

HEALING CHARMS IN THE LINCOLN THORNTON MANUSCRIPT

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HEALING CHARMS NUMBER among the many traditions studied to lasting effect by this volume's honouree, so sadly missed by so many. John Miles Foley's work on charms began in the 1970s with fieldwork conducted with anthropologist Barbara Kerewsky-Halpern in what is now Serbia. Foley returned to South Slavic "bajanje," or magical charms, in the 1990s, in a series of publications that culminated in a chapter of *Singer of Tales in Performance* in 1995.¹ By 1998, Stephen A. Mitchell was able to speak of "a new consensus" in the study of charms developing around "what John Foley has astutely called 'Word-Power, Performance, and Tradition.'"² Despite the obvious advantages of working with a living oral tradition, Foley nevertheless describes the charm as a particularly difficult genre for outsiders to interpret: "the problem of entering the performance arena—and specifically of construing the register—can prove extremely challenging."³ Scholars of medieval charms will never enter a charm's "performance arena" with the confidence of researchers who have witnessed charming rituals, recorded their words of power, and spoken with their practitioners. The performance settings for the medieval charms I focus on here are largely irrecoverable, "[b]ut," as Foley was unfailingly ready to point out, "here is the crucial point—we have not lost *all* of the keys to performance."⁴ In this essay I examine a famous fifteenth-century English household book for what it can teach us about its compiler's involvement with charming and about the performance and perceived efficacy of the many charms recorded within its pages.

Identifiable compilers of medieval healing charms are rare, and relatively well-known compilers invaluable.⁵ Thus I focus here on a single but unusually well-documented individual, Robert Thornton of Ryedale, North Yorkshire, and on one of two miscellanies he compiled for his own use and that of his household, the Lincoln Thornton Manuscript (Lincoln, Cathedral Library, MS 91), ca. 1420–1470, henceforth Lincoln.⁶

1 See Barbara Halpern and Foley, "Power of the Word"; Foley, "Word-Power" and *Singer of Tales in Performance*, 99–135.

2 Mitchell, "Anaphrodisiac Charms," 31.

3 Foley, *Singer of Tales in Performance*, 111. In this same book, Foley, 47, defines the "performance arena" as "the locus where the event of performance takes place, where words are invested with their special power."

4 Foley, *Singer of Tales in Performance*, 64.

5 An exception is the named medical practitioners who include charms in their treatises; see Olsan, "Charms and Prayers."

6 For current, detailed studies of Robert Thornton's two household books and full bibliography, see Fein and Johnston, eds., *Robert Thornton and his Books*. A facsimile of Lincoln was published by Brewer and Owen, *Thornton Manuscript*.

Thornton's primary biographer, George Keiser, describes him as "a prosperous member of the minor gentry, who [...] must have been known as a man of probity and strength of character, as well as a man of bookish piety."⁷ In addition to Thornton's probity, literacy skills, and piety, his household books also testify to the importance he accorded to his family, whose activities included praying together in the private chapel established in 1397 by his father, also Robert Thornton.⁸ If, as seems most likely, Thornton's charms were intended primarily for use by himself and his family members at home, they would have been performed in East Newton Hall, the rural Yorkshire manor house he inherited from his father. The building still stands, though renovated so extensively that much of what remains dates to the seventeenth century.⁹

The Place of Healing Charms in the Lincoln Thornton Manuscript

That Thornton would copy healing charms into a book intended for use by the members of a devout Christian household tells us, first of all, that he cannot have regarded charming as necromantic, sinful, or even clandestine. His was a period in which issues of religious orthodoxy were constantly and consequentially negotiated, but his open acceptance of charming is consistent with the perspective expressed in Chaucer's late fourteenth-century *Parson's Tale*, adapted by Chaucer from two penitential treatises authored by clerics. The fictional Parson objects vehemently to attempts to conjure evil spirits or harm people through necromantic rites and other "swich filthe,"¹⁰ but he takes a more permissive view of healing charms: "Charmes for woundes or maladie of men or of beestes, if they taken any effect, it may be peraventure that God suffreth it, for folk sholden yeve the moore feith and reverence to his name."¹¹ In this view, if charms succeed in healing, it is simply because God allows it; the "peraventure" (perhaps) presumably applies to the speculation about God's motive: perhaps he permits charms to heal in order to increase the devotion of his followers. Just as Foley's researchers were surprised to find South Slavic healing charms openly performed in family settings by Christian believers, "perfectly pleasant, grandmotherly people who not seldom intone the spells with grandchildren sitting nearby or in their laps,"¹² so Eamon Duffy remarks that "even Robert Thornton, whose learning and devotion are everywhere evident in his manuscript collections," copied healing charms into a compilation intended for his Christian household, including its youth.¹³

