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Medical Magic and the Church in Thirteenth-Century England

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‘Do you know any incantation for fevers and for any illness, which is called a blessing?’¹ This was one of several questions relating to magic (*sortilegium*) that the early thirteenth-century scholar John of Kent suggested that priests could ask penitents in confession. It points to a key difficulty that medieval churchmen faced when they thought about so-called ‘magical’ cures for illness. This was the question of how to define a magical cure, and how to distinguish it from other forms of healing, which might be deemed natural or religious. John’s comments also suggest that there was no easy answer to the problem of definition. For him, these verbal cures were ‘incantations’ and he went on to explain that they invoked the devil; but he admits that for others, they were ‘blessings’, a term which suggested that they invoked God and could be seen as legitimate religious actions.

The use of ‘magical’ cures in the middle ages has attracted the attention of several scholars in the past few decades. In the field of medical history, Tony Hunt has noted in his study of thirteenth-century medical recipes that many recipes mingle ‘charms and magic’ with pharmaceutical preparations.² Studies of university medicine have offered more details about how medieval medical writers perceived magical cures. For example Luke Demaitre has argued that Bernard of Gordon, a physician based at the university of Montpellier in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, rejected ‘suspending herbs around the neck... sorceries, incantations, and numerous other things which are better not revealed,’ but nevertheless recommended some charms and perhaps also astrological talismans (engraved images which were designed to draw down the power of the stars and which were denounced as magic by some theologians).³ Joseph Ziegler has found that Bernard’s contemporary Arnold of Villanova was similarly prepared to accept the curative properties of astrological talismans, while denouncing certain other healing practices as magic.⁴ Most recently Michael McVaugh and Lea Olsan have argued that medical writers did not categorize charms as ‘magic’ at all, but instead put them into a broader category of ‘empirica’ or ‘experimenta’. These were cures that had been observed to work, but which could not be explained by the theory of the humours, and so their basis was in experience

¹‘Scis aliquam precantationem ad febres et ad aliquam infirmitatem que dicitur benedictio?’ London, British Library MS Royal 9. A. XIV, fol. 230r. On John see Goering 1988.

²Hunt 1990, p. 1.

³Demaitre 1980, pp. 97, 157.

⁴Ziegler 1998, p. 246.

rather than in medical theory. Attitudes to *empirica* varied, however, with some medical writers more tolerant than others, and McVaugh suggests that many writers may have become less sympathetic to charms from the fourteenth century onwards.⁵

Other historians have studied magical cures as part of medieval religious culture and, like the medical historians, they have uncovered a range of attitudes in the sources. Some churchmen strongly condemned cures that they saw as ‘magical’ or ‘superstitious’ (some of these condemnations will be quoted below), but Valerie Flint has argued that in the early medieval period, there were also clerics who were willing to compromise with potentially questionable methods of healing.⁶ This diversity of opinion continued to exist in the late middle ages. Eamon Duffy and Don Skemer have pointed out that many written charms closely resemble orthodox prayers and exorcisms, and that many laypeople and even many clerics saw them as legitimate.⁷ Similarly, Peter Murray Jones has argued that late medieval churchmen did not object to all amulets, but rather sought to distinguish pious amulets from ‘superstitious’ ones.⁸ Magical cures thus had an ambiguous status among both churchmen and medical writers. Writers in both groups criticized the use of cures they saw as magical, but were sometimes prepared to accept a relatively wide range of remedies in practice. In both groups there also existed the potential for different individuals to adopt different views.

This paper will bring into this developing picture of medieval attitudes to magical cures a group of sources which have not yet been examined in detail. These are pastoral manuals, texts which summarize the knowledge that priests needed to hear confessions, preach, and conduct the pastoral care of the laity. The authors of these texts discussed magical cures fairly regularly under the heading of *Sortilegium*, a term which they employed to cover a range of unorthodox beliefs and practices including divination, beliefs relating to omens and fairies, and the misuse of ecclesiastical rituals, as well as the use of magical cures. However, although Joseph Ziegler and Daryl Amundsen have examined some pastoral manuals’ comments on medicine more generally, these discussions of magical cures have not been extensively studied.⁹

Pastoral manuals began to be written in large numbers in the period after the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, as part of a wider church reform movement which aimed to improve clerical education and the pastoral care of the laity. They vary considerably in length and format, but detailed discussions of magical cures are found mostly in the longer Latin manuals, called *summae*, which summarize academic theology and canon law.¹⁰ The authors of these textbooks tended to be well educated clergy: they could be friars; ecclesiastical administrators such as Thomas of Chobham (d. before 1236), sub-dean of Salisbury Cathedral; scholars associated with the cathedral schools or universities; and occasionally parish priests like William of Pagula (d. after 1332). Their readers were also drawn from these groups, and although the longer *summae* were probably too difficult and

⁵Olsan 2003, pp. 347–9; McVaugh 2003, pp. 333–8.

⁶Flint 1991, p. 246.

⁷Duffy 1992, p. 278; Skemer 2006, pp. 21–2.

⁸Jones 2007, p. 93.

⁹Ziegler 1998, p. 8 examines one manual. Amundsen 1996 does not discuss magical cures.

