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# Eating Words and Burning Them

## The Power of Destruction in Medieval English Charm Texts

When we think of text, we usually think of it as a form of communication. One person's words, written down, can be transmitted across continents and centuries, for as long as the writing survives. Destroying that writing destroys, at least symbolically, the ideas it records—one reason that burning a book is seen as an act more violent than burning an equivalent amount of unmarked paper. This is not the only way, however, to think about text or about its destruction. In many cultures, both medieval and modern, texts can be seen as carrying physical or spiritual power, power that is not necessarily destroyed along with the text itself.<sup>1</sup> Viewed in this way, the destruction of a text can serve a greater creative purpose by releasing and activating the power of the words it contains. In this paper I focus specifically on the destruction of charm texts in medieval England, exploring the variety of ways in which texts could be destroyed for healing purposes and pointing to two broad categories that imply different understandings of textual power. In one, the destruction of text serves to activate its power. In the other, destruction is the only way to limit its effect on the body.

In medieval England the healing power of written words was often harnessed through the creation of textual amulets for the patient to wear.<sup>2</sup> This study is based on my own collection of one thousand and thirty-five instructions for the performance of spoken and written charms, all recorded in manuscripts copied or owned in medieval England. Three hundred and eighty-three of those charms make use of written words, and roughly a quarter of those—ninety-four examples—require the text to be destroyed. Although it is impossible to know how commonly each recorded charm was used in practice, these figures mean that roughly nine percent of the verbal charms copied in these manuscripts make use of the destruction of text as part of their healing ritual. Examples of charms involving destruction range in date from the late tenth century to the end of the fifteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Their instructions appear in French,

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Bos 1995, 42–43; Bumbacher 2012, 65–67; Robson 2008; Zadeh 2014.

<sup>2</sup> For further discussion of textual amulets see Skemer 2006.

<sup>3</sup> The earliest charms in my sample come from the Old English medical compilations *Lacnunga* (ff. 137r–138r), *Bald's Leechbook* (ff. 39v and 51r), and *Leechbook III* (ff. 124v–125r), all dating from the tenth or early eleventh centuries. On *Lacnunga*, contained in London, British Library, MS Harley 585, see Grattan/Singer 1952 and Pettit 2001. On *Bald's Leechbook*, in London, British Library, Royal MS 12 D xvii, see Wright 1955. On *Leechbook III*, in the same manuscript, see Olds 1984. The latest charms in my sample date from the end of the fifteenth century: examples appear, for instance, in Cambridge, Cambridge University Library MS Ll.1.18 (f. 76v); Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 1447 (Part 2, pp. 29 and 101); and London, British Library, MS Egerton 2433 (f. 19r).

Latin, and English, the three main languages of England during the medieval period. The texts of the charms themselves, when legible, are always in Latin.

I begin by considering a type of charm in which the destruction of text is almost incidental. A recipe in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 84 tells us that in order to discover whether a sick man will live or die, you should take a hen's egg laid on the day that the man became ill. You should write a series of letters on it with ink, then put it in a safe place out of doors. The next day you break the egg open: if there is blood inside the man will be healed; if there is not, he will die.<sup>4</sup> Charms of this type are quite common.<sup>5</sup> In this ritual, and in the others like it, the text is destroyed not because of its status as text, but because the object it is written on must be destroyed in order to carry out the purpose of the charm. The primary motivation for breaking the egg is to see what is inside it, not to damage the text. The addition of writing to the egg has altered the significance of the egg itself, giving it a special status. It is perhaps significant that this type of destruction occurs only in charms that aim to predict the future or to instruct the patient's future behaviour.

The idea that text could create the conditions for telling the future has biblical parallels. In the second chapter of the Book of Ezekiel, for example, Ezekiel experiences a vision in which he is called to become a prophet. A spirit appears to him and holds out a scroll, which he commands Ezekiel to eat.<sup>6</sup> Having eaten the book, Ezekiel should go and speak to the children of Israel. The text of the book is never mentioned, thus reducing the importance of reading and emphasising the physical interaction

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<sup>4</sup> Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 84, f. 8v: “3yf þow wilt knowe in syknesse þe lyf or þe deþ of man. Taak an hen ay þat be yleyd þe same day þat he haþ þe syknesse. 7 wryȝt with ynke þese letteres vppon þe ay. 7 go . s . p . p . x . g . i x s 9 7 after ley þe ay in a sauf stede ouȝt of house 7 a morwe brek þat ay 7 3yf þer come of blod he schal be hol 7 þys þinge is preuid.”

<sup>5</sup> Examples of prognostication using an egg appear in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 388, f. 35r; Cambridge, Magdalene College, Pepys MS 878, p. 181; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Digby 86, f. 17v, MS Douce 84, f. 8v, and MS Rawlinson C 814, f. 56r; London, British Library, Harley MS 1680, f. 7v, Royal MS 15 A viii, f. 44v, MS Sloane 431, f. 16r, and MS Sloane 3466, f. 48r–v.