⁷ Keiser, "Robert Thornton," 71. Keiser's earlier studies of Thornton's life are cited in this essay.

⁸ Keiser, "Robert Thornton," 67–69; Boffey and Thompson, "Anthologies and Miscellanies," also stress the importance of "family readership" in shaping compilations of this sort. For their use in teaching children, see P. Hardman, "Domestic Learning."

⁹ Field with Smith, "Afterword," 262–63.

¹⁰ Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, X.606, cited by fragment and line number from Benson, *Riverside Chaucer*. For Chaucer's clerical sources, see 956–57.

¹¹ Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, X.607.

¹² Foley, *Singer of Tales in Performance*, 109.

¹³ Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 275. For family members, including children, as the audience for

Not only are healing charms and other talismanic materials openly present in Lincoln, but they also hold a fairly substantial place among its contents, mingling with examples of their two closest relatives in formal terms: prayers (in the final pages of its second booklet) and medical recipes (in the fourth and last booklet, as part of a remedy collection known as the *Liber de Diversis Medicinis*).¹⁴ The best-known healing charm in Lincoln is the Middle English verse remedy for toothache that Thornton copied on folio 176^r, near the end of the second booklet. I examine this intriguing text, an unusual version of the widely distributed “Three Good Brothers” charm, in detail in the latter part of this essay. Thornton copied it, “rather sloppily” in the words of Linda Olson, into the space left when the ending of the Middle English romance *Sir Perceval* filled only the first of two columns allotted to it.¹⁵ The charm’s sloppiness, its opportunistic use of space originally intended for something else, and its utter irrelevance to *Perceval*—a tale without mention of dental problems—creates the appearance of an impromptu and miscellaneous addition to the book’s major contents. But Thornton’s inclusion of charms in Lincoln begins to look more intentional when one notes that the fresh page on the verso begins with another toothache charm, this one, in Latin, evoking St “Edlana,” a form of “Apollonia,” a third-century deaconess from Alexandria whose tormenters “beat out all her teeth” in the course of her martyrdom.¹⁶ Other talismanic materials follow, including a preface to the famous “Heavenly Letter” to Charlemagne from Pope Leo thought to possess healing and protective powers;¹⁷ a Latin prose charm called “Crux Christi”;¹⁸ and a long English and Latin plea for protection from various perils with instructions for wearing as a written talisman or “textual amulet,” to which Thornton twice added his name, Robertus.¹⁹

household books such as Thornton’s, see the references in n. 8 above. Smallwood, “Conformity and Originality,” 87, also notes that “[i]n England in particular, in the fourteenth, fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, charms were not the arcane material of personal performance, but rather something to be shared, often in writing.”

14 Lincoln’s booklet structure as described by Fein, “Robert Thornton’s Manuscripts,” 13–65. Booklet 2 consists of quires D–K, fols. 53–178 and booklet 4 of quires Q–R, fols. 280–321. The *Liber* ends with some fragments from another work of practical medicine, *A Tretise of Diverse Herbis*. For the relation of charms to prayers, see Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 266–98; and Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 41–43, 61, and 177–211.

15 Olson, “Romancing the Book,” 119, caption to a reproduction of Lincoln fol. 176^r with Thornton’s toothache charm.

16 Forbes, “Verbal Charms,” 310, cites a version of this toothache charm from Northumberland (ca. 1373) that gives the saint’s name as “Edelina.” For the life of Apollonia, see de Voragine, *Golden Legend*. A letter from Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria from 247 to 265, preserved in Eusebius’s *Ecclesiastical History*, I.vi.41, reports that Apollonia’s teeth were beaten out, but many medieval artists show them being pulled out with pincers.

