
Magical Medieval Medicine: The Science of Pagan Practices within Medieval Medicine

Sara English

Sara English is a graduate student majoring in European history from Marshall, IL. She is currently in her last semester and wrote this paper for Dr. Bailey Young's HIS 5444: Church and Society in Medieval Europe. After graduation Ms. English hopes to obtain a teaching position within the community college system.

Rev. John Gregorson served as the parish minister of the Island of Inner Hebrides in the late nineteenth-century. Inhabitants would acknowledge him not only as a cleric, but as one of the most important successors to the great folklore collector and “Master of Folktales,” John Francis Campbell of Islay, who lived during the mid-nineteenth century. Campbell preserved and published traditions from the “Red Book of Appin” in approximately 1860. In *Folklore*, Hugh Cheape recounts the tale of an old carter from Glenfyne who narrated stories of his boyhood, one in particular where his family turned to the “Red Book” with the help of its custodian when their cows ceased to give milk. The wife of the family’s neighbor had essentially stolen the “produce” or “substance” of their cows and this action was considered a product of Witchcraft. Ironically, the recommended remedy was the use of a counter-charm in the form of an iron shoe of “an entire horse” that was to be hammered upside down “and byre door; but let no living person know.”¹ These folkloric practices were not uncommon in the nineteenth-century. Most notably, they serve as proof of the continuity of older pagan practices that the Church in the later Middle Ages sought to repress or assimilate.

Intellectually serious works such as Gies’ *Life in a Medieval City* and *Life in a Medieval Village*, along with E. LeRoi Ladurie’s *Montaillou* and Georges Duby’s *William Marshall the Flower of Chivalry* have transformed our understanding of Medieval Life. One theme that runs central within these scholarly works is the influence and importance of religion. However, when defining the spiritual component of the Middle Ages, historians today tend to focus predominantly on the influence of the Church on society, avoiding those religious influences considered problematic. Within the old religions and folk traditions rested practices that do not seem to be readily acknowledged by historians today. Historian Ludovis Milis, author of *The Pagan Middle Ages*, is quick to point out, when defining the lines of religious ideals, issues become decidedly blurry.²

Renowned history professor and author Ronald Hutton argues that this was not always so. He points to the first half of the twentieth century when historians of the day argued that Christianity in Medieval England was simply a façade. Scholars felt that Christianity was an elite religion and not one practiced amongst the masses as they predominantly adhered to the old religion.³ Milis points out in *The Pagan Middle Ages* that most historians paint the picture they think best fits what life was like in Middle Ages of the European world. It is safe to say that most would not hesitate to place Christianity at the helm of medieval development. Pagan rituals gradually lost much of their social relevance during the “Christian Middle Ages,” but several of their practices did not disappear, rather they were simply assimilated into Christian culture to make them more acceptable. The Middle Ages, according to Milis, is viewed by some as particularly intolerant. This is

¹ Hugh Cheape, “The Red Book of Appin: Medicine as Magic and Magic as Medicine,” *Folklore* 104, no. 1/2 (1993): 111–23.

² Ludovicus Milis, ed., *The Pagan Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, Suffolk ; Rochester, N.Y: Boydell Press, 1998), 3-7.

³ Ronald Hutton, “How Pagan Were Medieval English Peasants?” *Folklore* 122, no. 3 (2011): 235–49.

arguably true, and our language today reflects this view. Indeed the terms “medieval” and “feudal” are often used to describe something crude, primitive, old fashion or cruel. Given this supposed authoritarian, tightly-controlled society, it would seem logical that in the heavily Catholic Middle Ages nothing remotely “pagan” could have survived.⁴

The term *paganus* is a derivative of the Latin word *pagus*, meaning “rustic, or hick.” This term was commonly used by the elite urban dwellers, or the *Urbs*. As mentioned, the elites who lived in the cities were more than likely Christians, who would refer to someone who lives in the countryside as a *paganus*. *Urbs* also assumed rural dwellers were non-Christians, hence the term pagan became associated with someone without true religion.⁵

