative to the Lollard denial of the Real Presence, a theological conflict that Hudson documents extensively, and thus become a political weapon against the heresy. Somerset's work is crucial because she shifted the scholarly focus from Lollard doctrine to Lollard affect and shows that the orthodox church was competing with Lollards not just for intellectual assent, but for emotional engagement, thus providing the context for my analysis of the use of the extra-ordinary lexicon in sermons.

(26) Cf. M. ASTON, «Lollardy and the Reformation: Survival or Revival?», *History*, 49, 1984, pp. 1-18; S. MCSHEFFREY, *Gender and Heresy. Women and Men in Lollard Communities, 1420-1530*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 1995. The first allows us to understand the urgency of these sermons: they were reacting to a heresy that refused to die out ("survival"). The latter is specifically relevant to the case study of the "disbelieving woman", as it identifies the gendered dynamics of late medieval heresy, explaining why female figures were often chosen as literary vehicles for scepticism and for reasserting clerical authority through their corrections.

discourse, such disbelief was frequently framed as sacrilege and closely associated with accusations of host desecration, a polemical strategy that played a central role in pastoral, legal, and homiletic responses to heresy⁽²⁷⁾. *Exempla* depicting scepticism toward the Eucharist — especially when voiced by lay figures — and its correction through miraculous revelation thus functioned not only as didactic tools but also as narrative reaffirmations of ecclesial orthodoxy and sacerdotal mediation. Notably, in the Revision of the *Festial*, the sermon on the Real Presence belongs to the group of homilies added to Mirk's original sequence, reflecting a heightened pastoral concern with articulating and defending Eucharistic doctrine in a period marked by sustained doctrinal contestation. Taken together, these features make the *exempla* particularly well suited as case studies for the present inquiry.

5. Wonder, Myracle and Mervaille: a comparison

One may ask, then, whether there is any real difference between these terms, and if so, what that difference might be. In Middle English sermons, there is first a clear difference in frequency: *mervaille* appears more often than both *wonder* and *miracle*, in that 68 instances of *mervaille* against 57 of *wonder* and 38 of *miracle*. More significantly, *mervaille*

(27) Cf. M. RUBIN, *Corpus Christi. The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991; M. RUBIN, *Gentile Tales. The Narrative Assault on Late Medieval Jews*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1999. Following Rubin's analysis of eucharistic culture, the skepticism of the woman is framed here not simply as an error, but as a structural threat akin to host desecration; the miracle thus intervenes as a necessary act of divine violence that restores the hegemonic order, validating the priest's authority against the layperson's doubt.

often functions as a semantic bridge, encompassing both the emotional resonance of *wonder* and the theological weight of *miracle*, and frequently substituting for either in collocations and formulaic expressions.

As a matter of fact, about 60% of *merveille*'s occurrences overlap with *wonder*, reflecting a shared emotional or perceptual framing — both terms evoke astonishment for the strange, the unexpected, or the unknown. In such contexts, *merveille* easily encroaches on the domain of *wonder*, adopting its syntactic and rhetorical roles. At the same time, *merveille* is etymologically and semantically positioned to approach *miracle*. In approximately 40% of cases, it can substitute for *miracle* without disrupting the rhetorical or narrative function. Crucially, *merveille* also extends to describe not just the miraculous event, but its narrative framing the exemplum itself. Unlike *miracle*, however, *merveille* applies to extraordinary events whether attributed to divine agency or to human or diabolical sources, making it the more versatile term. By contrast, the direct overlap between *wonder* and *miracle* is minimal — only 15% — indicating that these words, while superficially similar, tend to function in distinct rhetorical registers. In the few instances where they do converge, *merveille* could also occur, mediating between emotional affect and doctrinal content.

Given that *miracle* is the earlier borrowing, first attested in English in the early 13th century, it is *merveille* — introduced later — that encroaches upon its domain. It broadens and reframes the scope of the miraculous without displacing the doctrinal precision that *miracle* retains. In many sermons, *merveille* becomes the preferred term for introducing an extraordinary event from which the audience is expected to extract a moral lesson. It is often favoured over *miracle*,

likely because it carries less doctrinal weight and is less tightly bound to divine agency. At the same time, *merveille* avoids the purely affective or spontaneous connotations of *wonder*. As a more neutral or mediating term, it allows the audience to engage more directly with the exemplum, where the extraordinary frequently results from human action or moral choice rather than supernatural intervention alone.