17 Lincoln, fol. 176^v.

18 Lincoln, fol. 176^v.

19 Lincoln, fols. 176^v–177^r. These materials are described by Fein, “Robert Thornton’s Manuscripts,” 30–31, and edited by Horstmann, *Yorkshire Writers*, I:375–76. Horstmann describes the text with Thornton’s name as a prayer; I call it “talismanic” or charm-like because its instructions call for protective and medical applications such as wearing it into battle as a textual amulet and speaking

Into Lincoln's fourth and final booklet, Thornton copied at least twelve more healing charms as part of a large collection of medical remedies known as the *Liber de Diversis Medicinis* (Lincoln, Cathedral Library, MS A.5.2) henceforth the *Liber*, fols. 280–314.²⁰ As well as prescribing treatment for life-threatening illness and injury, the remedies in the *Liber* address the everyday ailments of a large family, such as bodily aches and pains, burns, blisters, disturbed sleep, coughs, hiccups, and sore throats. They also include instructions for cosmetic procedures such as changing one's hair colour, re-growing thinning hair, removing unwanted body hair, sweetening the breath, and banishing freckles. Professional healers were scarce in fifteenth-century England, and such practical collections could help to fill the gap. Even land-owning families like the Thorntons, whose manor was only about sixteen miles from medieval England's second city of York, would have been unlikely to receive regular treatment from the small number of university-trained physicians who practiced in England in the fifteenth century.²¹ They might at different times have sought help from apothecaries, barber surgeons, lay healers without formal education, midwives, tooth-drawers, and parish priests such as the rector of the neighbouring parish of Oswaldkirk, who is cited as the authority for about a dozen of the medical recipes in Thornton's text of the *Liber*.²² In addition to whatever health care was available from such local practitioners, the *Liber* offered the members of Thornton's household instruction in self and family care.

The twelve healing charms from the *Liber* (five of them explicitly identified with the word "charme") amount to only a small fraction of the remedies on offer, but they address a variety of ailments from minor to life-threatening: one each for toothache, hiccups, nosebleed, epilepsy, and cramp, two for fever, and five charms for childbirth.²³ Just as charms are found among prayers at the end of Lincoln's second booklet, they alternate casually in booklet four with physical procedures and recipes for herbal preparations. Several are flagged in the margin as "a charme," but only in the same way that other remedies are identified as "a syrop," "ane oyntement," or "a drynke." As an example of how freely verbal charms alternate with physical remedies, the *Liber* offers a series of physical treatments for nosebleed, including blowing a dried powder called "sange

it over a well and giving its water to a labouring woman who will then hastily be delivered. See also Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 272–79, for the use of these materials in popular or folk religion. For the "Heavenly Letter," and the use and prevalence of textual amulets in this period, see Skemer, *Binding Words*, 96–105.

20 Ogden, "*Liber de Diversis Medicinis*." Two useful studies are Keiser, "Robert Thornton's *Liber*" and Orlemanski, "Thornton's Remedies." The charms are listed in n. 23 below.

21 Orlemanski, "Thornton's Remedies," 238.

22 Orlemanski, "Thornton's Remedies," 238. As Keiser, "More Light," 114, has shown, these mentions of the rector of nearby Oswaldkirk were already present in the exemplar from which Thornton copied the *Liber*; the exemplar seems likely to have belonged to a prominent local family, the Pickeringes of Oswaldkirk.