¹⁰On these see Shinnars and Dohar 1998, pp. 122–4 and Boyle 1985.

expensive for many parish priests to use, some of them nevertheless circulated widely. For example Thomas of Chobham's *Summa for Confessors* survives in over a hundred manuscripts despite its length.¹¹ Pastoral manuals can thus tell us how educated, pastorally minded churchmen defined magical cures, and how they wanted less well educated priests and ultimately the laity to think about them.

Churchmen had written about confession long before the thirteenth century, and the early medieval period saw the production of numerous penitentials, lists of recommended penances for various sins, which had also mentioned magical cures.¹² The thirteenth-century pastoral manuals differed significantly from these earlier works, however. Instead of simply listing penances, they also considered the circumstances of the sin and the different sins that different social groups might commit. Behind this change lay a shift in the way penance was conceived. The Fourth Lateran Council, influenced by recent developments in the theology of penance, stressed that the priest was a 'doctor of souls', and like a doctor he should tailor his 'remedies', the penances, to the individual penitent.¹³ Nevertheless, despite these new features, there was not a complete break with the past. Thirteenth-century writers continued to include material from the penitentials and other earlier works. This was transmitted to them through Gratian's *Decretum*, a collection of passages from theological and legal texts compiled in the mid twelfth century, which became a standard canon law textbook. In this way, the attitude of educated churchmen to magical cures (as to many other topics) was partly shaped by a process of textual transmission going back centuries.

In particular, many of the pastoral manuals' ideas about magic can be traced to the works of St Augustine. Gratian reproduced a set of passages from Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana* in which Augustine condemned as 'superstitious' (*superstitiosum*), demonic, and 'magic arts' (*magiarum artium*) 'all the amulets and remedies which the medical profession also condemns, whether these consist of incantations, or certain marks which their exponents call "characters", or the business of hanging certain things up and tying things to other things.'¹⁴ The fact that earlier texts relating to magical cures continued to be copied might suggest that churchmen's attitudes had not changed, but given the gap of several centuries, this cannot be assumed. How far did the 'medical profession' and the church still condemn the same remedies, in the way that Augustine's words implied? How influential were ecclesiastical condemnations of 'magic' and 'superstition', and how widely held was the Augustinian view of 'superstitious' remedies?

In this paper I will examine the discussions of 'magical' and 'superstitious' cures (the terms are often not clearly distinguished) found in some thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century pastoral manuals, which were either written in England or circulated there. I will also look at the question of whether these remedies were considered to be 'natural' or not, an issue that the authors of some pastoral manuals raised when they were trying to decide whether particular cures were acceptable. Finally I will compare the pastoral writers' discussions with the cures offered in some of the medical encyclopaedias and recipes that were either

¹¹Thomas of Chobham 1968, p. lxxvi.

¹²Filotas 2005, pp. 248–69.

¹³Boyle 1985, p. 32.

¹⁴Augustine 1995, pp. 91–3; Gratian 1879, Causa 26, qu. 2, ch. 6, columns 1021–2.

written or circulated in England, and which have received more extensive discussion from Olsan, McVaugh, and Hunt, to see whether pastoral and medical writers shared similar concerns about ‘magical’ cures.

Spoken and Written Charms

In the spirit of Augustine’s criticism of ‘incantations’ and ‘characters’, many authors of pastoral manuals condemned certain cures involving words, either spoken or written, as *sortilegium*. A few simply quoted Augustine, including the authors of two continental manuals which circulated in England: Guillaume Peyraut (or Peraldus), a Franciscan friar who wrote a *Summa* on the Vices and Virtues in around 1236, and John of Freiburg, a German Dominican friar who wrote a *Summa for Confessors* in around 1297–8.¹⁵ Other writers drew their material from alternative sources. Robert of Flamborough, who wrote one of the earliest pastoral manuals in around 1208–13, quoted a condemnation which originated in the penitentials:

Faithful priests should impress on their people so that they know that magic arts and incantations cannot bring about any remedy for any human illnesses, nor can they heal in any way animals which are weakening or lame or even dying; but rather these things are snares and traps of the ancient enemy, with which he perfidiously labours to entice the human race.¹⁶

Several later manuals repeated this statement, including the *Summa for Confessors* of Thomas of Chobham, written shortly after 1215, and the *Oculus Sacerdotis* [*Priest’s Eye*] of William of Pagula, written in the 1320s.¹⁷ Thomas of Chobham also reproduced another statement from the penitentials: ‘Nor is it permitted to pay attention to certain observations or incantations when collecting medicinal herbs, unless it is only with the divine Creed or the Lord’s Prayer, so that only God is honoured as Lord and creator of all.’¹⁸ Again this was quoted by later writers, including Raymond of Peñafort, a Catalan Dominican friar and canon lawyer whose *Summa on Penance*, written in the 1220s, influenced many later English pastoral manuals.¹⁹ Raymond added that as well as reciting the Lord’s Prayer or the Creed while collecting herbs, it was legitimate to lay pieces of parchment on which these prayers were written on the sick person.²⁰

¹⁵ ‘omnes ligaturae atque omnia remedia quae medicorum disciplina condemnat.’ John of Freiburg 1518, bk. 1, title 11, qu. 3, fol. 31r; Guilelmus Peraldus 1618, ‘Superbia’, ch. 26, p. 243. The 1618 edition of this text gives ‘commendat’ for the last word, but I have amended the text on the grounds that he is quoting Augustine, who says ‘condemnat’. Nevertheless, it is possible that Peyraut changed Augustine’s text to reflect the fact that many medical writers mentioned amulets. I am grateful to Peter Murray Jones for suggesting this.