Alain Dierkens emphasizes that archeology has had a major impact on the study of paganism. His work helps modern historians ascertain how the practices, traditions and activities of paganism came to be “Christianized,” thus, socially acceptable during the Middle Ages. Dierkens cites a letter from Gregory the Great to a missionary who ordered the protection of the former pagan shrines. His hope was that if they continued to feel reverence in the places where they once worshiped, then they would eventually become Christians. Through archeological studies, the existence of Roman carvings in these Christian places of worship were discovered.⁶ Archeology has also proven that former pagan structures were dismantled and used as stone quarries with some stones from these structures being utilized to build great Catholic cathedrals.⁷ The building materials were not the only pagan items to be absorbed into Christianity in some form. Milis stated that “Christianity carries on where Paganism leaves off,” like the stones of the monuments, some of the rites, usages, ideas and ways of presenting things” were adapted and adopted by Christianity.⁸

As this paper seeks to prove, pagan folkloric traditions not only survived but persisted throughout the Middle Ages beneath the level of written culture, despite the Church’s eventual view that it was evil. First by explaining and discussing the medieval viewpoint and definition of the term magic, an argument will be made that the actual intent of pagan practices was less than threatening; it was even welcoming. Second, by discussing the Church’s understanding of magic, the acceptance and study of what was considered by some in the Middle Ages to be natural magic, and its eventual comparison to science, we can better understand how pagan practices were molded into medieval Christian practices. Finally, evidence of the continued existence of these pagan practices, grafted onto Christian rituals makes clear that folkloric tradition and pagan practices not only continued and were tolerated but also were welcomed.

What did the context of the word “magic” mean to the inhabitants of medieval Europe? Robert Scribner’s definition of magic as “the exercise of a preternatural control over nature by human beings, with the assistance of forces more powerful than they are” helps because it lends credence to findings laid out later within this paper. To those inhabitants of medieval society, “magic” existed within Church sacraments. These practices included exorcism and blessing objects used during mass or other Catholic rites. The consecration of objects was thought to originate from a sacred power, thus giving the clergy an “other worldly” orientation. This magic later attracted disdain and aggression of the protestant reformers in the sixteenth century. Monks as wielders of sacred power adopted Christianized forms of healing charms as the non-Christian magical healing practices persisted with the names of Christ, or Christlike figures, replacing those of the pagan gods. Through clerical use, arbitrary lines between prayer and the use of magical spells or charms were

⁴ Milis, *The Pagan Middle Ages*.

⁵ “Pegnasus,” accessed January 25, 2019, <http://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/paganus.html>.

⁶ Milis, *The Pagan Middle Ages*, 42.

⁷ Joseph Gies, *Life in a Medieval City*, (New York : Crowell, 1969), 141.

⁸ Milis, *The Pagan Middle Ages*, 7.

created. When these spells or charms were used outside the reach of the clergy, the lines became even more distorted.⁹

Valerie Flint maintains that this enigmatical aspect of magic gave the continued use of these practices' validity, as long as it was kept in check. She writes, "There are forces better recognized as belonging to human society than repressed or left to waste away or growl about upon its fringes . . . Many of our forebears knew this." Flint's recognition of the encouragement (or at the very least tolerance) early medieval churchmen lent to what will be called "natural magic" has been accepted in his field of study.¹⁰ According to historian Richard Kieckhefer, the use of the term "magic" within medieval Europe was only prevalent amongst those who viewed its use as normal. In doing so, they openly accepted and firmly believed that not only was magic real, but that it was governed by explainable theological or physical principles.¹¹ However, some historians argue the term "magic" in its generic form was not common until the sixteenth century, yet there is evidence that the terms *magia* or *magica* were commonplace earlier.

Kieckhefer believes it is pertinent to point out that the definition of the term "magic" was rarely consistent, and it was reserved for the rituals of the elite, those on the inside and also, those outsiders who used magic. While the practice of magic may have been observed in some circles as natural, the labeling of one as a magician was the equivalent of taking a once commonplace term and labeling it as an offensive, giving it an abusive connotation. In doing so, one removed the "natural" and original aspect of the term and associated it with occult powers, and demon intervention on behalf of the wielder.¹²

Some historians have sought to define magic as an attempt at manipulation and an exercise of unnatural power over human beings, often for a sinister purpose. Ralph Merrifield feels the definition certainly holds some weight, however, according to Hutton these manipulations were nothing more than simple acts of "symbolic protection against misfortunate or magical attack."¹³