23 I cite Ogden's edition of the *Liber* parenthetically by page and line number: thorn (*b*) transcribed as *th*. The twelve charms are as follows: for toothache (18:13–30); hiccups (20:12); nosebleed (49:7–8); epilepsy ("falling sickness") (42:9–15); cramp (42:34–43:4); two for fever (63:11–15 and 63:16–21); and five for childbirth (56:29–38; 57:5–7; 57:8–15; 57:16–17; and 57:23–25).

dragon" (dragon's blood) into the nostrils through a pipe or placing a man's "ballokes" in vinegar or cold water (48–49). To us, the following remedy might seem to derive from an entirely different thought world: "Or tak the blode of hym that bledis & wryte in his fronte [forehead] † a † g † l † a † & he sal sone stanche" (49.7–8). (Inscribed crosses and the "AGLA" tetragrammaton or four-letter acronym for the name of God are common in written charms.²⁴) While so apparently distinctive to modern readers, this charm is marked only with the marginal designation "An oth[er]," used throughout the work to indicate alternative treatments for the same ailment.

The charms that Thornton copied as part of the *Liber* do not carry the same weight as those at the end of the second booklet in indicating Thornton's personal involvement with charming, but the inclusion of charms among the *diversae medicinae* of the *Liber* and the many practical collections like it establishes charming as a minor but viable therapeutic option in the lay medical practice of the day.²⁵ One might ask at this point what evidence indicates that Thornton copied his charms in order to *perform* them, rather than preserving them for other reasons, as curiosities of antiquarian or literary interest, for example. Linne R. Mooney has asked the same question about fifteenth-century medical remedy books in general: is there evidence that they were copied, not as antiquarian curiosities, but for frequent practical use? In addition to well-thumbed pages, damage from spilled liquids, and other signs of heavy wear, in her sampling Mooney found a page containing instructions for bloodletting marked by what appear to be bloody fingerprints, and in the spines and gutters of pages containing herbal remedies she found leaves, seeds, and other botanical detritus. Thus she judges the evidence "quite conclusive" that such unpretentious collections of scientific and utilitarian materials were indeed "working books" in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.²⁶ A remedy book thought to be copied from the same exemplar as the *Liber* was put to use by a Yorkshire medical practitioner named John Reed (or Rede), who annotated it with details of the healing he performed on the upper gentry and nobility of his region.²⁷ Though verbal charming does not leave the same material trail as many physical remedies, the evidence suggests that the copy Thornton made of the *Liber* extended its practical remedies, charms and all, beyond the local elites to minor gentry families like his own.

24 Frequently found interspersed with crosses in textual amulets, AGLA is, Skemer, *Binding Words*, 112, "a formula based on the initials of a Hebrew benediction 'Atta gibbor leolam adonai,' meaning 'Thou art mighty forever Lord.'"

25 See Olsan, "Charms and Prayers," for the acceptance of charming by four English medical writers with academic training. Although it is sometimes asserted that university-trained physicians were scornful of charming, Olsan shows that this was not the case with the writers she examines. See also her study of charms in a related series of fifteenth-century English medical remedy books distinct from the *Liber* tradition, "Corpus of Charms."

26 Mooney, "Manuscript Evidence," 199. See especially 193–99 for material evidence; fig. 3 on p. 195 illustrates what appear to be bloody fingerprints in London, British Library, MS Sloane 100, fol. 34^r.

27 Reed's book is now Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson A.393. See Mooney, "Manuscript Evidence," 188; and Keiser, "Robert Thornton's *Liber*," 33.

A more direct indication of Thornton's personal investment in charming is his abovementioned addition of his own name to the text of the talismanic prayer or charm he copied into the second booklet: "Da michi N[omen] Roberto ffamulo tuo victoriam contra omnes Inimicos meos [...] libera me Robertum, famulum tuum ab omni dolore, tribulacione, et angustia" (Give me, N[ame] Robert, your servant, victory over all my enemies [...] Free me, your servant Robert, from all pain, tribulation, and anguish).²⁸ In Lincoln, charms rub shoulders with prayers one assumes were meant to be prayed and with physical remedies that were indeed put to practical use in personal and family health care in this period. Thus it seems reasonable to assume that, in a book meant to offer spiritual guidance, protection, and practical help to his family, Thornton recorded charm texts for his and his family's use in charming.

