

## THE CHARM: A CONTRIBUTION TO MODERN AND MEDIAEVAL ANTHROPOLOGY

One of the most serious difficulties in the historical study of folklore lies in the paucity of primary evidence. What we know of to-day as folk-tradition is rarely written about or commented on in the documents of the Middle Ages. Books of penance deal with *superstitiones* and other beliefs, but only in passing and without going into reliable detail as to what they consisted of, and even Burchard of Worms' prohibitions, interesting as they are, leave much unsaid. This paper attempts to bring into relief one single aspect of folk-belief which is well documented, and which merits more attention than it has hitherto received: the charm.

Briefly, a charm is a popular prayer aimed at bringing about healing, good luck, divine help, and many other benefits. But its importance lies not in the mere words of supplication that characterise any and every prayer, but in its context. To underline this fact let us look at a modern situation: the setting up of protective measures in south-east Peru, where the inhabitants of a community are aiming to stop devils or thieves from entering a house or field:

"You take a bowl of stale urine and mix it with creosote and paraffin. On the right night (for preference always a Tuesday) you prepare all this, and then at least three men leave the house. One goes ahead with a stick or digging tool, and with this he goes along banging the ground. Another man follows him, sprinkling the mixture while the other comes behind him with the Bible in his hand, calling on the name of God. In this way they go all round the bounds of the house. This is the way a Protestant would do it. A Catholic would do the same, except that they also get drunk and chew coca, and they also go around the house without the Bible repeating these words: "It is closed, the path of the thief is closed up, so that no evil may enter". In the case of field protection the farmer makes an offering through a witchdoctor, and this time they do not carry the bowl of stale urine. They go about the bounds of the field repeating these words: "The path is closed, the path of the hail is closed up, and the path of the thief may not

enter here"<sup>1</sup>. In this ceremony of protection there are different parts: a manual or practical, with the sprinkling of a concoction and the banging of ground with sticks and an oral rite which consists of an invocation (the Protestants call on the name of God, the Catholics make a prayer, which in fact is in Quechua in the text). The essence of the Protestant ritual prayer lies in namings<sup>2</sup>.

The Quechua prayer is analogous to our mediaeval charm: a set of words or formulae forming part of a remedy. You apply the practical part, then through prayer call on the gods to sanction the healing, protection or whatever it may be. At a fertility ceremony in south-eastern Peru, the celebrants sat in a corner of a field to be blessed: *chicha* (maize beer) was drunk, and the earth liberally sprinkled with the liquor. A hymn was chanted addressed to the mountain gods and spirits (*apu, auki*), calling on their names, and asking for an abundant crop. Rites had to be followed exactly to the letter: if for instance some *chicha* was left at the bottom of the jug, a girl would be dispatched after a field-worker who had gone to his work at the foot of the hill. She would insist that he finished what he had left in the jug, to the last drop 'or the maize will not grow'<sup>3</sup>.

If, with these modern examples as a text on which to build our discourse, we now go back to the Middle Ages, and in particular the fifteenth century, we see how the curative or preventative prayer or charm functions in its social context. In this paper I do not intend to dwell on the charm itself, for it is well enough known as a phenomenon in European folklore. I shall examine rather those aspects which tell us something of the attitudes inherent in it regarding contemporary society, as well as the attitudes of that society towards it. In this way I hope to suggest some

<sup>1</sup> This account was received from an Indian informant in 1963, and appears in a work in preparation, *Some Traditions of the Ayllu*, by L. and P. HOGGARTH, p. 9-10

<sup>2</sup> An interesting 'recipe' which illustrates the point about naming, and given by the same informant, runs (it is for growing good potatoes): 'This is a simple ceremony, and anyone can do it before starting any kind of work in the fields. He prepares the following things: a waxy-leafed plant, fat, and three coca leaves, which are three set out for each person who is present. . . They light the fire. . . then the owner of the field sets out the cloth full of coca leaves, and having prepared the offering says "fa, fa, fa, Lord Llallawa, Lord Imampu, breathe out good potatoes without worms, fa, fa, fa, Lord Janq'oyawa, Lord Jukuwiri, blow the potatoes to this place". Then he puts the offering for the earth on the fire, and then they serve coca, and begin the hoeing'.

See also, for excellent examples of Quechua or Inca prayers, J. ROWE, 'Six Inca prayers'.

<sup>3</sup> The ceremony, noted down during a field-expedition in the summer of 1969, took place near Macay (Vilcanota Valley, S. E. Peru).

conclusions which may be of use to us when we look at the folk-cultures of modern times.