A telling example is offered by the episodes of the disbelieving woman and the theft of the host, in which the narrative is explicitly referred to as a *merveille*, foregrounding both the strangeness of the event and its function as a moral and theological illustration.

And at þe laste þei rememberyd þem of an holy man callyd mayster Thomas of Alquyne, a notabyll and a famus doctur of diuinite. And he was an holy lyver. [And they desyred hym gretly to com theder]; and when he herd this grete mervell þereof. (eMus 180/29, Sermo in die Pasche)
 “And at last they remembered a holy man called Master Thomas of Aquino, a notable and famous doctor of divinity, and a holy liver. And they greatly desired him to come there; and when he heard of this great marvel...”

And when þe procession was done, þis holyman made a sermon to al þe pepyll of þis same mervaille. And when þe sermon was done, he remisyd hym to the hyze awtyr and toke þe chylde with þe kerchyfe owt of þe womans hondys and leyde him vpon þe awtyr, and made þis woman openly to confesse hyr in every degre, withe all the hole cyrcumstance lyke as sche had done, as it is before reheryd. (eMus 180/29, Sermo in die Pasche)

“And when the procession was finished, this holy man preached a sermon to all the people about this same

marvel. And when the sermon was finished, he went back to the high altar and took the child with the kerchief out of the woman's hands and laid him upon the altar, and made this woman openly confess herself in every detail, with the whole circumstance, just as she had done, as has been recounted before."

Neuerpelesse, all witheowte myrakyll schewyng, whoso belevythe not on þis poynt, he may not be saved. And also for þe more stedfastnesse of 3our herttis, I schall tell 3ow þis mervaille. We rede in þe lyffe of seynt Gregory þat þer was onys a good woman in Rome that, a3enst every Sunday, sche made a certen of obleys and brow3te hem to seynt Gregori in maner of an offeryng, of the whiche seynt Gregori made Goddis body on the awtur. Then it befell on a day þis woman wolde be howselyd after masse among oþer pepill. (eMus 180/31, In die Pascheo)

"Nevertheless, even without the showing of a miracle, whoever does not believe in this point cannot be saved. And also, for the greater steadfastness of your hearts, I shall tell you this marvel. We read in the life of Saint Gregory that there once was a good woman in Rome who, every Sunday, made a certain number of wafers and brought them to Saint Gregory as an offering, from which Saint Gregory made God's Body upon the altar. Then it happened one day that this woman wished to receive communion after Mass among other people"

5.1. Marvel as a Discursive and Rhetorical Operator

From a theoretical perspective, the sermonic use of *marveil* (*mervell*, *mervaille*) is best understood not as a purely referential lexical item but as a discursive operator that

regulates the representation, circulation, and interpretation of extraordinary events. Rather than functioning as a simple synonym of *wonder* or *miracle*, *marvel* occupies an intermediate semantic and rhetorical position, mediating between affective response and doctrinal validation. In what follows, the term is translated consistently as “*marvel*” in order to preserve this specificity and to foreground its role within the economy of sermonic discourse.

Narratologically, *marveil* marks the moment at which an event is stabilised as narratable. Formulaic expressions such as *this grete mervell pereof* or *pis same merveille* perform an anaphoric function, retrospectively framing an occurrence as a coherent and bounded narrative object. Through demonstrative reference, the preacher presupposes a shared horizon of perception and understanding, transforming an initially disruptive or extraordinary experience into a recognised unit of meaning. In this sense, *marvel* operates as a mechanism of narrative domestication, enabling the extraordinary to be integrated into a communicable and interpretable story.

At the level of discourse organisation, *marveil* frequently functions as a metadiscursive marker introducing exempla. Formulae such as *I schall tell 3ow pis merveille* explicitly signal a shift from doctrinal exposition to narrative illustration, guiding audience expectations and structuring attention. Here, *marvel* does not denote the event as such, but rather names the narrative act itself. It thus participates in what discourse theory would describe as a framing device, marking the exemplum as rhetorically salient while suspending, for the moment, questions of theological proof.

This framing function becomes even more evident when *marveil* designates the object of preaching itself, as

in references to sermons delivered *of þis same merveille*. In these cases, the extraordinary event is no longer merely recounted but is subjected to sustained interpretation. *Marvel* here designates a discursive object that demands explanation, clarification, and moralisation. Exceptionality is thus reconfigured as pedagogical material, and narrative becomes an instrument for doctrinal reinforcement. From this perspective, *marvel* functions as a category that renders the extraordinary epistemically manageable within the institutional discourse of the Church.