<sup>6</sup> Ezekiel 2:8–3:3: “Tu autem, fili hominis, audi quæcumque loquor ad te, et noli esse exasperans, sicut dominus exasperatrix est: aperi os tuum, et comedere quæcumque ego do tibi. Et vidi: et ecce manus missa ad me, in qua erat involutus liber: et expandit illum coram me, qui erat scriptus intus et foris: et scriptæ erant in eo lamentationes, et carmen, et vae. Et dixit ad me: Fili hominis, quodcumque inveneris, comedere: comedere volumen istud, et vadens loquere ad filios Israel. Et aperui os meum, et cibavit me volumine illo: et dixit ad me: Fili hominis venter tuus comedet, et viscera tua complebuntur volumine isto quod ego do tibi. Et comedisti illud, et factum est in ore meo sicut mel dulce.” “But thou, O son of man, hear all that I say to thee: and do not thou provoke me, as that house provoketh me: open thy mouth, and eat what I give thee. And I looked, and behold, a hand was sent to me, wherein was a book rolled up: and he spread it before me, and it was written within and without: and there were written in it lamentations, and canticles, and woe. And he said to me: Son of man, eat all that thou shalt find: eat this book, and go speak to the children of Israel. And I opened my mouth, and he caused me to eat that book: And he said to me: Son of man, thy belly shall eat, and thy bowels shall be filled with this book, which I give thee. And I did eat it: and it was sweet as honey in my mouth.” Here, as elsewhere, I use the Douay-Rheims translation of the Bible.

between the written material and its recipient. Eating the book allows Ezekiel to experience the text's sweetness, and to incorporate it into his own prophecy.

In the Book of Revelation, meanwhile, an angel holding an open book appears to St John and instructs him to eat it, saying that “it shall make thy belly bitter, but in thy mouth it shall be sweet as honey”.<sup>7</sup> In both of these passages the act of eating text creates privileged speech. While these passages have been noted as providing parallels for the consumption of text, they also show that the physical incorporation of text permits knowledge and expression of the future.<sup>8</sup> It is the combination of the text with the speaker that allows the prophecies to be made, as by consuming the text the recipient also incorporates and is changed by it.

In a parallel way, writing on the egg allows the egg to predict the future. The object, combined with the text, acquires new properties. This transformative effect of writing on objects can also be seen in charms in which the written name of a saint takes on the properties of that saint's relics: for example, one medieval charm says that anyone who carries the name of St Nichasius will be protected from pox; another that anyone who carries the name of St Apollonia will be protected from toothache.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Revelation 10:9–11: “Et abii ad angelum, dicens ei, ut daret mihi librum. Et dixit mihi: Accipe librum, et devora illum: et faciet amaricari ventrem tuum, sed in ore tuo erit dulce tamquam mel. Et accepi librum de manu angeli, et devoravi illum: et erat in ore meo tamquam mel dulce, et cum devorasset eum, amaricatus est venter meus: et dixit mihi: Oportet te iterum prophetare gentibus, et populis, et linguis, et regibus multis.” “And I went to the angel, saying unto him, that he should give me the book. And he said to me: Take the book, and eat it up: and it shall make thy belly bitter, but in thy mouth it shall be sweet as honey. And I took the book from the hand of the angel, and ate it up: and it was in my mouth, sweet as honey, and when I had eaten it, my belly was bitter. And he said to me: Thou must prophesy again to many nations, and peoples, and tongues, and kings.” The *Glossa Ordinaria* notes a distinction between eating and drinking sacred writing: when it is unintelligible without exposition it is represented as food, and when it can be understood easily it is represented as drink. *Bibliorum Sacrorum cum Glossa Ordinaria* 1603, vol. 6, col. 1563, [http://lollardsociety.org/?page\\_id=409](http://lollardsociety.org/?page_id=409) (last accessed: 18.04.2018).

<sup>8</sup> Discussion of these passages alongside examples of edible text in medieval literary works can be found in Minnis 2017, 369–371. See also Gayk 2011.

<sup>9</sup> The earliest example of the charm against pox of which I am aware appears in London, British Library, Cotton MS Caligula A xv, f. 129r. It reads: “Wið poccas. *Sanctus nicasius* habuit minutam uariolam et rogauit dominum ut quicumque nomen suum secum portare scriptum. *Sancte nicasii* presul et martir egregie ora prome. N peccatore et abhuc morbo tua intercessione me defende. Amen.” “Against pox. St Nichasius had small pox and he asked the Lord [to preserve] whoever carried his written name. St Nichasius, eminent bishop and martyr, pray for me [name], a sinner, and defend me by your intercession from this disease. Amen.” Later examples, in both Latin and English, appear in Durham, Durham University Library, MS Cosin V.III.10, f. 38v; London, British Library, Additional MS 17866, f. 21r–v, Cotton MS Julius D viii, f. 117v, and Royal MS 2 A xx, f. 52r; and New Haven, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Takamiya MS 46, f. 20r–v. A copy is also recorded in Dickins/Wilson 1937, 72, as having been written at the end of the now-lost Cotton MS Otho A xiii. The Apollonia charms include the story of Apollonia's martyrdom, to be spoken or written, often including the statement that the saint prayed that anyone who carried her inscribed name would not suffer from toothache. This

By writing the saints' names onto parchment, the parchment gains the properties of the relic itself.