¹⁶ ‘Commeant sacerdotes fideles populos ut noverint magicas artes incantationesque quibuslibet infirmitatibus hominum remedii nil posse conferre, non animalibus languentibus claudicantibusque vel etiam moribundis quidquam mederi, sed haec esse laqueos et insidias antiqui hostis quibus ille perfidus genus humanum nititur allicere.’ Another possible translation of the opening is ‘Priests should remind their faithful people’, as ‘fideles’ could agree either with ‘sacerdotes’ or ‘populos’. Robert of Flamborough 1971, p. 261; Gratian 1879, Causa 26, qu. 7, ch. 15, col. 1045.

¹⁷ Thomas of Chobham 1968, pp. 484–5; *Oculus Sacerdotis*, trans. in Shinnars and Dohar 1998, p. 148.

¹⁸ ‘Nec in collectionibus herbarum que medicinales sunt aliquas observationes vel incantationes liceat attendere nisi tantum cum symbolo divino aut oratione dominica, ut tantum deus creator omnium et dominus honoretur.’ Thomas of Chobham 1968, p. 477; Gratian 1879, Causa 26, qu. 5, ch. 3, col. 1028.

¹⁹ Raymond of Peñafort 1603, bk. 1, title 11, p. 104. On the dates of the *Summa* and the glosses see Boyle 1974, p. 247

²⁰ Raymond of Peñafort 1603, pp. 104–5.

These prohibitions were already old in the thirteenth century and were not very specific.²¹ What was meant by ‘incantations’, and how did these writers think that they worked to heal illnesses? More explicit information was provided by William of Rennes, a Dominican friar who wrote glosses on Raymond of Peñafort’s *Summa* in around 1241. William’s glosses then circulated with the *Summa* as a standard commentary on the text. In his gloss on the passage in which Raymond permitted the wearing of the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer or their recitation over herbs, William considered a series of specific verbal healing practices:

The *brevia* [written prayers] that are made on Ascension day should not be reproved, since they only contain the words of the Gospel; but it is superstitious to believe that they are less effective if they are written after the Gospel has been read out, or after the mass, or on another day, than [if they are written] when the words of the Gospel which are contained there [in the *brevia*] are spoken.²²

Holy words were acceptable, then, but it was superstition to believe that writing them down as they were spoken in a particular ritual setting increased their efficacy – an example of the way in which written and oral healing practices could intersect. This passage also raises the question of who was writing these *brevia* down. It is hard to be sure but probably they were clerics. By the thirteenth century in England a relatively high proportion of aristocrats, gentry and perhaps officials lower down the social scale were probably able to read Latin to some extent, but writing remained a harder skill, and was often left to the clergy or to professional clerks.²³

William’s second point followed on from this:

But those *brevia* in which certain characters and unfamiliar names are written because they are the unutterable names of God, and in which it is said that whoever carries this *breve* on themselves will not be endangered in this or that way, or that this or that good thing will happen to them, should without doubt be condemned and not be carried, and the people who write them, or teach that they should be carried, or carry them, or give them, or sell them, sin unless they are so simple that ignorance excuses them.²⁴

William was not inventing these practices: prayers which make promises like these still survive.²⁵ Many of the surviving examples date from the fifteenth century, but there is no reason to suppose that they did not exist earlier. Again, there are hints about the use and circulation of these *brevia*, with mentions of recommendation, selling and giving. If the writing of *brevia* was most often done by clergy, then either selling or giving would be necessary for them to circulate among the laity; however, William does raise the possibility

²¹For earlier examples see Filotas 2005, p. 257.

²²‘non sunt reprobanda breuia, quae fiunt in Ascensione, cum non contineant nisi verba Euangelii; sed superstitiosum est si credatur, quod minus habent efficaciae, si scribantur post lectum Euangelium, aut post missam, aut alia die, quam cum proferuntur verba Euangelii, quae ibi continentur.’ William of Rennes, gloss, printed in Raymond of Peñafort 1603, pp. 104-5.

²³Skemer 2006, pp. 47, 81-2; Clanchy 1993, p. 236.

²⁴‘Illa autem breuia in quibus scribuntur quidam characteres, et quedam nomina inusitata, quia nomina Dei ineffabilia, et in quibus dicitur quicumque super se portauerit istud breue, non periclitabitur, sic, vel sic; vel istud, aut illud bonum sibi eueniet, proculdubio reprobanda sunt, non portanda; et peccant, qui scribunt ea, aut portanda docent, aut portant, aut donant ea, aut vendunt, nisi adeo sint simplices quod ignorantia debeat eos excusare.’ William of Rennes, in Raymond of Peñafort 1603, p. 105.