These notes are based on the study of some two thousand charms found in British libraries, which I feel to be representative of the western European charm-tradition as a whole<sup>4</sup>. For examples I shall draw on practical and oral parts of charm-recipes, which are to be found in MSS in three principal types of location: (a) in collections of liturgical and orthodox prayers, where they form an integral part of the text; (b) in collections of medical recipes, the so-called *receptae et orationes medicae*; (c) on flyleaves of books and odd sheets of paper, jotted down — apparently — at random<sup>5</sup>.

### The purpose of the charm

Before the eleventh century, four main categories of curative or preventative prayer may be distinguished: (1) that which includes those that aimed at the stopping of bleeding (whether in wounds or in childbirth); (2) those that sought protection against evils by the evocation of guardian spirits (e. g., against thieves, or ills that befell crops); (3) those which consisted of blessings on fields for the promotion of fertility; (4) those which helped bring about luck or success in love. The last category belongs, however, rather to the Greek papyri of the 3-5th centuries A.D., and stems from pre-Christian traditions.

From the twelfth century onwards the purpose of the charm became more general, and between then and the fourteenth different types started to proliferate. First in quantity came charms for toothache, then ones for fevers, for bleeding and for gynaecological ills. Then came charms for animal diseases, for poison, for lack of sleep, for thieves and for rats and mice. There were also prayers for finding lost goods, against the devil, the gout, tempests and 'worms'<sup>6</sup>, and last but not least in significance, love incantations.

<sup>4</sup> I wish to acknowledge an immense debt to the Dorothea Waley Singer Index of scientific MSS (of the Middle Ages) to be found in British libraries. The relevant boxes concerning charms (and curative recipes of that type) are numbers 18 and 19, to be seen in the Dept of MSS, British Museum.

<sup>5</sup> For a flyleaf example, see the charm in Basque (XIV-XVth century) in D. J. GIFFORD, 'A white paternoster in Basque?', *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, xli (1964), pp. 209-222, which relates possibly to the nursery rhyme 'Matthew, Mark, Luke and John / Bless this bed that I lie on'.

<sup>6</sup> 'Worms' or *vermes* were thought of to be the cause of many illnesses. In one narrative charm Christ finds St. Peter sitting on a stone, holding his jaw. When asked what the matter is, Peter replies that he has the worm which causes toothache. Christ then pronounces healing words, and Peter is healed.

With the fifteenth century there was a further increase in the general application of charms to wider fields of human preoccupation, but still the familiar types of toothache, bleeding and fevers head the list. The scope of the serious charm was in fact not large, though it might well be argued that neither was the field of diagnosis amongst those who attempted to find out what was wrong with themselves or with others medical science was still in its infancy from certain points of view.

### Medicine and charms

I have pointed out that charms are prayers which are part of a remedy, and that this remedy includes a manual or practical side as well as a spiritual one. This practice comes directly from Egyptian medicine, which enjoyed much prestige in Classical times and later. Universal drugs were introduced to the ancient world by the Egyptians (e. g., hartshorn, castor oil, cumin, dill, coriander) and it is they who give us our first herbals. Much of the surviving folk-medicine of western Europe has come from these, and 13th-14th century medical MSS were drawn up in the same way as ancient medical papyri. Remedies were headed by the name of the disease they were designed to cure, and each was followed by a long series of alternatives, with charms and incantations interspersed among the prescriptions. Egyptian deities were simply replaced by Christ, the Virgin and Christian saints<sup>7</sup>. Magic and medicine were inextricably bound up one with another. In the fifteenth century one finds such headings in MSS as 'Oratio dicenda super herbas collectas', prayers to be said over collected herbs: the connection between spiritual and practical aspects of medical materials was very wide-spread<sup>8</sup>. This intimate relationship of the prayer with medicine is seen with even more clarity when we remember the various ills against which it was directed. As we saw, the pre-twelfth-century type was in the main directed against ills which involved bleeding (wounds or childbirth) and toothache. The rest were not so much curative or medical as preventative, popular prayers directed towards chance, successful love, fertility and so on. But with regard to the first type, the 'medical' charms, an important point must be made, and that is that the ills involved there are those very often curable nowadays by hypnotism. Once this is realised, the formulaic nature of the charm is explained<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> WARREN DAWSON, *The Survival of Ancient Medicine*, London 1929. 135ff.

<sup>8</sup> MS BM Sloane 783, fol. 214v.

<sup>9</sup> See D. J. GIFFORD, 'The mediaeval charm - some medical aspects', in *Proceeding of the Scottish Society of the History of Medicine*, 1963, 262. The paper is followed by another which examines the implications of the charm-hypnosis theory in the light of Scottish medical cases and folk-medicine, by J. S. G. Blair.