Having established that the presence of text can fundamentally alter the power of an object, I now turn to the most common type of textual destruction in medieval charms: writing text onto food and eating it. A simple example is the childbirth charm in London, British Library, MS Egerton 833 that reads “tak 7 wryte thir [sic] wordes in butter or chese 7 gar hir ete hit. Sator arrepo tenet opera rotas.”<sup>10</sup> In a charm like this, the text enters the body whole, especially if the foodstuff on which it is written is small enough to eat in one piece. The text is then destroyed within the body it aims to heal.

This is the most common method of destroying text in medieval English healing charms, appearing in more than half of the examples in my sample. The practice seems, largely, to be a post-Conquest one. Only one Anglo-Saxon recipe specifies that its texts should be written onto food—in this case communion wafers—and eaten, although others call for text to be written onto edible things without specifying how they should then be used.<sup>11</sup> In later charms apples, bread, butter, cheese, communion

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detail appears in Durham, Durham University Library, MS Cosin V.IV.1, f. 34r; London, British Library, Additional MS 33996, ff. 104v–105r; London, Wellcome Library, MS 542, f. 13r; and York, York Minster Library, MS XVI.E.32, f. 77r.

<sup>10</sup> London, British Library, MS Egerton 833, f. 10r. It is interesting to note that while the phrase “sator arepo tenet opera rotas” seems originally to have gained popularity because of the many directions the sentence can be read when arranged in a square, the additional *r* in this manuscript’s rendering of *arrepo* destroys its palindromic qualities.

<sup>11</sup> This remedy for fever, probably copied between 1030 and 1070, is written onto a blank leaf at the end of Worcester, Worcester Cathedral Library, MS Q.5. As transcribed in Napier 1890 it reads “Dis mæg wið gedrif. gemin .ix. oflætan 7 gewrit on ælcere on þas wisan: iesus christus, 7 sing þærifer .ix. pater noster 7 syle æten ænne daeg .III. 7 oðerne .III. 7 ðriðdan .III. 7 cweðe æt ælcon siðan þis ofer þone mann. In nomine domini nostri, iesu christi, et in nomine sancte et individue trinitatis et in nomine sanctorum .VII. dormientium, quorum nomina hec sunt: Maximianus, Malchus, Martinianus, Iohannes, Seraphion, Constantinus, Dionisius . ita sicut requievit dominus super illos, sic requiescat super istum famulum dei N. coniuro vos, frigora et febres, per deum vivum, per deum verum, per deum sanctum, per deum, qui vos in potestate habet, per angelos, archangelos, per thronos et dominaciones, per principatus et potestates, XII prophetas, per omnes martyres, per sanctos confessores et sanctas virgines et per IIII<sup>or</sup> evangelistas, Matheum, Marcum, Lucam, Iohannem, et per XX<sup>u</sup> IIII<sup>or</sup> seniores et per cxliii<sup>or</sup> milia, qui pro christi nomine passi sunt, et per virtutem sancte crucis adiuro [...] tor vos diabolicum [...] t non habe [...] s ullum [...] malum.” “This is effective against fever. Take nine sacramental wafers and write on each one in this way: ‘Jesus Christ’, and sing nine Pater Nosters over them, and give three to eat on the first day, and three the next, and three on the third, and each time say this over the person: ‘In the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and in the name of the holy and indivisible Trinity, and in the name of the seven sleeping saints, whose names these are: Maximianus, Malchus, Martinianus, Iohannes, Seraphion, Constantinus, Dionisius. So just as the Lord rested above them, so many He rest above this servant of God [name]. I conjure you, chills and fevers, by the living God, by the true God, by the holy God, by God who has you in his power, by the angels, archangels, by the thrones and dominions, by principalities and powers, twelve prophets, by all martyrs,

wafers, and sage leaves all appear as possible writing surfaces for texts that are to be ingested. Despite being the method most commonly recorded, however, this technique—like others in which text is destroyed—treats only a narrow range of conditions. Among the fifty-one examples of which I am aware, only four medical conditions are present: childbirth, fever, jaundice, and a bite from a rabid dog. Two further examples give recipes for restoring pigs to health, and one more promises that a string of letters written onto unleavened bread and fed to a suspected thief will choke the guilty party.<sup>12</sup>