²⁵Duffy 1992, p. 273.

that even someone educated enough to write *brevia* might still be ‘ignorant’ in the sense that they did not realize that this was a sin. William also tells us that the *brevia* offered not only health, but also concrete promises of protection. His attitude to these promises is not clear. They are a characteristic of ‘bad’ *brevia*, but this seems to be a secondary point. William’s main point was that the use of unfamiliar names was sinful. He did not say why, but a later Dominican, Thomas Aquinas, argued that these unfamiliar names might in fact be the names of demons. Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica* was not itself a pastoral manual, but several later authors of pastoral manuals drew material from it.²⁶ In answer to the question ‘Whether it is illicit to hang divine words at the neck’, Aquinas argued that

if it implies invocation of the demonic, it is clearly superstitious and unlawful. Similarly, we should beware, it seems, of strange words we do not understand lest they contain something unlawful... Again, one should take care lest a supposedly sacred word contain error, for then its effect could not be ascribed to God, who bears no witness to falsehood.²⁷

William of Rennes made his third point about superstitious cures at greater length. It is worth quoting in full because of the range of verbal healing practices that it mentions, oral as well as written, and the nuances in William’s attitude to them:

But what about those enchantresses or enchanters [*carminatricibus vel carminatoribus*] who sing charms over the sick, children, and animals? Surely they do not sin mortally? I answer that if they do not say or teach or do anything superstitious, but only use licit prayers and adjurations, such as by the Passion and the Cross and similar things, I do not believe that they sin mortally, unless they do such things after the Church has forbidden them.

This is what we might expect: licit prayers and adjurations were acceptable. William went on, however, to make further, more surprising concessions, which depended on the status and attitude of the person using the cures as well as on the cures themselves:

But I believe that women and men who are accustomed to mix in very many useless and superstitious things should be prohibited, unless perhaps they are a priest or a religious, and discreet; or even if they are a layperson, either a man or a woman, of excellent life and proven discretion, who after pouring out a licit prayer over the sick person (not over an apple or a pear or a belt and similar things, but over sick people), lays hands on them according to the Gospel of Matthew [sic], *They shall lay hands on the sick and they shall recover* (Mark 16.18). Nor should people of this sort be prohibited from such things, unless perhaps it is feared that because of their example, indiscreet and superstitious people will see this example and practise the abuse of charms for themselves.²⁸

William of Rennes thus gave a detailed picture of which verbal cures he regarded as legitimate, and which he did not. Acceptable cures were those that relied on established

²⁶Boyle 1974, p. 266.

²⁷‘Utrum suspendere divini verba ad collum sit illicitum.’ This is my translation of the question, but elsewhere I have used the translation provided. Thomas Aquinas 1958, qu. 96, art. 4, pp. 80, 83.

²⁸William of Rennes, in Raymond of Peñafort 1603, p. 105.

prayers alone, and did not mix those prayers with strange words or other observances that were, in William's opinion, irrelevant to making the prayer work, such as saying the prayers over an apple or a belt. Nor did they include any element, such as unknown names, that might honour any being other than God. These distinctions are clearly spelled out, and although William forbade several practices, he permitted those which did not use unfamiliar words or extraneous observances, and even justified their use with a quote from the New Testament. Recent studies of other writers suggest that his attitude was not unusual among educated clergy. Aquinas, thirteenth-century canon lawyers, and even Augustine also offered a rationale for the use of some verbal cures, even as they condemned others.²⁹

Just as important as the words and observances used in verbal cures, however, was the question of who was using them. Crucially, William claimed for the Church the right to judge the credibility of those offering verbal healing, to the extent that an ecclesiastical prohibition could make using an otherwise licit prayer into a mortal sin, if 'they do such things after the Church has forbidden them'. This shows that definitions of magical cures might be ambiguous in practice, because what was superstitious when done by one person might be a legitimate healing practice when done by another. It also shows how the term 'magic' could be used polemically to denigrate the ritual practices of individuals or groups whom churchmen disapproved of, as well as reflecting a judgement of the ritual itself, or the existence of particular characteristics such as unknown words.³⁰ It is striking, however, that despite his concern to regulate the use of healing prayers, William allowed the laity, even women, scope to use them, as long as they were of 'proven discretion'. If put into practice, this emphasis on 'discretion' would allow priests to judge those laypeople who were offering verbal cures on an individual basis.

Attitudes varied, however. John of Freiburg reproduced William of Rennes' position,³¹ but in the mid fourteenth century, the English Dominican friar John Bromyard took a more negative view of lay verbal healing, denouncing the typical user of charms as an 'old woman who hardly knows the rudiments of faith,' who should in no way be believed above 'all the clerics in the world.'³² Bromyard also gendered the users of charms as female: he called them 'carminatrices', a feminine noun, in contrast to William of Rennes' use of the masculine and feminine terms, 'carminatrices vel carminatoribus'. This may simply reflect Bromyard's own perception that women used charms more often than men, but it also corresponds to an increasing suspicion of female healers which Jole Agrimi and Chiara Crisciani have identified in other sources. They argue that from the thirteenth century onwards, as physicians and surgeons sought to assert their professional status, and as theologians became more concerned about religious deviance, both pastoral writers and medical writers increasingly associated the knowledge of 'old women' with magic.³³

²⁹Flint 1991, p. 302; Skemer 2006, p. 64; Kelly 2008, p. 214.