Alliteration, rhythm, rhyme, repetition, these are all characteristic traits of the hypnotic verbal process. Nor is this anything new by way of discovery. A seventeenth century work by Frommann, *Tractatus de fascinatione novis et singularis* (1675) has the revealing sub-title 'in quo fascinatio vulgaris profligatur, naturalis confirmatur et magica examinatur'. This book (well over 1,000 pages long, in Latin) is a very early examination of the principles of hypnotism, or fascinatio, and deals in detail with mediaeval curative prayers and charms. There is no space here to go into the work in all its analyses, but no student of the charm in relation to hypnotism can afford to ignore it.

The charm as part of a simple medical hypnotic process becomes thus much easier to understand in its curative purpose and as a psychophysiological phenomenon. That the hypnotic trance itself was used can be seen from the following example: at the end of a volume containing Froucester's history of the monastery there are 90 folios of medical recipes and charms. Amongst these we find the following headings:

de vulnere sanando per carmen  
ad capiendas aves manu

and then the following: 'ut sedeantes in mensa dormiant, scribe in mensa ka ko q.b.c. et dormiant omnes'<sup>10</sup>. Here is surely a recipe for a trance? Similarly, the tendency to alliteration and repetition in the charm can be seen time and time again, e.g.,

Sanguis prosapia sanguis quoque dicitur sudor  
sanguis sit zima signat sanguis quoque vitam  
... Elyson miserere sonat que sonat nobis ymas<sup>11</sup>

or another short charm from the Sloane collection:

Explicunt secreta mulierum: In nomine patris... et spiritus  
sancti Amen: Anamzapta - ta - ta - ta et hoc me misit ut sa-  
neris<sup>12</sup>.

or again,

perto sunt fili oscula (?) ba ba  
materia intacta virgo purissima oscula da da...<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Historical MSS Commission XII, 9, 398, 1st half XVth century.

<sup>11</sup> MS Cambridge Corpus Christi College 386 (v), iate XVth century. No folio reference given.

<sup>12</sup> MS BM Sloane 121, fol. 105r.

<sup>13</sup> MS BM Additional 12195, fol. 136v.

Many of such 'nonsense' words are in effect remnants of old magical formulae, cabbalistic words, etc, but there can be no doubt that the intended effect derived from their alliterative and repetitive style was part of the hypnotic process in healing. The writing of what seem to be hypnotic words occurs frequently: presumably these were meant to be recited, e.g.,

Write þese wordes and put hem in his hond in þe same syde þat he  
bledeth:

*max uax pax  
buro baro barones  
pax max uideus*<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, there seems to be an awareness that the charm cannot cure a wound that has gone too far, and for which a more practical remedy is required:

A gude charme for the worme and for a wounde yf hit be nocht  
wounded to þe dede. Pernez une pece de plumbe et le fete quartre et  
fetes V croyces dens le dite plumbe...

and that this is effective

if a mayster vein be not corven nor the wunde too large<sup>15</sup>

We have spent some time defining the place of the charm with relation to its medical background, because there is a tendency, too often seen in modern writers, to regard it as so much superstitious nonsense, with no place in the serious folk-medicine of the Middle Ages. We can now look at it without, as it were, needing to explain it away or excuse it.

### The concept of authority

All prayer, be it orthodox or not, derives its effectiveness from an appeal to authority. For a moment we must now return to Egypt. Bar, in his excellent chapter in the *Legacy of Egypt*<sup>16</sup> writes: "...there is the importance of the single word, not just an abstraction but a reality of a kind for the Egyptian, to whom what we would call puns appeared as mythological facts. All this would lead — as one modern scholar has put it — to 'the impossibility of translating Egyptian thoughts into modern language, for the distinctions we cannot avoid making did not exist for the Egyp-

<sup>14</sup> MS Oxford Bodleian E. Mus. 187 (3605) fol. 82.

<sup>15</sup> MS BM Egerton 833, fol. 9.

<sup>16</sup> 'Mystery, myth and magic', *The Legacy of Egypt*, ed J. R. HARRIS, Oxford 1971, 138-69.

tians' ". Now, as a corollary, the name of an authority — be it divine or otherwise — had power in itself in Egypt, and this essential fact of what one might term religious magic transmitted itself into the religious orthodoxy of the early Christians as it did into the great body of curative prayers in western Europe. Thus the invocation of a divine name, the naming of a person, actually brings that divinity or that person within your reach <sup>17</sup>.