In these examples, as in the example with the egg, the presence of the text changes the properties of the object. However, the original properties of the object are still fundamental to the healing work of the charm. For instance, as well as the sator-arepo formula mentioned above, the texts “*christus fuit natus de uirgine Maria. 7 Iohannis de elisabeth. adiuro te infans per patrem 7 filium 7 spiritum sanctum si puer es an puella: christus te appellat foras*” and “*Elisabeth peperit iohannem baptistam. Anna mariam. Maria dominum nostrum ihesum christum. Quicumque es exi. in nomine patris 7 filii 7 spiritus sancti amen*” could be used to ease a difficult childbirth.<sup>13</sup> Although the texts vary, all give the practitioner the choice to write either on butter or cheese.<sup>14</sup> There is perhaps a connection between the milk-based products of the charm and the milk the mother will produce to feed her child. More generally, this example suggests that while the inscription gives healing power to the substance on which it has been written, it cannot give that power to all substances or even to all substances that can be eaten. This is also true for the other charms in my sample. Texts against rabies are always written on bread, as are texts for the health of pigs. Texts against jaundice are always to be written on apples. While texts against fever may be written on apples,

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by the holy confessors and holy virgins and by the four evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and by the twenty-four elders and by the 144,000 who suffered for the name of Christ, and by the virtue of the holy cross I adjure [...] you devil [...] not have [...] any harm.” Other Anglo-Saxon remedies ask for text to be written on food but ask for it to be carried by the patient rather than eaten, as with the communion wafers in the recipe against *dweorh* (possibly a type of fever) found in London, British Library, MS Harley 585, f. 167r–v. Similarly, a remedy for fever in Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Reg. Lat. 338, f. 91r instructs the practitioner to write on a leek leaf, but gives no instructions about whether it should be carried or eaten. This charm is described in Ker 1957, no. 390, 458.

<sup>12</sup> The pig charms appear in London, British Library, MS Sloane 2839, f. 4v and Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Digby 86, f. 31r. The theft charm is also recorded in MS Digby 86, on f. 20v.

<sup>13</sup> “Christ was born of the virgin Mary, and John of Elizabeth. I adjure you, infant, through the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, whether you are a boy or a girl: Christ calls you forth”. London, British Library, MS Sloane 431, f. 44r. “Elizabeth bore John the Baptist, Anna Mary, Mary our Lord Jesus Christ. Whoever you are, come out. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen”. London, British Library, MS Sloane 431, f. 50v. Other childbirth charms in which text is eaten are recorded in Lincoln, Lincoln Cathedral Library, MS 91, f. 303v; London, British Library, Additional MS 17866, f. 40v; and New Haven, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Takamiya MS 46, f. 37v.

<sup>14</sup> An unusual exception, in which non-alphabetic characters are to be written on a piece of bread, appears in London, British Library, MS Sloane 475, f. 23r.

communion wafers, or sage leaves, the texts written on each substance are exclusive to that substance and do not appear on other surfaces.

A feature of some of these charms that may explain the reasoning behind eating the text is that they address the disease to be driven out—or in the case of childbirth, the infant to be driven out—directly. In the childbirth charms quoted above, for example, one includes the phrase “whether you are a boy or a girl, Christ calls you forth”, while the other reads in part “whoever you are, come out”.<sup>15</sup> These clauses directly call the infant to leave the womb. The fever charms also occasionally seem to conceive of the disease as an entity that can be ordered in writing to leave the patient’s body. One asks in writing on an apple that the various kinds of fever flee in the name of God; another makes the same request in speech while the patient eats other words also carved onto an apple.<sup>16</sup> Yet another, in which the patient must eat words written onto communion wafers, conjures the fevers not to harm the patient while also beseeching God to free the patient from the chill and heat of the fever.<sup>17</sup> If the disease is thought of as an entity to be driven out, these charms suggest that the text is imagined as having the power to communicate with the entity within the patient’s body even after that text has been destroyed. The cheese on which the childbirth charm was written, for example, appears to carry the message that Christ calls the infant forth even after the text itself has ceased to exist.

This assumption about the continued ability of the text to communicate after it has been destroyed can also be seen in charms in which the text is dissolved in water or another liquid and drunk by the patient. This is the second most common type of destruction of text in medieval English healing charms, and is used against difficult childbirth, fever, and falling evil, a disease associated with epilepsy. One further charm may be used for making chickens healthy and one Anglo-Saxon example guards against elvish magic and the temptations of the devil. As with words which are eaten, the text enters the patient’s body. Unlike words which are eaten, however, words to be drunk are destroyed before they are consumed. The procedure therefore assumes that the power of the written word survives beyond the physical existence of the text. The words’ power is apparently transmitted to the ink used to write them down, which retains power even after the words have been dissolved. The ink, by virtue of having formed the shapes of sacred words, has a different effect on the medi-

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<sup>15</sup> “Si puer es an puella, Christus te appellat foras” and “Quicumque es, exi”. The first of these appears in London, British Library, Additional MS 17866, f. 40v and MS Sloane 431, f. 44r. The second appears in London, British Library, MS Sloane 431, f. 50v and New Haven, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Takamiya MS 46, f. 37v.