Historical research has provided scholars with many new types of sources that give academics a new understanding of medieval viewpoints on magical cures. Pastoral manuals instructed priests on the daily care of their congregation. Included in the manuals were magical cures, often under the heading *Sortilegium*, a category used to cover a varying array of beliefs and practices of an unorthodox nature, such as divination, omens and fairies, along with the misuse of ecclesiastical rituals and more noteworthy, magical cures. Early thirteenth-century scholar John of Kent suggested that priests could ask their confessors (other priests to whom they confess): "Do you know any incantation for fevers and for any illness, which is called a blessing?" This line of questioning sheds light on the problems that medieval churchmen faced when discussing "magical" cures for illnesses. What exactly was magic, and where was the line between magic and other forms of healing? John of Kent acknowledged that no absolute answer existed when defining magic; too many contradictions existed. Verbal cures, known as incantations, for instance, could be considered both "blessings" invoked of God or appeals to the devil. This shines an important light on how the assimilation of these practices was accepted, since invocations of God were considered legitimate religious actions.¹⁴

Church proclamations show us that there was indeed opposition to priests who used pagan spells and charms. Councils ruled that pagan rites and customs should not be practiced by anyone,

⁹ Robert W. Scribner, "The Reformation, Popular Magic, and the 'disenchantment of the World,'" *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23, no. 3 (Winter 1993): 475.

¹⁰ Valerie I. J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1994), 12.

¹¹ Richard Kieckhefer, "The Specific Rationality of Medieval Magic," *The American Historical Review* 99, no. 3 (1994): 813–36.

¹² Kieckhefer, "The Specific Rationality of Medieval Magic," 813–36.

¹³ Ronald Hutton, ed., *Physical Evidence for Ritual Acts, Sorcery and Witchcraft in Christian Britain: A Feeling for Magic*, 1st ed. 2016 edition (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 17.

¹⁴ Catherine Rider, "Medical Magic and the Church in Thirteenth-Century England," *Social History of Medicine: The Journal of the Society for the Social History of Medicine / SSHM* 24, no. 1 (April 1, 2011): 92–107.

especially Christian priests. Declarations came later from the Church ordering the defrocking or excommunicating of priests who even considered or sought out advice on such matters.¹⁵

The pastoral movement of the thirteenth century brought magical practices to the attention of medieval writers and churchmen. This also encouraged several canonists to raise questions regarding the legitimacy of magical practices and how they worked. Surprisingly, this led the way for tolerant viewpoints. A system of regular Church courts developed after the Fourth Lateran council of 1215, and magic was discussed in terms of magically induced impotence. These conversations resulted in the Church acknowledging the existence of magic when discussing potential causes, as well as cures. Previous acknowledgement in the 12th and 13th centuries could be found in decretals, which were new papal rulings that derived from cases involving impotence. The *Litteras, Fraternitatis*, and the *Litteras Vestre* all dealt with marital issues of a sexual nature, more importantly, magically induced impotence. These and many more decretals became canon law. By the mid-thirteenth century, magic was an acceptable topic within canonistic dialogue. Pastoral manuals indicated that the use of magical cures could be used by couples who had yet to consummate their marriages, but only when the impotence was found to not be caused by a physical problem.¹⁶

Curses inscribed on Norwich Cathedral share significant similarities with curse tablets retrieved from Roman contexts. Furthermore, churches in Norfolk and Suffolk appear to have geometric designs identical to drawn charms that acted as a cure for fistulas.¹⁷ Confession within the Church had been written about long before the thirteenth century. The production of many penitentials, or rule books, recommended penances for a wide array of sins, but it also included magical cures. The pastoral manuals of the thirteenth century were different than earlier works as they considered the circumstances of sin and took into consideration the varying sins that different social groups were at risk to commit. Earlier texts concerning magical cures continued to be copied, so one could assume that the attitudes towards “magic” were tolerated. The papacy’s stance on magical cures written by educated churchmen was shaped by the transmission of these earlier texts. Physical evidence of magical practice within medieval Europe exists in the form of amulets, some 1,700 still exist within museum collections. Amulets are considered portable charms, and their uses vary from guarding against negative influences to evoking positive ones. One example we can point to is the existence of hagstones which were ironically used to guard against witchcraft. Other examples include the use of fossils to keep away lightening or even the carrying of a mole’s foot to fight cramping.¹⁸