The invocation of names, of special words and phrases or mnemonics which refer back to sacred formulae, is then a part of the Egyptian heritage in the charm, as is also its essential structure and binary nature. A Cambridge MS includes a recipe on the flyleaf of a Book of Hours which tells you how to cure bleeding: 'write *Beronexa* on a woman's forehead, or *Beronex* on a man's' <sup>18</sup>. Cabbalistic letters were also powerful, as we have said and had to be repeated <sup>19</sup>. Charms in Greek were thought to have especial potency, as also many diagrams of an astrological and learned nature. These would all demand long chapters in themselves even were I competent to deal adequately with the more learned and sophisticated aspects of magic. I only touch on such charms for the illustration of my point <sup>20</sup>.

The types of authority appealed to, apart from the normal orthodox sources common to Christian prayers, were increasingly inspired by the mass of eastern magic and learning which came into Europe through Spain: this provided a kind of second renaissance of eastern tradition, coming as it did hand in hand with Aristotelian works, mathematical and scientific treatises, astrological and alchemical works. Another Cambridge MS (1492) gives us a charm for finding out secrets by means of the Hebrew and Chaldee alphabets.<sup>21</sup>

With all the interest of the oriental and exotic, however, the main authorities in charms of the fifteenth century and earlier remain Biblical and hagiographical, invoking the same names as do orthodox Christian prayers.

<sup>17</sup> The literature on this subject is, as is well known, vast: one of the first scholars to treat of it in detail was Frazer in his *Golden Bough*.

<sup>18</sup> MS Cambridge Sidney Sussex College 30, fol. 130v, c. 1450. MS from near Bristol.

<sup>19</sup> MS Prof. Donald Mackinnon Edinburgh 2, fol. 7r-8. Partly in Gaelic. XVth cent.

<sup>20</sup> See, for examples, MS BM Additional 21165, BM Harley 5596, BM Royal 16 C II, etc.

<sup>21</sup> Trinity College 1144, fol. 144v.

### Authoritative 'letters' and compilations

Many charms are presented within a pretext of authoritative writings by traditionally famous personages: this is another concept of authority which resides not in the invocation of names or sacred words or phrases, but in the prestige — generally mythical — of wise figures in history.

Already in the twelfth century there occur references to the 'sancte scientie Sancti Salomonis'<sup>22</sup>, and the 'saige Salomon' is mentioned in prayers whereby spirits are to be brought down to earth in order to make them obey one's wishes<sup>23</sup>. A 'letter' from Pope Alexander to Wulfstan Bishop of Winchester also dates from the twelfth century, and contains prescriptions and recipes<sup>24</sup>. A 'letter' at that time from Christ to king Abgarus was also well-known<sup>25</sup>. In the thirteenth century we learn that Ham's books on magic were concealed in the Ark<sup>26</sup>. In the fourteenth we get Honorius' edition of the so-called works of Solomon<sup>27</sup>.

Thus it is that in the fifteenth century it is not surprising to find all manner of compilations traditionally ascribed to learned men, saintly personages, often in the form of confidential letters sent by one of them to some great ruler. They set the cachet, the sign of good faith, on a reliable source. Thus, medical figures:

Ipocras this buke sent thus to the emperour Cesare wyte ye well that this buke is gude leeche with all thynges it will teche. Do als so this buke hym byddes. He teches leches all there wyte of euer yika maner wytte of euele what so it be here sone efter thar may se, man or woman that haues met how thai sall be taken in cure...

And here follow recipes, for urinary cures, charms (many for gynaecology), surgery (treatment of wounds), fevers, and some prognostics<sup>28</sup>.

Now this is of course a preamble to a medical book, and the authority of Hippocrates obviously gives the collection its power and prestige. Another mythical compilation is that of Solomon. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Key of Solomon was a compendium of recipes and magical prayers, much in demand in the upsurge of fashionable in-

<sup>22</sup> MS Cambridge Trinity College 1405, fol. 5r-8v.

<sup>23</sup> MS *Ibid.*, fol. 1r-4r.

<sup>24</sup> MS Oxford Bodleian Hatton 114 Cod. Junius 22, fol. 85v-86v.

<sup>25</sup> MS BM Royal 2 A xx. Cited Birch, *An ancient MS of the 8th or 9th Century*, London 1889 (Hampshire Record Society), 104. The MS principally treated by Birch is the Leofric Missal (see *infra*, p. XX).

<sup>26</sup> MS Cambridge Fitzwilliam 31, fol. 17r.

<sup>27</sup> MS BM Sloane 313, fol. 1.