Mixed Media: Writing and Speaking Words of Power

The charms that Foley and other researchers studied in a rural village in the former Yugoslavia in the 1970s were part of an oral tradition, and the spoken word was doubtless the original medium for performing charms in Western European culture. In the *Odyssey*, the hero's kinsmen chant a blood-staunching charm over his leg wound.²⁹ In early medieval England, oral performance was likely to have been the norm for charming in Old English and Latin, even when the charm texts circulated in writing, and the Middle English word "charme" derives, by means of the same word in Old French, from Latin "carmen," a song or chant, used also in Latin for a charm.³⁰ By the later Middle Ages, however, charms to be performed in writing were very common, and the charms in Lincoln represent a thoroughly mixed tradition in which speaking a charm and enacting it in writing could provide equally viable forms of healing or protection. Lincoln provides a particularly instructive example: Thornton copied two versions of the Latin toothache charm invoking the harrowing story of St Edlana/Apollonia, one designed for wearing as a textual amulet and the other, from the *Liber*, meant to be spoken over the sufferer.³¹ The version from an unknown source that Thornton recorded near the end of the second booklet is much shorter; it gives the saint's name as "Edlana," and it appears to provide her with a similarly martyred saintly sister unmentioned in the life of Apollonia in the *Golden Legend*. Thornton's text is incomplete because a piece is missing from the top of the sheet:

²⁸ Fol. 177^r, as transcribed by Horstmann, *Yorkshire Writers*: 1:376–77; unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

²⁹ Homer, *Odyssey*, 19:457–59.

³⁰ MED, s.v. "charme." Foley, "Læcdom and Bajanje," compared oral charming in Old English and South Slavic. For orality and Latin charms in England roughly 1000–1500, see Olsan, "Latin Charms."

³¹ For other versions of the Apollonia charm in England, see Keiser, ed., *Works of Science*, 3867–68. Olsan, "Latin Charms," 119, cites a fourteenth-century English example from London, British Library, MS Royal 12.B.XXV, fol. 61^r, intended as a textual amulet to be tied to the patient's head, and Forbes, "Verbal Charms," 310, prints an example from Northumberland ca. 1373.

In dei nomine Amen. † Sancta Edlana et S.....e sorores quarum dentes earum fuerunt abstracte pro amore Ihesu Christi,.....vt quicunque nomina earum super se portauerint, a dolore dencium liberentur. † O d..... † discedat te pater † discedat te ffilii † discedat te spiritus sanctus † ab hacffamulis dei Amen. † In nomine patris † Et ffilii † Et spiritus sancti † Amen. Pater noster & III Aue Maria. † Amen. †

(In the name of God, Amen. St Edlana and S.....e sisters whose teeth were drawn on account of their love of Jesus Christ,so that whoever carries (or wears) their names is freed from pain in the teeth. O d.... [doulour (pain)?] let the Father send you away, let the Son send you away, let the Holy Spirit send you away, from this one [...] servants of God. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen. Paternoster and three Aves. Amen.)³²

The phrasing of the instruction to wear or carry the saints' names on the body ("super se portauerint") is characteristic language for a textual amulet.³³ But the mention, with no further instructions, of "Pater noster & III Aue Maria" directs that these prayers, standard in medieval charming and known by heart by most medieval Christians, were to be spoken aloud by the practitioner or by the patient or both together, perhaps as the amulet is attached "super se," which could mean around the neck, over the heart, or near the site of the pain.³⁴ Thus even this charm to be enacted in writing very likely had a significant spoken element to its performance.

Thornton's second Apollonia toothache charm, copied as part of the *Liber* (18:13–30),³⁵ records the script for an oral performance, with clear instructions for speaking its words of power "dices isti," "in-iunges dicere [...]," "Et dicat [...]." It sits amid a series of physical toothache remedies, such as pressing the dung of a badger into the tooth cavity, smearing it with horse fat, or pouring liquid extracted from a plant called ground ivy into the ear on the appropriate side of the head. The *Liber's* St Apollonia toothache charm instructs the healer to address the malign source of the patient's pain directly, "dices isti," banishing it from the sufferer's body, and then to invoke the saint, her name given this time as "Appollonia," asking her to pray for an end to the patient's pain. The charm then directs that the patient and healer recite together three Paternosters and three Aves: "in-iunges dicere iii Pater noster & iij Aue Maria." Speaking the patient's name, the healer further petitions the saint to pray on the patient's behalf: "vt Deus dolorem a dentibus ab hoc famulo Dei : N[omen] : expellat" (that God expel the pain from the teeth of this servant of God, N(ame)) (18:23–25). As Duffy points out, healing rituals such as

32 Horstmann, *Yorkshire Writers*, 1:375–76.

33 Skemer, *Binding Words*, 136n27 and 163, cites two fifteenth-century examples of the Apollonia charm used as a textual amulet, one from England and one from France.