Historian Peter Murray Jones argues that not all late medieval clergy objected to all amulets, but they sought to differentiate religious amulets from ‘superstitious’ ones. Magical cures therefore occupied an uncertain status between churchmen and medical writers, as both groups condemned cures they considered magical. These cures were oftentimes prepared to contain a somewhat comprehensive range of treatments or remedies within practice, meaning when written, a treatment for one illness could be used to heal several others. However, even within these groups, the potential existed for diverse opinions. Those who have researched magical cures as part of medieval religion have discovered a varying range of beliefs about magic in their sources. Some clergy condemned cures they considered magical or that existed with a sense of superstition, but Valerie Flint contends that there were clerics who were more than willing to find the middle ground

¹⁵ Mary Ann Campbell, “Labeling and Oppression: Witchcraft in Medieval Europe,” *Mid-American Review of Sociology* 3, no. 2 (1978): 55–82.

¹⁶ Catherine Rider, *Magic and Impotence in the Middle Ages* (Oxford ; Oxford University Press, 2006), 114-117.

¹⁷ Hutton, 32.

¹⁸ Hutton, 188.

between heresy and science.¹⁹ Flint maintains that not only was magic tolerated by the Church, it was also recognized and encouraged, thus taking over a non-rational practice.²⁰

Catherine Rider explains that medieval writers began to develop a new category of magic, *magia naturalis*, “natural magic.” Magical writers found that this new category did not operate according to the typical categories of medieval science, yet it was not considered demonic. Using the symbolic connections between objects, such as animal testicles serving as a symbol for human fertility or sex, writers of this natural magic were frequently able to show how the use of words could be used to affect the physical world. They illustrated how sometimes the use of these objects could be classified as natural magic, although, some medieval writers felt this skirted the line between demonic and natural assistance. When the existence of inexplicable remedies became recognized, it is here that Rider believes that natural magic overlapped with medicine.²¹

William of Auvergne, a thirteen-century French priest and later bishop, admitted begrudgingly that some works of what he considered “natural magic” should be viewed as a branch of science “by means of its whole nature.” He began researching in the 1220’s and compiled his findings into a collection of works entitled *Magisterium divinale ac sapientiale. De Universo*, which simply translated means “Universe.” This he divided into three parts: the magic involved in sleight of hand, natural confections or unusual gadgets and, lastly, those acts that relied on the invitation of demons to carry out their work. His overall belief was that *opera magica* should be considered illicit and evil from beginning to end, simply stated, these were not natural occurrences, as in order to work, you need the manipulated and the manipulator.

There were, he concluded, natural activities that occurred by one of two different methods: by contrariety or by assimilation. Then there were such cases where the action was oftentimes a factor of a hidden force or power, still natural although not ordinary or planned and rather difficult to describe. According to William, there were “books of experiments” and “natural histories” that were chock full of descriptions of these “natural powers,” and, most importantly William was adamant that medicinal practices relied upon them. These “powers,” in William’s opinion, were not considered *opera magica* so long as no harm was applied when they were at work. “Natural magic” according to William, must be utilized, and more importantly, should be highly praised.²²

Several translated twelfth and thirteenth century works containing information on occult properties of natural objects discussed the subject of amulets used for medical purposes. These works also discuss plants, birds, stones and charms acknowledged as having “magical” abilities.²³ William’s own observations refer to the power of a sapphire in conjunction with curing sickness, calming fears and reigning in passion. In this case, according to William, it was not the matter or form of the sapphire, but the healing accomplishments it demonstrated. Simply stated, the sapphires existence contributed to a cure, or at least to restrain the problem. The gemstones presence within a room was enough, it did not require direct use and it did not have to come into contact with one’s person. He believed that these actions belonged to a category he deemed “magical.”

Who then might be considered a practitioner of “magic” in its acceptable form throughout Medieval Europe? First, it is important to differentiate between a pagan or folkloric ritual and the practice of witchcraft. This can be accomplished by turning to the theology and history behind the study of both when deciphering the ultimate objective of those practicing the ritual. Second, turning to folklore and folk religion studies can help one to understand how the distortion between pagan ritual and the practice of witchcraft happened in the Middle Ages. Last and most important is acknowledging how, although the two seem intertwined, there is a difference between paganism and

¹⁹ Rider, “Medical Magic and the Church in Thirteenth-Century England,” 92–107.

²⁰ Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe*, 127.

²¹ Rider, *Magic and Impotence in the Middle Ages*.

²² Steven P. Marrone, “Magic and the Physical World in Thirteenth-Century Scholasticism,” *Early Science and Medicine* 14, no. 1/3 (2009): 158–85.