<sup>28</sup> MS Oxford Bodleian Auct. A. 106 (AX) (29003), fol. 139r-191v. XVth century.



terest in magic that followed the Reformation. In the Middle Ages proper Solomon was also known for his prowess in matters of love:

Quaedam experimenta natural, quae Solomon rex composuit ab amorem et implorationem cujusdam excellentissime reginae<sup>29</sup>.

Daniel enjoyed much prestige in the matter of interpreting dreams, and his so-called writings contain charms:

Computacio Danielis Prophete ad omnes res incipiendas et prenoscendas utrus vera au falsa sunt<sup>30</sup>.

Holy men were in general the source of much good advice and many useful charms:

A medcyne that the pope send to Tornay ffor the pestilans then rayning...

and there follow the usual collection of medical recipes interspersed with charms<sup>31</sup>. But perhaps the most famous Pope to give his name to compilations of charms was Leo III, who reflects unto himself some of the glory of Charlemagne in — apparently — being the emperor's mentor in matters of magical knowledge. The *Enchiridion of Pope Leo III* was a book of recipes much loved by the eighteenth century dilettantes who dabbled in magic but as a printed work it first appears in Rome (1502, though no copy of this edition seems to exist). Earlier, however, the 'wisdom' of Pope Leo III was limited to a single prayer designed to afford protection to the bearer. A prototype might read:

Saint Leo wrote this epistle to the Emperor Charles the Great, saying on this wise, that whosoever carry this letter shall in no wise be smitten by tempest, be drowned, etc.

There follow then a long list of the names and attributes of God. The charm is found in Latin, in Anglo-Norman French, in English, and in both prose and verse<sup>32</sup>. Other Popes also enjoyed prestige as founts of wisdom: in one compilation from Dublin (15/16th century) we find charms for producing male children and preventing disease and impotence:

<sup>29</sup> MS BM Sloane 121 (xi), fol. 90v-93v, XVth or XVIth century.

<sup>30</sup> MS BM Sloane 1009 no fol. reference. XVth century.

<sup>31</sup> MS BM Sloane 1584, fol. 41v-42r. XVth century.

<sup>32</sup> There are dozens of examples of the Pope Leo Charm: see especially Ms BM Royal 17 A xvi, fol. 22v-23r.

Angelus domini dictavit haec Gregorio pape pre uice celebrationis horarium omnium gloria tibi deus pater amen <sup>33</sup>.

Albert the Great was another reputed purveyor of healing prayers, giving rise later in the fashion for magical exotica to such compilations as *Le Petit Albert*. In the same way, St Cyprian became the 'author' of a body of writings which now flourish in Galicia and Latin America as the *Ciprianillo*. Yet another compiler and author was Roger Bacon <sup>34</sup>.

Collections of this nature were looked on perhaps as are advertised brands of medicine to-day: the name behind them is to be respected. There was, however, a tendency in them to magical ephemera rather than to the serious medical charm.

### Terminology of the charm

The way the mediaeval charm was regarded is also reflected in the names by which it was called. These often underline the etymology of the modern term itself, for there can be little doubt that the charm was meant to be sung or chanted — itself another indication of its hypnotic nature as a healing medium.

a) *precantatio*: *precantatio ad cohibendum sanguinem ne fluat; ad capiendos pisces; ut vinum non pervertatur, etc;* <sup>35</sup>

b) *carmen*, often used in rubrics in conjunction with

c) *experimentum*; <sup>36</sup>

d) *medicines* or *medicina*: a medicine for knowing whether a man will live or die <sup>37</sup>, or a *medicina contra peccata* <sup>38</sup> — though this savours more of the figurative meaning of 'a remedy against sin', 'a prescription against dishonesty';

e) *incantamenta*: *Incantamenta et medicina ad morbos repellendos;* <sup>39</sup>

f) *precatio*: *precatio contra migraneam;* <sup>40</sup>

<sup>33</sup> MS Trinity College Dublin 133b, col. 672v. In Gaelic and Latin. XVth century.

<sup>34</sup> For alleged writings by Albert the Great, see Oxford Merton, fol. 58-59r; for Roger Bacon, see MS BM Landsdowne 548. XVth Century.

<sup>35</sup> MS BM Harley 1602 II, fol. 3-25, for examples. Fifteenth century.

<sup>36</sup> Both (b) and (c) find examples in MS BM Additional 34111, fol. 1 ff. Fifteenth century.

<sup>37</sup> MS BM Harley 1680 (v, vi), fol. 7v. Fifteenth century.