<sup>16</sup> London, British Library, MS Harley 273, f. 213r; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Digby 86, f. 29r.

<sup>17</sup> “uos coniuro febres [...] hinc dei famulo non noceatis” “I conjure you, fevers [...] that henceforth you do not harm this servant of God”; “domine deus [...] libera hunc famulum tuum n. uel famulam [...] de frigoribus 7 ardoribus februm” “Lord God [...] free this your [male] servant [name] or [female] servant [...] from the chills and heat of fever”. London, British Library, MS Sloane 431, f. 73r.

cine than would the same ink added to the mixture without having taken the form of a word. The fact that the power stems from the words rather than from the ingredients of the ink itself is emphasised by the fact that very few of the charms specify what kind of ink should be used.

Methods of using dissolved words to transmit power appear in the Bible, providing parallels for English examples. The Book of Numbers, for example, describes a ritual for discovering whether or not a woman has committed adultery.<sup>18</sup> The ritual is complicated, involving sacrifices, holy water, and curses. Among the several stages is this step: “scribetque sacerdos in libello ista maledicta et delebit ea aquis amarissimis in quas maledicta congesit et dabit ei bibere.”<sup>19</sup> In this ritual, the text interacts with the woman to discern her guilt or innocence: the curses only take effect if she has committed adultery.<sup>20</sup> In order for the text to do its work of detecting adultery, it must come into close contact with the woman. The water, therefore, is a medium for transferring the effect of the very text it is used to destroy.

The assumptions the composer of the Biblical ritual made about how written text might be transferred to a person are similar to the assumptions made in the creation of a protective drink described in the Anglo-Saxon medical collection *Lacnunga*.<sup>21</sup> The recipe in *Lacnunga* is for a holy drink which, the author promises, will provide protection against elvish magic and the temptations of the devil. The recipe instructs the reader first to write a series of religious texts—the beginning of the Gospel of John;

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<sup>18</sup> Numbers 5:12–31.

<sup>19</sup> Numbers 5:23–24. “And the priest shall write these curses in a book, and shall wash them out with the most bitter waters, upon which he hath heaped the curses, and he shall give them to her to drink.” The effect of the curses is described in Numbers 5:21–22: “Dominus in maledictionem exemplumque cunctorum in populo suo putrescere faciat femur tuum et tumens uterus disrumpatur ingrediantur aquae maledictae in ventrem tuum et utero tumescente putrescat femur.” “The Lord make thee a curse, and an example for all among his people: may he make thy thigh to rot, and may thy belly swell and burst asunder. Let the cursed waters enter into thy belly, and may thy womb swell and thy thigh rot.”

<sup>20</sup> The medieval glosses on this passage raise questions about the power of the words. The *Glossa Ordinaria* places the power of the writing in the woman’s response to it and in God’s power, rather than in the text itself. Either the writing frightens the woman, scaring her away from sin, or she holds it in contempt, in which case God will punish her. *Bibliorum Sacrorum cum Glossa Ordinaria*, vol. 1, col. 1195–1196, [http://lollardsociety.org/?page\\_id=409](http://lollardsociety.org/?page_id=409) (last accessed: 18.04.2018). Nicholas of Lyra’s gloss on this passage questions which words were, in fact, written, and even whether the power of the ritual came from the words at all. He writes: “secundum Iosephum non scribebat nisi nomen domini tetragrammaton, ex cuius virtute veniebant super mulieres iste maledictiones. Secundum alias vero scribebat istas maledictiones prout in textu sunt expresse cum videtur magis credendum iosepho, qui talia sacrificia videre potuit et forte vidit.” “According to Josephus, he wrote only the name of the Lord Tetragrammaton, from the virtue of which these curses came upon the women. According to others, however, he wrote these curses just as they are expressed in the text, although it seems Josephus is more to be believed, who was able to see sacrifices of this kind, and perhaps did see them.” Lyra 1492 (repr. 1971), vol. 1, X ii v.

<sup>21</sup> London, British Library, MS Harley 585, ff. 137r–138r. See Pettit 2001, vol. 1, 17 (no. XXIX).

Matthew 8:23–5; and Psalms 53, 66, and 69—onto a paten.<sup>22</sup> Next, the reader makes a mixture of herbs and water from a running stream and uses it to wash the texts carefully away. This water, now mixed with the ink used to write the texts, forms the base of the holy drink. To complete the recipe, the water is mixed with consecrated wine, and a series of masses and psalms are sung over it.

The written text is not the only vehicle for power in either recipe. Both involve sacred objects and consecrated ingredients—in the *Lacnunga* remedy, for example, we see the paten and the consecrated wine, both of which might have been thought to have healing properties of their own. The religious words of the text are therefore integrated into a broader Christian structure of healing. However, the destruction of text in both instances implies that the text did convey power—that the force of the written words persisted in the ink as the text dissolved into the liquid. When the ink formed the words of the curse or the blessing, it apparently became saturated with their power. The ink therefore contributed to the drink’s protective or healing power not because of its own properties, but because of the properties of the words it had been used to write.