³⁰Kieckhefer 1994, p. 815.

³¹John of Freiburg 1518, bk. 1, title 11, qu. 14, fol. 32r.

³²Rider 2007, p. 195.

³³Agrimi and Crisciani 1993, pp. 1284–5, 1293–4.

Moreover, Bromyard did not suggest that priests could allow more scope to individual 'discreet' laypeople, as William of Rennes had. Instead he emphasized that women who used charms never had the authority to do so:

What they do is against the prohibition of divine, canon and civil law... and against the doctrine of the whole church. Therefore [even] if what they do were good, they should still stop because of all these prohibitions, and so that their action is not taken by others as a dangerous example.³⁴

William of Rennes was probably aware that his more tolerant view might be problematic, since at the end of his discussion he expressed the fear that any permission granted to the laity might encourage less 'discreet' laypeople to use illicit cures; however, Bromyard gave the same idea a more authoritarian interpretation. These differences of opinion betray different views, not only perhaps of female healers, but also more fundamentally of the laity's competence to understand religious matters for themselves. Different views of this issue can be found in late medieval English religious literature more generally, with some writers confident about their readers' understanding, but others worried that laypeople might misinterpret what they read.³⁵

Non-Written Amulets

In a passage quoted below, Thomas of Chobham observed that natural forces existed in three materials: words, herbs and stones. This is a proverb found in other medieval texts, and it suggests that some writers thought about non-verbal amulets in a similar way to charms and herbal medicines, because all could be conceived of as working by means of natural forces.³⁶ Medical writers, too, sometimes linked the wearing of items on the body with charms, on the grounds that both were *empirica*. For example John of Gaddesden, an Oxford physician with a degree in theology who wrote a medical encyclopaedia, the *Rosa Anglica*, in 1311, suggested a nosebleed remedy which required the sick person to wear herbs around his or her neck, as well as saying a charm or prayer while gathering the herbs.³⁷

With the exception of Thomas of Chobham, however, most authors of pastoral manuals differed from the medical and other writers who sometimes linked words with stones and herbs. In contrast to their regular criticisms of 'incantations', they often said little about non-verbal amulets. This was not a position forced on them by older theological texts because, as we have seen, Augustine criticized incantations and amulets together as magical. Thomas Aquinas's very comprehensive *Summa Theologica* did include a discussion of the wearing of substances in order to affect the body, but he devoted most of this to the specialized case of astrological talismans, arguing that the characters and images engraved on these could have no natural efficacy and so must be designed to communicate with demons.³⁸ Aquinas's comments on talismans were not widely taken up by the authors of

³⁴Illud quod faciunt est contra prohibitionem legis divine, canonici et civilis... Et contra doctrinam totius ecclesie. Ergo si bonum esset quod faciunt, cessare tamen deberent propter tot prohibitiones, et ne factum illorum ab aliis in exemplum vertatur perniciosum.' John Bromyard 1518, 'Sortilegium', art. 2, fols. 356r-v.

³⁵Kamerick 2008, p. 30.

³⁶Fanger 1999, p. 97; Jones 2007, p. 95.

³⁷Hunt 1990, p. 27; Olsan 2003, p. 355.

³⁸Thomas Aquinas 1958, qu. 96, art. 2, pp. 75-7.

pastoral manuals, however. One of the few to reproduce them was John of Freiburg, and even he devoted less space to them than to written amulets and incantations.³⁹ This may have been because the authors of pastoral manuals were more interested in widespread magical practices that could be performed by many laypeople, like the healing prayers discussed by William of Rennes, than in learned practices such as astrological talismans which were more likely to be restricted to an educated elite.

Those thirteenth-century churchmen who did mention the wearing of substances such as stones and herbs did not deny that these could heal illnesses. Although Aquinas condemned the wearing of written characters and astrological images, he did admit that certain substances might have natural properties conferred on them by the stars which could affect the body.⁴⁰ Aquinas's teacher, the theologian and scientific writer Albertus Magnus, had also argued in his treatise on minerals, *De Mineralibus*, that when precious stones were worn on the body, 'healing and help are conferred solely by natural powers'.⁴¹ One pastorally minded writer even thought that these properties could be useful in preaching. Thomas of Cantimpré, a Dominican friar who wrote a work *On the Nature of Things* in the 1260s to provide material for preachers, discussed the properties of stones and even astrological talismans as evidence of God's power.⁴² This view of the properties of substances as a part of the created world, which could be legitimately used, probably explains why many authors of pastoral manuals said less about non-written amulets than about verbal cures. Strange words in charms looked more obviously like an attempt to communicate with demons than did wearing or carrying a stone or herb which, it could be argued, worked because of mysterious but nevertheless natural and even god-given forces.