<sup>38</sup> MS BM Harley 3954 (iv), fol. 81. Fifteenth century.

<sup>39</sup> MS BM Royal 128 xxv (xii), fol. 9r-10r. Fifteenth century.

<sup>40</sup> MS BM Sloane 122 (xvii), fol. 186v. This is however perhaps just a cataloguer's term, as I cannot find it in the MS itself.

- g) *expertum*: *expertum certissimum*; <sup>41</sup>  
 h) *benedictio*: *benedictio pro animalibus*; <sup>42</sup>  
 i) *conjuratio*: *conjuratio contra latrones* <sup>43</sup> One remembers here the Spanish term for the charm, *conjuro*;  
 j) *versus*: *versus contra incendium*; <sup>44</sup>  
 k) *exorcismus* is to-day used with a liturgical context, but was in the Middle Ages often employed as a term for a protective charm <sup>45</sup>.

### Climates of opinion

In the fifteenth century one finds that latent attitudes to the curative prayer, which had always existed amongst the intelligensia who regarded all charms with scepticism, started to make themselves more generally felt. Although the medical curative prayer still held its own in prescription books and manuals, there were an increasing number of what came to be known as grimoires, collections of recipes, bits of knowledge, entirely devoted to magic as it was then understood.

The heightening of interest in the occult has been studied at great length, and there is no need to go into such corresponding movements as the rise of empirical science and medicine, the growing influence of eastern culture, and above all the scepticism of the humanists. It is enough to point out that the medical charm or prayer became less fashionable and more generally misunderstood. We find ourselves, in the fifteenth century, on a type of borderline between medicine and magic, on a drawing back from the serious use of curative prayer to that of the amused half-belief and 'superstition' which is prevalent at certain stages of social sophistication, and in this instance gathers maximum force after the Renaissance. Then it is that doctors like Frommann need to revindicate the charm in order to point out its true medical properties.

One of the first compilations which highlight this dilettante interest in the occult is that of Honorius, which is basically a presentation of the so-called magical writings of Solomon. The first example which I have been able to trace comes from the late fourteenth century. The prologue of this grimoire seeks to identify such magic with works of the

<sup>41</sup> MS BM Sloane 1698, fol. 10v. Fifteenth century.

<sup>42</sup> MS Oxford Rawlinson A 356, fol. 90r. Fifteenth century.

<sup>43</sup> MS Historian MSS Commission vi, p. 289, col. 13, fol. 15r (sic). XVth century.

<sup>44</sup> 50 MSS from the collection of H. Yates Thompson, MS 20, fol. 83r. XVth century.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Dorothea Waley Singer Index, 19: cards 103, 471, 491.

devil (in itself nothing new!) and is one of the prototypes of 'authoritative' collections which are of such interest to the historian of the late fifteenth century witch-mania. In any case, there is little genuine concern here for the serious medical charm as most people knew it. Honorius' work styles itself as 'liber angelorum vel liber iuratus noncupatur, quem fecit Honorius magister Thebarum...' purporting to be compiled by Honorius the son of Euclid after a conference of 89 masters from Naples, Athens and Toledo, convened by the Pope and Cardinals<sup>46</sup>. It starts:

When wycked sprites were gathered together intending to send devills into the hartts off men to the intente that they wolde destroy all things profytabie ffor mankynde and corrupte all the whole worlde... even the pope him selfe and his cardenalles which gathering them selves together sayde won to a nother as here followeth ...

and there follow a mass of prayers, exorcisms, names of angels, recipes and herbal remedies, the majority being culled from the reputed wisdom of Solomon on the subject of magic. Some remedies became familiar in later epochs.

For the mone take the heades of frogges mad of the aier which you may gather after some showers of raigne, with the eyes of a bull and the sede of whytt popye with thurs and camphyre equall porcione...and mix these<sup>47</sup>.

The parting of the ways suggested by works of this type hints at a polarisation, already existing at higher levels of sophistication since the ancient world, at one end of which the curative or preventive prayer is an integral part of medical or religious stock-in-trade, and at the other a plaything for the intellectual's entertainment. In the fifteenth century opinion was veering more and more round to the latter concept.

Consequently in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries we find much commentary on the foolishness of charms, as well as the erasing of offending passages in recipes of that class. After the Reformation, words like 'The Pope' would frequently be expunged: 'Saint Leo the ... wrote this epistle'<sup>48</sup>. Elsewhere charms in their dozens were erased from the *receptae et orationes medicae* or liturgical works<sup>49</sup>. Marginal comments

<sup>46</sup> For some examples of this popular work, see MS BM Sloane 3854, fol. 138v; MS BM Sloane 313, fol. 1; MS BM Sloane 3885, fol. 58 (all XVth century).