The *Lacnunga* recipe is not the only medieval charm to use water as a medium for transferring textual power. For example, from the Anglo-Saxon period there survives at least one similar charm, used for treating fevers.<sup>23</sup> In this recipe, the Greek letters

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<sup>22</sup> The instructions, with word separation normalised, read: “writ on husldisce. In principio erat uerbum usque non comprehenderunt et reliqua. Et circum ibat ihesus totam galileam docens usque et secuti sunt eum turbe multe. Deus in nomine tuo usque in finem. Deus miseratur nobis usque in finem. Domine deus in adiutorium usque in finem.” “Write on a paten ‘In the beginning was the Word’ up to ‘did not comprehend it’, and further, ‘And Jesus went all about Galilee, teaching’ until ‘and much people followed him’. ‘O God by thy name’ until the end. ‘May God have mercy on us’ until the end. ‘Lord God, come to my assistance’ until the end.” London, British Library, MS Harley 585, f. 137r–v.

<sup>23</sup> London, British Library, Royal MS 12 D xvii (*Bald’s Leechbook I*), f. 51r–v. The charm reads: “Pis mon sceal wriwan on husldisce 7 on bone drenc mid halig wætere þwean 7 singan on. +A+ +Ω+ In principio erat uerbum et uerbum erat apud deum et deus erat uerbum. Hoc erat In principio apud deum omnia per ipsum facta sunt. Pweah ponne þam gewrit mid halig wætre of þam disce on bone drenc. si/n/g. bonne credo 7 pater noster 7 bis leop. beati Immaculati bone sealum mid ad dominum þam. xii. gebed sealum. Adiuro uos frigores et febres. per deum patrem omnipotentem et per eius filium ihesum christum per ascensum et discensum saluatoris nostri ut recedatis de hoc famulo dei. et. de corpusculo eius quam dominus noster Inluminare Instituit. Vincit uos leo de tribu iuda radix dauid. Vincit uos qui uiinci non potest. Christus natus. christus passus. christus uenturus. aius. aius. aius. *Sanctus*. *Sanctus*. *Sanctus*. In die Salutiferis incedens gressibus urbes. oppida rura uicos castella peragrans. Omnia de pulsis sanabat corpora morbis. 7 þriwa þeron onsupe þæs wæteres swelces gehwæper para manna.” The Greek letters are surrounded by small crosses, and in the “Christus natus” formula there are also crosses written above each occurrence of the words *Christus*, *aius*, and *sanctus*. In modern English, the charm reads: “A man shall write this on the paten, and wash it off into the drink with holy water, and sing over it. +A+ +Ω+ In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. Through him all things were made’. Then wash the writing off the paten into the drink using holy water. Then sing the Credo and the Pater Noster and this song: ‘Blessed are the undefiled’, the psalm with ‘to the Lord’; and the

alpha and omega, surrounded by small crosses, should be written onto a paten along with the opening of the Gospel of John. These texts should then be washed away with water. Further prayers must be sung over the water to complete the drink. From the late thirteenth century, an Anglo-French childbirth remedy instructs users to write the Pater Noster in the bottom of a bowl, then pour wine or water into the bowl to dissolve the text.<sup>24</sup> The patient would drink the resulting mixture. From the later medieval period, a charm to protect chickens asks its user to write the Pater Noster onto bread or parchment, wash it with water, and give the chickens the water to drink.<sup>25</sup> Matthew Milner, discussing a veterinary charm that involves blessing oats and sprinkling them with holy water, notes that the use of such a charm for a non-human patient “limits the roles of personal piety, sin, or intellectual processes and consideration of saintly intercession, and prioritizes the physical experience of the holy oats.”<sup>26</sup> He argues persuasively that grace could be seen as an Aristotelian intentional quality, an inherent property combining agency and intelligibility. Averroes, for example, believed that intentional qualities in the strings of a musical instrument explained the affective power of music.<sup>27</sup> Milner understands the intentional quality of grace as saturating the oats through the spoken words of the charm. A similar argument can be made about the use of written words to treat chickens.

The most common recipe to use the tactic of dissolving text in liquid was used to treat children suffering from the falling evil. The version of the charm in London, British Library, MS Sloane 1314 reads:

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twelve prayer psalms. ‘I adjure you, chills and fevers, by God the Father Almighty and through his son Jesus Christ, through the ascension and descent of our Saviour, that you recede from this servant of God and from his body which our Lord prepares to illuminate. The lion of the tribe of Juda, the root of David, conquers you. He who cannot be conquered conquers you. Christ born. Christ suffering. Christ to come. Holy Holy Holy Holy Holy.’ ‘From there proceeding with healing steps, passing through cities, towns, farms, villages, forts, and castles, he healed all the bodies, having expelled their diseases’. And let each of the two people then sip this water three times.’ The Biblical quotations are taken from John 1:1–13, and Psalms 118 and 119, while the final quotation is from Sedulius, *Carmen Paschale*, Bk 3, ll.23–25. For more on the use of patens in medicine see Cavell 2017.