Natural and Unnatural Cures

Albertus Magnus's comments on the 'natural powers' of precious stones point to another important theme running through the discussions of magical cures in some pastoral manuals: the question of whether they were 'natural' or not. This idea went back to Augustine, who did not use the term 'natural' but did argue that 'superstitious' cures could not have a physical effect on the body. Following on from the passage quoted above in which he condemned amulets and written characters, he went on to say that 'the purpose of these practices is not to heal the body, but to establish certain secret or even overt meanings'.⁴³ In other words they had no physical effect, but instead meant something, and Augustine went on to explain that they acted as signs to demons. The demons were then supposed to bring about the desired result.⁴⁴ This, like the earlier part of the passage, was quoted in Gratian's *Decretum* and so was available to later pastoral writers.⁴⁵

A number of pastoral writers went beyond Augustine and argued in their own words that the methods of healing which they condemned were magic because they could not work

³⁹John of Freiburg 1518, bk. 1, title 11, qus. 11–12, fols. 31v–32r.

⁴⁰Thomas Aquinas 1958, qu. 96, art. 2, p. 77.

⁴¹Albertus Magnus 1967, p. 146.

⁴²Klaassen 1998, p. 7.

⁴³Augustine 1995, p. 93.

⁴⁴Augustine 1995, p. 99; Markus 1994, p. 382.

⁴⁵Gratian 1879, Causa 26, qu. 2, ch. 6, col. 1022.

naturally; and conversely, that ‘natural’ methods of healing were legitimate. This interest in nature and explicit use of the term ‘natural’ was probably influenced by the translation of Aristotle’s works on the natural world into Latin, which encouraged many twelfth- and thirteenth-century writers to take a more rigorous view of what was and was not natural than their earlier counterparts had.⁴⁶ For example Raymond of Peñafort, in a passage for which I have not found earlier sources (though they may exist), argued that it was superstitious to believe that actions were particularly effective if performed at certain times (a point echoed for the *brevia* by his commentator William of Rennes). However, an exception could be made if there were genuine natural reasons for this:

Peasants who pay attention to times for sowing seed, or cutting down trees, or similar things, which have a certain and natural reason why they should be done in this way, should not be condemned here. The same goes for physicians, when they are giving medicines and similar things, for which a certain and manifest reason can be given according to natural philosophy.⁴⁷

Raymond was quoted by Guillaume Peyraut and John of Freiburg.⁴⁸ An anonymous short treatise on confession surviving in a late thirteenth-century manuscript made a similar argument, although it talked about ‘reason’ rather than ‘nature’: practices were superstitious if they had no ‘reason’ (*ratio*) why they were done.⁴⁹

Thomas of Chobham and Thomas Aquinas explored the issue in more detail. Even though Thomas of Chobham condemned ‘incantations’, he was willing to accept that some words had natural power:

It is well known, however, that holy words have much effectiveness in natural matters. For the natural philosophers say that the force of nature is concentrated above all in three things: in words and herbs, and in stones. We know something about the power of herbs and stones, but of the power of words we know little or nothing.⁵⁰

Nevertheless, the power in them was believed to work ‘naturally’ (*naturaliter*).⁵¹ Nor was he alone. Claire Fanger has identified other thirteenth-century writers who considered that the power of some words might be natural, but this position was always controversial.⁵² Thomas Aquinas took a stricter view, and one which was closer to Augustine’s. He stated flatly that words had no natural power and so must rely on demons to produce their effects:

When things are used in order to produce an effect, we have to ask whether this is produced naturally [*naturaliter*]. If the answer is yes, then to use them so will not

⁴⁶Bartlett 2008, pp. 31–2.

⁴⁷‘Item non condemnantur hic rustici qui seruant tempora ad seminandum, vel arbores incidendas, vel similia, quae certam et naturalem habent rationem, quare ita debeant fieri. Item de physicis circa medicinas dandas, et similia, de quibus certa et manifesta ratio reddi potest secundum physicam.’ Raymond of Peñafort 1603, p. 104.

⁴⁸Guilelmus Peraldus 1618, ‘Superbia’, ch. 26, p. 243; John of Freiburg 1518, bk. 1, title 11, qu. 3, fol. 31r.

⁴⁹‘Observaciones aut supersticiose sunt, quecumque rationem non habent quare fiant.’ London, British Library MS Add. 30508, fol. 124r. I am working on an edition of this text.

⁵⁰‘Constat tamen quod verba sacra in rebus naturalibus multam habent efficaciam. In tribus enim dicunt phisici precipuam vim nature esse constitutam: in verbis, et herbis et in lapidibus. De virtute autem herbarum et lapidum aliquid scimus, de virtute verborum parum vel nihil novimus.’ Thomas of Chobham 1968, p. 478.

⁵¹‘naturaliter aliquem effectum creditur habere.’ Ibid.

⁵²See Fanger 1999.

be unlawful, since we may rightly employ natural causes for their proper effects. But if they seem unable to produce the effects in question naturally, it follows that they are being used for the purpose of producing them, not as causes but only as signs, so that they come under the head of a compact entered into with the demonic.