34 Skemer, *Binding Words*, 133–38.

35 This version of the charm occurs second in the current configuration of the book, but not necessarily in the order of Thornton's copying. The evidence is ambiguous as to the sequence in which Thornton's works were copied. On the basis of its paper's watermarks, Hanna, "Growth of Robert Thornton's Books," has suggested that the *Liber* might have been among the earliest surviving pieces copied by Thornton. Arguing from change over time in Thornton's handwriting, Keiser, "Robert Thornton," 92, thinks rather that the *Liber* was copied late in Thornton's compiling efforts. Orlemanski, "Thornton's Remedies," 242, leans towards placing the copying of the *Liber* early in Thornton's work on his household books.

this one borrow quite directly from the Christian liturgy,³⁶ in this case including the use of “N” for “Nomen,” and the directive that follows, “Oremus” (let us pray). At this word, the practitioner and patient very likely knelt and then spoke the next set of prescribed words, this time directly to a third addressee, God, who answered Apollonia’s prayers by delivering her from the hands of her enemies. The climax of the charm—its central act of healing—comes at this point when the practitioner asks that God do for the present sufferer what he did for Apollonia, thus making a bridge between Apollonia’s world and the sufferer’s, *uniting* the two situations across time. In her insightful work on European charming, Edina Bozóky stresses that a charm’s healing is not simply a matter of citing a precedent: what takes place is “a true transposition” of the healing act “from the actual to the mythic level.”³⁷ David Frankfurter gets at the same point when he stresses that by the power of a charm’s *historiola*, or brief narrative, an event from the mythic past is, in the words of Gerardus van der Leeuw, “rendered present in the literal sense and made actual and fruitful.”³⁸ Whether the charm’s words of power are written out and worn as a textual amulet, as in Thornton’s “Edlana” charm, or spoken aloud over the patient as in the *Liber*’s “Appollonia” charm, the same fusion between two worlds effects the same healing.

As compiled by Thornton in Lincoln, late medieval charms thus represent a thoroughly mixed tradition, written and oral, and, as we have seen, even the enactment of written charms such as “St Edlana” often involved the oral recitation of Paternosters and Aves. Of the twelve charms Thornton copied as part of the *Liber*, four are to be spoken and eight enacted in writing, though rarely by means of the ordinary inscription by pen and ink on parchment or paper that we might envision. The *Liber* prescribes spoken charms for toothache (18:13–30), hiccups (20:12), and two of the five childbirth charms on offer (56:29–38, 57:8–15). The eight charms to be performed in writing include the remaining three childbirth charms, one of them to be bound to the labouring woman’s knee (57:5–7), one to her belly (57:23–25), and one written on butter or cheese and given to her to eat (57:16–17). Written charms are also prescribed for epilepsy and cramp: the former to be written on the forehead of the sufferer in blood from his or her little finger (42:9–15), the latter involving inscription on a ring (42:34–43:4). Also written in the patient’s blood is a charm for nosebleed (49:7–8). Two written charms serve as remedies for fever, one to be inscribed on “obles” or mass wafers (63:11–15) and one on both mass wafers and parchment (63:16–21).³⁹

Keys to the Oral Performance of Thornton’s “Three Good Brothers” Charm

The best known and most intriguing charm recorded in Lincoln, and the one that offers most keys to its vanished performances, is a Middle English version of “The Three Good

³⁶ Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 279–83.

³⁷ Bozóky, “Mythic Mediation,” 85.

³⁸ Frankfurter, “Narrating Power,” 463, citing van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence*, 424.

³⁹ Mass wafers used in charming were “presumably unconsecrated,” as Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 275, remarks.