<sup>47</sup> MS BM Royal 17 A xlili, fol. 7. For further references to the grimoire, see the Dorothea Waley Singer Index, box 19, numbers 314 and 317. Fifteenth century.

<sup>48</sup> MS BM Royal 17 a xvi (vii), fol. 22v. Year 1420.

<sup>49</sup> E. g., MS BM Sloane 374, fols 63v, 68r, 75r. Fifteenth century.

on 'a foolish charm' appear everywhere, and although this may be due in some measure to the Reformation, there is evidence that some suppression took place in the fifteenth century<sup>50</sup>. Arnaldo de Vilanova in Spain was particularly worried over the effect of charms.

Together with collections by dilettante magicians, with the erasures and scornful marginal comments, we also find charm-patterns being employed for conjuring tricks or what at any rate seem like entertainment pieces: 'to make hot baken bread when hit is draven alle hot — for to lepe a bouthe the hous',<sup>51</sup> or 'for to make be semyng addres and snakes for to renne alle aboute the hous as thow the hous were fulle of edderes...'<sup>52</sup> which seem to be of the same order as those recipes of the 3-5th century papyri where a sophisticated reading public or professional quack finds delight in such passages as: 'how to restrain a woman from overmuch wine and garrulity', which were mixed up with household hints such as how to make brass look like gold<sup>53</sup>.

One may then sum up on this question of attitudes: collections of medical recipes and prayers, the pattern for individual units of which came from Egypt, were handed down from Classical times to the Middle Ages in western Europe. Around the model of the charm itself, which as we have seen contained therapeutic qualities in its hypnotic formulae, there were in different epochs imitations, mockings, 'good luck' variants called into being by the rising sophistication of writers. One of these epochs was the fifteenth century. At the same time, a keen interest in alchemy and the occult (with which the charm has nothing to do in its medical aspect) used charm patterns for more serious purposes in such subjects as divination and prognostics. Similarly, love magic also resorted (as it did of old) to the charm formulae. We are witnessing then in the fifteenth century a change of opinion regarding the status and usefulness of the curative prayer as part of medical knowledge.

<sup>50</sup> As for instance in Sloane 374, cited in foregoing note.

<sup>51</sup> MS BM Sloane 389 (x), fol. 129r-v. Fifteenth century. See also MS Bodleian Ashmole 1393, p. 5-6. Epoch of Henry VII.

<sup>52</sup> MS Oxford Bodleian Ashmole 1393, p. 2. A puzzling recipe, which may or may not be part of a serious prognostication prescription is headed 'Divinationes quaedam' and runs: 'Teneat quis in manu dextera quot grana volverit tunc ponat in sinistra quot habet in dextera. Deinde ponat volueris de sinistra et ponat in dextera postea reponat in sinistra de dextera quot remanent in sinistra hoc facto remanebit in dextera. Duplum illius numeri qui de sinistra fuerat assumptus...' And so on, for three more paragraphs. (MS BM Sloane 118, fol. 49. Fifteenth century).

<sup>53</sup> BM Papyrus 121, 3rd century.

### The charm and religion

In a paper which aims principally at defining attitudes in a certain sphere of folk-tradition, it is only fitting that the conclusion should rest in a religious context, for it is in its religious application that the charm comes nearest to what has usually been seen as folklore. It lies as a phenomenon on the boundaries between medicine and religion, but its terms of reference are almost entirely religious. The Leofric Missal of the 8th or 9th century already shows us a vital bridge between liturgical and medical lore reaching back to pre-Christian times. It shows clearly too the belief that wherever there is disease, it is the work of evil powers or spirits. The only way to attack these is of course by prayer. Every part of the human body must be catered for in case it is attacked. By extension, Christ's body has prayers devoted to its different parts. The Leofric Missal includes prayers also to the Lord's tears; the kiss of Judas; the ear cut off by Peter; Christ's arms, hands, and neck; the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit; the darkness; the thief; the vinegar and the gall; his closed eyes; his nostrils. Later in the Missal there is a fresh collection of prayers after which comes the *lorica* of Lodgen, 'composed in the year of danger, and others say that great is its virtue if chanted twice a day'. The prayer for pain in the eyes divides parts of the body between our Lord and Biblical characters:

Caput Christi, oculos Gesaeie, frons nasum Noe, labia lingua Salomonis, collum Timothei, mons Benjamin, pectus Pauli, iunctus Johannis, fides Abrahe, sanctus sanctus sanctus usque ad finem.<sup>54</sup>