**24** Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Digby 86, f. 15v–17r. It reads “Ou escriuez la pater noster . en vn mazelin . as founz . 7 pus le lauez od vin 7 od ewe 7 donez li a beiure. 7 ceo sachez qui saunz peril en ert deliure.” “Or write the Pater Noster in the bottom of a mazer and then wash it with wine and with water and give it to her to drink, and so know that she will be delivered without peril.” The charm begins on f. 15v. Folio 16 is a later addition to the manuscript, and the charm concludes on f. 17r. A late-fourteenth or early-fifteenth century example of the same charm, in English, can be found in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 84, f. 6v, reading simply “Oper wryte þe pater noster in a mazer 7 wasch it aȝen with wyn oper with water 7 ȝyf here to drynke.”

**25** Cambridge, Magdalene College, Pepys MS 878, p. 102. It reads “Medicines to chikenes þat þey ne deien. Write þe pater noster . on a brede oper on parchemin 7 wasche of with water . and ȝif þe gose . chikenes oper be henne chikenes . to drinken þere of . ar . þei drinken . ony oper drinken .”

**26** Milner 2013, 222.

**27** Milner 2013, 224.

For þe fallyng evyl. Take þe blod of þe litel fynger of þe ryht hande of hym is seke 7 wryte þese thre names in parchemyn with þe blod + Jasper + Melchior + balthazar + let close hit 7 heng hit aboute his nek þat is seke 7 or þou close hit put þer in gold 7 mirr 7 frank encens of ilkon alitul . 7 bid hym þat is seke and has þe evel blesse hym when he ryse of his bed ilka day with with [sic] þo thre names 7 say for her fader soules 7 her moders thrye pater noster 7 thrye ave maria . 7 illka day amoneth drink þe rote of Pyony with stale ale 7 he schal be hol securly ¶ And if hit be a child þat is an Innocent drawe blod of þe same fynger þat is before seyd 7 write þe thre kynges names in a masere with þe blod 7 wasche hit with ale or mylk 7 let þe child drink hit 7 he schal be hol.<sup>28</sup>

Here, as in the ten further examples I am aware of, drinking the words is recommended only for children, either those who are “innocent” or those under seven years of age.<sup>29</sup> The words to be drunk always relate to the Three Kings, either simply listing the names Jasper, Melchior, and Balthazar or giving a brief description of their gifts to the infant Christ.<sup>30</sup> In the more detailed remedies, these words were to be written in a cup or mazer using blood from the little finger of the child’s right hand, washed away with ale or milk, and drunk.

This recipe implies that ingesting the words is equivalent to wearing them amuletically: that physical contact with a textual amulet was equivalent to drinking liquid into which words had been rinsed. The different treatment of text in the two remedies for different patients demonstrates that the power of particular words was not necessarily linked to their ritual context. The same words transmitted to patients in two different ways would have the same effect, even though one remedy preserves the text and the other destroys it. The fact that the two methods are presented as alternate ways of administering the same charm suggests that they were seen as equivalent: that physical contact with a textual amulet had the same healing power as drinking liquid into which words had been rinsed. This confirms that the rituals surrounding the text were intended as a means of transmitting the text to the patient physically, rather than through orthodox verbal communication.

**28** London, British Library, MS Sloane 1314, f. 38v. At some point, this charm was crossed out by a user of the book.

**29** Other examples of this charm appear in Cambridge, Cambridge University Library, Additional MS 9308, ff. 53v–54r, and MS L1.1.18, f. 76v; Durham, Durham University Library, MS Cosin V.IV.1, f. 28r–v, and MS V.IV.8, f. 16r; Lincoln, Lincoln Cathedral Library, MS 88, f. 129v, and MS 91, f. 297r; London, British Library, Additional MS 33996, f. 105v; London, Wellcome Library, MS 542, f. 13v; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Wood empt. 18, ff. 121v–122r; and York, York Minster Library, MS XVI.E.32, f. 36v.

**30** Several examples omit the name of Balthazar, instead inserting the name *Attropa*, apparently derived from Atropos, one of the Three Fates. Durham, Durham University Library, MS Cosin V.IV.1, f. 28r–v; Lincoln, Lincoln Cathedral Library, MS 91, f. 297r, and York, York Minster Library, MS XVI.E.32, f. 36v, give the sentence “Jasper fert aurum thus melchior attropa mirram”, meaning “Jasper brings gold, Melchior frankincense, Attropa myrrh”. Cambridge, Cambridge University Library, MS L1.1.18, f. 76v, on the other hand, uses the name Balthazar and assigns different gifts to the kings, saying “Jasper fert mirram thus melchiar baltazar aurum”: “Jasper brings myrrh, Melchior frankincense, Baltazar gold”.