Brothers" (Tres Boni Fratres) intended for speaking aloud. Versions of this charm circulated widely in late medieval Europe, and it was still being collected in the twentieth century; from medieval England it survives in Latin, Anglo-French, and Middle English prose texts, in addition to Thornton's Middle English verse text.⁴⁰ On Lincoln's fol. 176^r, Thornton completed his copy of the romance of *Perceval* at the bottom of the first column; at the top of the second, he wrote the medical indication, "A charme for the tethe-werke," and the utterance instructions, "Say the charme thris to it be sayd ix ty[mes] and ay thris at a charemynge" (Speak the charm three times, until it be said nine times, and always three times at each charm ritual).⁴¹ The envisioned performance presumably took place over the course of three days, as in this unusually explicit set of utterance instructions attached to a multipurpose charm in London, British Library, MS Sloane 521, ca. 1400:

Neme þe sekys name; þanne say þou and þe seke also a paternoster and aue. Say þis charme thryes on thre sundry dayis ouyr hym and here þat sufferyth ony of þeise ma[la] dies; and ley þi ryth hond upon þe seke place, qwyl þou seyst þis charm.

(Name the sick person's name; then you and the sick person together say a Paternoster and an Ave. Say this charm three times on three different days over him and her that suffers any of these maladies, and lay your right hand upon the sick place while you say this charm.)⁴²

Under the medical indication and the instructions for speaking the charm, Thornton copied fourteen lines of verse beginning, "I conjoure thee, laythely beste" (I conjure you, loathly beast). After these verses he left a blank space the width of two or three lines, and then, beginning with a modestly enlarged initial "T," he copied twenty-eight lines of verse beginning "Thre gude brether."

Whether we take these two units as two separate charms or one single charm is not highly consequential: charms in this tradition are often radically segmented with parts that can circulate independently as well as together in long composite charms.⁴³

40 For a recent comprehensive account of this charm from papyrus fragments of the fifth or sixth century to eastern Europe in the twentieth century, with full references to previous scholarship, see Olsan, "Three Good Brothers Charm." Olsan, 61, sees Thornton's version as something of a side line to the tradition because it has been adapted for banishing the "worme" that causes toothache instead of healing wounds or staunching blood. A Latin prose text appears in John of Gaddesden's *Rosa medicinae*, composed ca. 1305–17, printed from London, British Library, MS Sloane 1067 by Hunt, *Popular Medicine*, 26, 29. Hunt, 68, 72, also prints a thirteenth-century Anglo-French prose version of the charm found in Cambridge, Trinity College, MS O.1.20 and, 93, 95, a fifteenth-century Latin text from British Library, MS Sloane 962. Sheldon, "Middle English and Latin Charms," 166–67, includes a Middle English prose text, a rough contemporary of Thornton's charm, from London, British Library, MS Sloane 3160 (third quarter of the fifteenth century). Bozóky, "Mythic Mediation," 87, cites a thirteenth-century Latin text from Leipzig, Universitätsbibliothek, MS 73, fol. 142^r.

41 I adopt the useful term "utterance instructions" from Stuart, "Utterance Instructions."

42 Fol. 272^r. These instructions follow a Middle English charm said to have been brought to St William by the Angel Gabriel; it is printed by Henslow, *Medical Works*, 145.

43 For example, in his proposed typology, Roper, *English Verbal Charms*, indexes as separate charms "Tres boni fratres," "Longinus," and "Neque doluit neque tumuit" (the latter two discussed below), yet all three combine in the Middle English verse charm (or charms) that Thornton copied in Lincoln.