He went on to specify that written characters, words and the engravings on astrological talismans 'clearly have no efficacy by nature'.⁵³ Aquinas was quoted by several later Dominican writers, including John of Freiburg and John Bromyard.⁵⁴ Bromyard also explained that the only legitimate unnatural cures were miracles: 'conferring health outside of natural practice pertains to God's saints.'⁵⁵ However, apart from Thomas of Chobham, this concern with naturalness seems to have been mostly confined to Dominican writers, who were the most deeply influenced by Aquinas, and few non-Dominicans mention the issue.

Despite their differences, Thomas of Chobham, Thomas Aquinas and John Bromyard, like Raymond of Peñafort and, earlier, Augustine, set magic in opposition to nature, even though elsewhere in their works they were sometimes prepared to blur this distinction by arguing that demons were able to produce unnatural-seeming phenomena by cleverly manipulating natural forces.⁵⁶ In this case, despite their use of the term 'natural', their basic ideas remained similar to Augustine's.

Pastoral Manuals and Medical Texts

The authors of the pastoral manuals presumably expected their clerical readers to pass their criticisms of magical cures on to the laity through preaching and confession, but there is little evidence from thirteenth-century England of more active attempts by the church to combat medical magic. This situation may have changed to some extent in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when church court records contain some cases of men and women who were given penances for using 'magical' cures.⁵⁷ Since very few thirteenth-century church court records survive, it is difficult to know whether this represents a change in attitude or simply the survival of better records, but even if churchmen did become less tolerant of magical cures, the evidence still does not suggest a widespread attack on their use, or indeed the use of magic in general. It has been estimated that the ecclesiastical courts of the diocese of Canterbury prosecuted on average two or three people a year for magic between 1450 and 1560 – far fewer than the numbers prosecuted for sexual offences. Nor were those who were prosecuted punished harshly.⁵⁸

The church court records might suggest that the pastoral manuals' concerns were not widely shared, or that magical cures were not seen as a particularly serious issue when compared to other problems like sexual misdemeanours. However, some thirteenth-century medical encyclopaedias and recipe collections suggest another possible explanation. Many, although

⁵³Thomas Aquinas 1958, qu. 96, art. 2, p. 75.

⁵⁴John of Freiburg 1518, bk. 1, title 11, qu. 11, fols. 31v–32r; John Bromyard 1518, 'Sortilegium', art. 2, fol. 356r.

⁵⁵'conferre sanitatem preter [edition says 'propter'; my emendation follows London, British Library MS Royal 7. E. IV, fol. 560r] naturalem usum ad sanctos dei pertineat.' John Bromyard 1518, 'Sortilegium', art. 1, fol. 356r.

⁵⁶Bartlett 2008, p. 20; Thomas of Chobham 1968, p. 475.

⁵⁷Jones and Zell 2005, pp. 51–2.

⁵⁸Jones and Zell 2005, p. 51; Kamerick 2008, pp. 31–4.

not all, of the charms included in these works could arguably have been seen as legitimate when compared with the criteria for magical cures set out by the authors of the pastoral manuals. For example John of Gaddesden included several charms in the *Rosa Anglica*. One is this cure for bleeding:

Write this name Veronica on the forehead of the patient with his/her blood and say this prayer: God who deigned to cure the woman presented with a flux of blood with only the touch of the hem of your garment, we humbly entreat, Lord Jesus Christ, who alone heals illnesses, such as the flux of blood of this person, for whom (man or woman) we pour out prayers. Cause it to staunch and stop by extending the right hand of your power in compassion. In the name of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit, Amen. With a Pater Noster and Ave Maria.⁵⁹

John also sometimes told his readers to say the Lord's Prayer while gathering herbs, a practice explicitly permitted by the pastoral manuals. For a nosebleed he instructed his readers to gather herbs while reciting the Lord's Prayer and the Ave Maria, followed by this 'little verse' [*versiculum*]: 'Therefore we pray you, aid your servants whom you have redeemed with [your] precious blood.'⁶⁰ The thirteenth-century recipe collections edited by Hunt offer a similar picture. The verbal cures in these collections take many different forms, but many of them would arguably have been legitimate. They include short stories about a saint; prayers addressed to God or a saint asking them to cure the illness, similar to John of Gaddesden's Veronica prayer; adjurations to the illness, ordering it to depart; instructions to say the Lord's Prayer; and strings of names that were not unknown, such as the names of biblical figures, saints, or the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, or names of God such as Emmanuel, Sabaoth and Adonai.⁶¹

This does not mean that every thirteenth-century medical recipe followed the pastoral manuals' guidelines. Charms containing unknown words do exist, such as one suggested by Gilbert of England to cure infertility and impotence in his *Compendium of Medicine*, written in around 1240. In this charm, in addition to writing down a biblical quotation, the practitioner was told to write the words 'Uthihoth... Thabechay... Amath.'⁶² Other examples of unknown words, characters or strings of letters also survive.⁶³ Nevertheless, even in these cases the words may not always have been perceived as unknown and therefore potentially demonic. Gilbert's 'Uthihoth... Thabechay... Amath' contains authentic Hebrew word endings and looks, to a non-Hebrew speaker, as if it might be Hebrew.⁶⁴ Mark Zier has suggested that some thirteenth-century English Christians saw Hebrew as a legitimate source of healing words.⁶⁵ There was thus considerable scope to argue that many of the verbal formulas and amulets found in medical recipes and encyclopaedias were not magical, by contemporary pastoral writers' standards.