²³ Rider, *Magic and Impotence in the Middle Ages*, 84.

folklore. In the medieval definition of life, all challenges to the authority of the Church amounted to a challenge to God and to the order of society. Those who opposed pagan practices were considered “God’s Defenders,” and as Jeffrey Burton Russel describes them “were carried away with man’s infinite capacity for self-delusion and ecclesiastical self-righteousness.”²⁴

During this time, peasants were typically accused of witchcraft, mostly women, old women, and those who lived alone or in groups. Ironically, many of these women were healers, who practiced herbal medicine, midwifery as well as healing via charms and spells. Yes, many at the time worshiped nature, following the ancient pagan religions and adoring many gods, rather than the Christian God. Some rituals consisted of dancing and feasting, some were of a hedonistic nature. But they predated Christianity, as did “cures,” mostly herbal, which had been passed down through generations before “modern medicine.” If one fit any label above—healer, woman, pagan or peasant—then the danger existed to be labeled as a witch. Any combination of those labels could prove fatal.²⁵

Premodern Britain saw charms and texts contain directions for a vast array of calamities. These included but were not limited to eliminating irritations and healing injuries caused by accidents, but for this essay, the most important contained cures for illness and other human contingencies.²⁶ As we see illustrated in Geis’ *Life in a Medieval City*, charm use is widespread within medieval society, especially in childbirth. During labor, a medieval midwife might rub the belly of the patient with ointments or encourage the expectant mother with soft and reassuring words, but if that labor was difficult, sympathetic magic was invoked. The “opening” of items within the house—doors, drawers, cupboards and the loosening of pinned up hair and tied knots—were all symbolic gestures performed as a means of opening womb. Geis notes that the gemstone Jasper was known to have childbirth assisting powers, as well as powers of contraception, controlling menstrual flow and reducing sexual desire. The right foot of a crane, or even its dried blood was considered useful. In extremely difficult cases, the midwife could resort to the use of magical incantations whispered into the patient’s ear, but Geis is quick to point out that priests frowned upon the practice.²⁷

European birthing charms were somewhat of a tradition for quite a long time. Some were written in Latin, while others were in German or English. In the tenth century, a charm from the south of France was used to help women in childbirth. The charm *Tom I Da Femina* or translated, “A Swollen Woman,” was used by a birthing woman’s helper. This incantation or poem would be recited during the most intense moments of childbirth, spoken in a soft magical tone. Bernhard Bischoff discovered this charm in 1984 in the margins of a manuscript of Roman legal texts. It was written upside down on both the sides and the bottoms of the text.²⁸

Scrolls that contained Middle English texts are sure to be of interest to folklorists or to someone who studies the history of medical charms. Such texts included chronicles and genealogical manuscripts (moreover writings that display the English Crown and its descent), religious prayers and supplications books, and “estate rolls,” which held a wide variety of religious prayers and supplications. It is of great likelihood that such texts were used as medical charms²⁹

As we have seen, many of the pagan trappings, specifically in rituals and medicine, were maintained in the daily lives of generations of Medieval Europeans. Christianity itself, also

²⁴ Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 2-6.

²⁵ Campbell, “Labeling and Oppression.”

²⁶ John C. Hirsh, “Credulity and Belief: The Role of Postconditions in the Late Medieval Charm,” *Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural* 1, no. 1 (2012): 130–46.

²⁷ Gies, *Life in a Medieval City*, 60.

²⁸ William Paden and Frances Paden, “Swollen Woman, Shifting Canon: A Midwife’s Charm and the Birth of Secular Romance Lyric,” *PMLA* 125, no. 2 (2010): 306–511.

²⁹ Curt F. Bühler, “Prayers and Charms in Certain Middle English Scrolls,” *Speculum* 39, no. 2 (1964): 270–78.

incorporated many of these same rituals within its worship practices.³⁰ The practice of pagan healing rituals, use of charms as well as herbs and stones, was not viewed as problematic until the late 15th century. With the Inquisition began the decline of paganism and the assimilation of its practices into Christianity. Those who acknowledged its existence and tolerated its practice began to turn away, but its presence has been recorded for us to study and debate.

³⁰ Ronald Hutton, "How Pagan Were Medieval English Peasants?" *Folklore* 122, no. 3 (2011): 235–49.