Crucially, sermons often oppose *marveil* to *miracle*, especially in passages insisting on the necessity of belief even “without miraculous showing”. This contrast reveals a key theoretical distinction. Whereas *miracle* implies visible divine intervention and serves as direct theological authentication, *marvel* occupies a more flexible rhetorical space. It allows the preacher to mobilise exceptionality without committing to an economy of continual miraculous proof. In pragmatic terms, *marvel* supports persuasion rather than demonstration, functioning as a narrative warrant rather than an evidentiary one.

Taken together, these patterns suggest that *marveil* operates at the intersection of narrative theory and rhetorical pragmatics. It names extraordinary events only insofar as they have been discursively framed, narrated, and rendered interpretable; it structures transitions between exposition and exemplum; and it enables the preacher to regulate audience response while maintaining doctrinal authority. Neither purely affective like *wonder* nor strictly theological like *miracle*, *marvel* designates a mode of rhetorically mediated extraordinariness, through which belief, interpretation, and moral evaluation are guided within sermonic discourse.

5.2. Wonder and Miracle as Operators of Reception and Validation

If *marveil* functions in sermons as the discursive category through which extraordinary events are framed, stabilised, and rendered narratable, *wonder* (*wondre*, *wondyr*) and *miracle* (*mirakel*, *myracle*) operate at adjacent but distinct levels of sermonic discourse. Rather than naming the extraordinary itself, they regulate how such events are received and authorised. *Wonder* functions as a discourse operator at the level of reception, designating the affective and cognitive disturbance produced by the encounter with the unexpected. Constructions such as *to have wonder why* or *for wonder and for fear/joy* register moments of interpretive suspension, in which established explanatory frameworks momentarily falter and the audience is placed in a state of heightened attentiveness. Within sermons, however, this response is not an end in itself: *wonder* is mobilised as a provisional state that opens the audience to instruction and prepares them for doctrinal clarification, its rhetorical value lying precisely in its instability.

Miracle, by contrast, functions as a discourse operator of validation. When events are designated as miracles, their extraordinariness is no longer mediated through affect or narrative framing but anchored in explicit divine agency. In sermonic contexts, *miracle* signals a shift from interpretive openness to doctrinal certainty, grounding meaning in theological causation and ecclesiastical authority. Rather than eliciting questioning or emotional disturbance, miracles confirm belief and delimit acceptable interpretation, operating as mechanisms through which orthodoxy is asserted and ecclesial mediation legitimised.

Conclusions

The extraordinary in Middle English sermons is not merely a thematic or narrative embellishment, but a carefully regulated discursive resource whose meaning and function are shaped through lexical choice. By focusing on the semantic fields of *wonder*, *marvel*, and *miracle* within a selected corpus of Middle English sermons, and in particular within exempla concerned with female transgression and Eucharistic sacrilege, the paper has shown that the vocabulary of astonishment operates according to a structured rhetorical economy rather than through free variation or synonymy.

The use of *miracle*, *wonder*, and *merveille* in Middle English sermons is far from arbitrary. Although these terms share overlapping semantic traits in lexicographical descriptions, their actual deployment reveals clear functional differentiation. Lexical choice shapes how extraordinary events are presented to the audience: whether as emotionally unsettling experiences, as morally instructive narratives, or as incontrovertible signs of divine intervention. In this way, language itself becomes an instrument of persuasion and doctrinal control, reinforcing theological and ideological boundaries through the very vocabulary of astonishment.

Taken together, *wonder*, *marvel*, and *miracle* form a functional triad within sermonic discourse. *Wonder* names the audience's affective and cognitive disturbance in the face of the unexpected, registering a moment of interpretive suspension that heightens attention and emotional engagement. *Marvel* transforms extraordinary events into narratable and interpretable discourse objects,

stabilising exceptionality through narrative framing and metadiscursive signalling. *Miracle*, by contrast, anchors such events within a framework of explicit divine causation and doctrinal certainty, functioning as a marker of theological validation rather than as an invitation to interpretation. Their distribution is therefore not accidental, but reflects a calibrated rhetorical strategy through which the extraordinary is first experienced, then narrated, and finally regulated within the moral and theological economy of the sermon.

In conclusion, homiletic discourse does not merely inherit lexical material from literary or theological traditions, but actively reorganises it to meet specific pastoral and ideological needs. More broadly, the findings suggest that attention to genre-sensitive lexical usage is essential for understanding how medieval audiences were guided to perceive, interpret, and evaluate exceptionality, not only as a disruption of the ordinary, but as a meaningful component of a moralised and hierarchically ordered world.

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