⁵⁹Trans. Olsan 2003, p. 361.

⁶⁰'Te ergo quesumus, famulis tuis subveni quos precioso sanguine redemisti.' Hunt 1990, p. 27; my translation.

⁶¹Examples in Hunt 1990, pp. 30, 36, 82–99.

⁶²Rider 2006, p. 164.

⁶³Hunt 1990, pp. 31, 73, 88; Olsan 1992, pp. 124–5.

⁶⁴I owe this information to Siam Bhayro.

⁶⁵Zier 1992, p. 108.

Conclusion

In the cases of both charms and non-written amulets, there are signs that some thirteenth-century medical writers and the authors of pastoral manuals shared similar ideas. Verbal cures using holy words and established prayers were acceptable, whether spoken or written, but unknown words were problematic – although ideas may have varied about what counted as an unknown word, rather than, say, a Hebrew term or an ‘unutterable name of God’. Non-verbal amulets were broadly acceptable to both groups, except for astrological talismans, which were criticized by Aquinas and John of Freiburg but accepted by some medical writers. This is not to say that everyone held exactly the same views. Charms containing unknown words are recorded, and conversely, some authors of pastoral manuals worried that some forms of medicine were incompatible with Christian moral teaching. Here they were not necessarily thinking of magical remedies, but more often of unacceptable sexual practices such as masturbation.⁶⁶ Even in these cases, however, the difference between the two groups may have been greater in theory than in practice. Joseph Ziegler has suggested that when therapy came into conflict with monastic lifestyles, then physicians tended to compromise, while Iona McCleery has argued that Portuguese miracle stories suggest a level of cooperation between physicians and saints’ shrines.⁶⁷ Attitudes also varied among both groups of writers: some pastoral manuals said more about magical cures than others, and medical writers varied in their willingness to include charms in their works. It is also possible that attitudes changed over time, as McVaugh has suggested, although more detailed research would be needed to confirm this.

The two groups of writers offered different theories to account for their views. The pastoral manuals discussed magical cures in terms of demons: cures were objectionable if they did not use natural forces but instead were deemed to be a means of communicating with spiritual forces other than God. The thirteenth- and fourteenth-century medical writers discussed here, on the other hand, did not mention demons (though one fifteenth-century writer denounced the ‘empirical’ cures for sterility and impotence recommended by Gilbert of England as demonic).⁶⁸ Instead, they called them ‘empirica’ and ‘experimenta’, if they gave them a label at all, thus presenting charms and amulets as natural even if unexplained.

Despite these differences, many medical writers do seem to have conformed roughly to contemporary theological ideas about what constituted a magical cure, even though they did not discuss the matter explicitly. This was not only true of the late middle ages. Historians have also identified significant overlaps between religious and medical attitudes to ‘magical’ cures in other periods. For example Audrey Meaney has argued that about half of the remedies in *Lacnunga*, an Anglo-Saxon collection of medical recipes, would not have met the criteria for ‘magical’ cures given by the contemporary moralist Aelfric, and Richard Palmer has pointed out that early modern churchmen and medical writers were both keen to condemn cures which they labelled as ‘superstition’ or ‘witchcraft’.⁶⁹ This may suggest that

⁶⁶Ziegler 1998, p. 261; Amundsen 1996, pp. 267–8.

⁶⁷Ziegler 1998, pp. 265–7; McCleery 2005b, pp. 199–200.

⁶⁸Rider 2006, p. 202.

⁶⁹Meaney 2000, p. 233; Palmer 1982, p. 90.

ecclesiastical criticisms of magical cures were heeded to some extent, at least by healers educated enough to write a medical text or copy recipes into a manuscript.

One possible reason why ecclesiastical criticisms may have been heeded is that the authors of pastoral manuals, medical writers and collectors of medical recipes often shared similar backgrounds. Moreover, as Agrimi and Crisciani have pointed out, both groups were specialists in their respective fields, part of the same learned culture based around universities and religious houses.⁷⁰ This was certainly true in the early middle ages, when the surviving charms were recorded in monastic manuscripts. Even in the later middle ages, medicine remained a part of general learned knowledge.⁷¹ Many of the men who studied medicine in northern European universities were clerics, and John of Gaddesden had even studied theology, while Thomas of Cantimpré incorporated scientific material into his preaching textbook. Some of the surviving manuscripts containing medical recipes were owned by religious houses, and charms could be copied into devotional books as well as medical ones.⁷² In these circumstances, it is not surprising that educated men, often clerics, could share similar ideas about medical remedies, whether they were writing medical works or religious ones. Nor is it surprising that some medical writers would echo educated clerics in denouncing ‘magical’ cures. Their shared background permitted them to share a rough consensus about what counted as a magical cure, and why.

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⁷⁰Agrimi and Crisciani 1993, pp. 1282–3.

⁷¹McCleery 2005a, p. 120.

⁷²Duffy 1992, pp. 266–98.

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