In the examples I have discussed so far, texts have continued to function despite being destroyed. The final type of destruction this article addresses assumes precisely the opposite. In these examples, text is destroyed after the charm has succeeded in healing the patient. At this point, several recipes specify that the charm text must be rapidly removed; some go so far as to say that it must be burnt. Although removing the text does not necessarily entail its destruction, destruction is occasionally specified and often implied by the use of the Latin word *tolle*, which can mean both *remove* and *destroy*.<sup>31</sup> In this small number of charms, texts are destroyed not because their destruction allows them to function and to be incorporated into the human body, but because their continued existence would put the patient at risk. Such charms are rare, but they provide a significant contrast to the examples previously discussed.

Perhaps the most graphic example of a textual charm that must be destroyed to prevent it from harming the patient is a childbirth charm found in the twelfth-century manuscript London, British Library, MS Sloane 475. After recommending a text that should be written on parchment and tied to the mother's right hip, the charm specifies: "7 cum exierit infans. cito tolle ne sequitur matrix".<sup>32</sup> The following charm in the same manuscript, also for childbirth, similarly states that the written text should be quickly removed once the child has been born.<sup>33</sup> A fourteenth-century charm, this time used to promote conception, also offers dire warnings of what might happen if the efficacious text of the charm is not destroyed. The conception charm consists of a string of letters to be written around the edge of a lead plate, which is depicted in the outer margin of the manuscript page. The plate should be wrapped in cloth or leather and hung around the woman's neck, where it should stay until she conceives. After conception, it should be removed as quickly as possible, lest "diversas infirmitates intrare[n]t".<sup>34</sup> Although this later example does not directly specify that the text must be destroyed, it should certainly not remain in contact with the patient or be worn as a charm any longer.

Although other charms do not specify the negative consequence of wearing a written charm for too long, a number of them do tell their users that the text should be destroyed. One childbirth charm states that once the child is born the efficacious text

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<sup>31</sup> London, British Library, Additional MS 17866, f. 40v–41r and New Haven, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Takamiya MS 46, f. 38r. These are two copies of the same charm for childbirth, which reads "Ad feminam que non potest parere scribe nomen eius in tribus foliis malue et ea nesciente in sinum eius mitte mox vero ut enixa fuerit tolle." "For a woman who cannot give birth, write her name on three mallow leaves and place them in her lap without her knowledge, and as soon as she has given birth destroy [or remove] them".

<sup>32</sup> "and when the child has emerged, destroy [or remove] it at once, lest the womb follow". London, British Library, MS Sloane 475, f. 113v. I have normalised word spacing in the Latin.

<sup>33</sup> "quando exit infans cito aufer". "When the infant emerges, remove it quickly". London, British Library, MS Sloane 475, f. 113v.

<sup>34</sup> "various diseases should enter". London, British Library, Additional MS 15236, f. 54r.

should be burnt.<sup>35</sup> Two charms for fever instruct that “Qwen he [i. e. the patient] es al hale cast be charme in be fir”; another asserts that the text should be burnt and the cinders thrown into running water.<sup>36</sup> In these examples it is apparently not sufficient just to remove the text from contact with the patient. In the case of the fever charms the destruction of the text perhaps destroys the fever which has been transferred to the parchment, but in the childbirth charms it seems that the destruction is necessary in order to end the effect of the charm on the female body.

In the charms in which writing is destroyed by being ingested by the patient as food or in drink, the text disappears only in its absolute proximity to the human body. The words are united with the patient and act on him or her from within. When the charm texts are destroyed after the charm has taken effect, on the other hand, the writing is removed from the patient’s body. In burning it, and especially in disposing of the ashes in running water, the practitioner ensures that the text and everything that physically constituted the text is removed from the patient’s vicinity.

Examining the destruction of text in medieval English charms therefore reveals two distinct ideas about the power of text: in one form, the powerful text combines with the material on which or with which it is written and then with the body of the patient in order to enact healing. In the other, the healing power of the text derives from the words themselves. As with the other written charms, their power is transmitted to the substance on which they are written. Unlike those other charms, however, their power does not combine with the patient’s body. It remains in the parchment, where it acts indiscriminately and potentially harmfully until it is prevented from acting further. In the context of medical charms, therefore, the destruction of text could act either to release the power of words or put an end to it.

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<sup>35</sup> “videas vt deponas breve ab ea cum fes[t]inacione quam cito infans natus fuerit 7 facias illud cre-  
mari”. “See that you remove the breve from her with haste when the infant is born, and have it burnt to ashes”. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson C 814, f. 58v.

<sup>36</sup> The first two charms appear in London, British Library, MS Egerton 833, f. 12v and Lincoln, Lincoln Cathedral Library, MS 91, f. 306v. The third reads “tercio vero die remoueatur sedula 7 comburatur 7 cineres in aquam currentes proiciantur”. “On the third day the scrap should be removed and burnt to ashes and the cinders should be thrown into running water”. It appears in London, British Library, Additional MS 15236, ff. 47v–48r.

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