A study of such a work as the Leofric Missal, together with the popular prayers it brings within its orbit, shows us the background to the charm as few other examples can: it shows us above all that there is a fundamental and inseparable unity between physical man, and what pertains to his spirit both in sickness and in health. There is no division between the spiritual and the material, between the realm of prayer and the healing of medicine. To quote Birch 'It is curious to observe how prayers and charms go together here as in the Winchester MS. Religion and magic had an indistinct border line in some parts of Christendom at the period when these MSS were written and used<sup>55</sup>. I would go further than this, and postulate that the border was not only indistinct, but non-existent, in the serious medical recipe known as the charm; thus the prayers against

<sup>54</sup> MS BM Harley 2695, fol. 38. See for the Leofric Missal, W. DE GRAY BIRCH, *An ancient MS of the 8th or 9th century*, London 1889 (Hampshire Record Society).

<sup>55</sup> *Op. cit.*, 104.

bleeding that come interspersed with the Magnificat and other orthodox prayers are perfectly rational in their placing in the early Middle Ages. Later it ceased to be so because of the polarisation of medicine and religion. We remember however that in the early centuries of the Christian era healing was an integral part of the Christian message. Some of the greatest healers of this early period were bishops who could prescribe both spiritual and physical remedies. Christ's instructions to his disciples established the church as healer of body and soul, and as early as the sixth century, monasteries had become the repositories of medical knowledge. The practice of incubation, so valuable for our study of primitive hypnotism, is another indication of the indissoluble nature of body and spirit in the minds of saints and healers<sup>56</sup>. But it is from this intimate relationship of religion and medicine that the charm drew its strength, and its success explains the many hundreds of examples it affords us in mediaeval western European MSS.

## Conclusions

Can the foregoing notes supply us with any kind of conclusions to help clarify our perspectives concerning folk-tradition in modern times? Already studies of writers such as Lévi-Strauss have shown that traditional definitions of 'magic' or 'superstition' are not only meaningless but misleading, and require a severe and fresh working out. So-called 'primitive' societies whose religion to us is so much 'magic' have been shown to possess more sophistication than our own, and if we are to derive profit from the last twenty years' advances in anthropological science, then not only modern but mediaeval folk-traditions must be re-examined with more understanding.

Many writers in Classical times as well as in the late Middle Ages, looked at and described as nonsense that which they did not fully comprehend. Like us to-day, superstition was what other people believed, in the same way that non-Christian religion was paganism and non-Christian gods became demons. In the fifteenth century a further reason for impatience with older traditions of healing by charm lay in the rising prestige of eastern science, penetrating Europe from the thirteenth century onwards. Arabic drugs brought also a new specialist - the pharmacist. Slowly the rise of empirical medicine and science brought the whole idea

<sup>56</sup> An excellent picture to illustrate this point can be seen in the practice of incubation, where, in the early centuries of the Christian era, healing shrines of Aesculapius and others were taken over by the church. See M. Hamilton, *Incubation in the Early Christian Church*, St Andrews 1910.

of hypnotic formulae that underlay the charm into disrepute, till in modern times the European version has become identified with the mass of titillating literature that serves those interested in occult fashions. Manuals for making oneself invisible, with recipes for making devils out of black hens' eggs, for forcing secrets out of husbands or wives — the endless list is highly entertaining and a form of escapist literature which sells, adorned with lurid covers, in many markets of the world<sup>57</sup>. But then such entertainment is, as we have seen, as old as civilisation itself.

The preventive or curative prayer that stems from the mediaeval charm (or indeed from similar prayers all over the world) still has its place in indigenous cultures of America and Africa, and here we come again full circle to the Quechua prayers at the beginning of this paper. Perhaps the only real classification of attitudes in the last instance is that which divides the rational and the mythical. The rational mind sees a merging of medicine and religion as something quaint, externalised, illogical and faintly ridiculous. The mythical mind, on the other hand, takes such a relationship to be a fundamental truth, and creates its own logic in order to fuse the mental with the physical. This might take us a short step in medicine towards explaining the mind of the Greek as opposed to that of the Egyptian. It might also move us a little nearer to understanding the secret of the contemporary so-called primitives of Andes and Amazon, who do not need to measure in order to comprehend, nor to analyse in order to believe.

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<sup>57</sup> I was able to buy up-to-date editions of the *Ciprianillo*, the afore-mentioned 'writings' of St Cyprian, complete in one case with nude lady and wizard on dust-cover, at markets in both Cuzco and Rio de Janeiro.