Favouring the one-charm hypothesis is the fact that Thornton gives only one indication, in the singular, “A charme for the tethe-werke,” and the one set of utterance instructions quoted above. As we will see, the unusually poetic final four lines of each unit are nearly identical, forming an evocative refrain if what we have is one verse charm. Thornton crowded the utterance instructions into the page’s upper right margin after some words that are crossed out, and to make his text more legible, he drew a line to separate the instructions from the verses beginning “I conjoure thee.” These verses may constitute a separate charm, or they may be the first section of a long charm whose second part is the twenty-eight verses beginning, “Thre gude brether.” Or, if the untidiness is the result of confusion about the text he was copying, “I conjoure thee” may even represent the displaced final fourteen lines of “Thre gude brether,” since in many charms the “conjuring” clauses follow the *historiola* or miniature narrative, in this case, the story of the three brothers. Whatever the intended relationship between the two sets of verses, I will begin with some observations about performance and efficacy in “I conjoure thee,” and then offer a close look at these issues in the distinctive version of “Thre gude brether” recorded by Thornton in Lincoln.

“Within the larger world of speech acts,” Mitchell writes, “few types of utterances can outstrip the charm for being performative in character.”⁴⁴ As in J. L. Austin’s famous formulation, in charming, “the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action.”⁴⁵ All charms are performatives, but Frankfurter distinguishes narrative charms, which he classes as “descriptive utterances,” from “directive utterances,” in which the speaker requires a certain outcome in response to his words of power.⁴⁶ The first set of verses on Lincoln’s folio 176^r, the fourteen lines beginning “I conjoure thee,” constitute a directive utterance, in which the force emanates from the “I,” the speaker:

I conjoure thee, laythely beste, with that ilke spere	(I conjure you, loathly beast, with that same spear
That Longyous in his hande gane bere,	That Longinus bore in his hand
And also with ane hatte of thorne	And also with a hat of thorn
That one my lordis hede was borne,	That on my lord’s head was borne,
With alle the wordis mare and lesse,	5 With all the words greater and lesser,
With the Office of the Messe,	With the office of the Mass
With my Lorde & his XII postills,	With my Lord and his twelve apostles
With oure Lady & hir X maydenys,	With our Lady and her ten maidens
Saynt Margrete the haly quene,	Saint Margaret, the holy queen,
Saynt Katerin the haly virgyne,	10 Saint Katherine, the holy virgin,
IX tymes Goddis forbott, thou wikkyde worme,	Nine times God’s prohibition, you wicked worm,
That euer thou make any rystynge,	That ever you stay at rest [where you are]
Bot away mote thou wende	But away you must go
To the erde & the stane.	To the earth and the stone.)

⁴⁴ Mitchell, “Anaphrodisiac Charms,” 31.

⁴⁵ Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 6.

⁴⁶ Frankfurter, “Narrating Power,” 466.

The speaker directly and definitively banishes the cause of the sufferer's pain, enlisting God's prohibition against any attempt by the "laythely beste" or "wikkyde worme" to linger. This unit's form is that of an imposing list, enumerating the sacred objects, words, and persons by the power of which the speaker banishes the "wikkyde worme" that played a role in the medieval theory of tooth decay, presumably because new cavities resemble wormholes in the teeth. A toothache therapy in the *Liber* that involves steaming the teeth over hot water promises the patient that "thu sall see the wormes in the water, some schortere & some lengare" (19:29–30).

While the authority in a declarative utterance such as "I conjoure thee" emanates from the speaker, in a descriptive utterance like the narrative charm "Thre gude brether," it emanates from the sacred events recounted in its *historiola*. A fascinating instance of a charm within a charm, "Thre gude brether" begins by narrating briefly an encounter between the brothers and Christ, who then teaches them a new narrative charm with its own tiny *historiola*:

Thre gude brether are ye,		(Three good brothers are you,	
Gud gatis gange ye,		You travel on good paths,	
Haly thynges seke ye.		You seek holy things.	
He says, "Will ye telle me?"		He says, "Will you tell me?"	
He sais, "Blissede, Lorde, mot ye be,	5	He says, "Blessed, Lord, may you be,	
It may neuer getyne be,		It may never be gotten,	
Lorde, bot your willis be."		Lord, unless it is your will."	
"Settis doune appone your knee,		"Set yourself down upon your knee	
Gretly athe suere ye me		Great oath you shall swear to me	
By Mary Modir mylke so fre;	10	By the milk of Mother Mary so generous;	
There es no mane that euer hase nede,		There is no man who ever has need	
Ye schall hym charme & aske no mede.		That you shall [not] charm & ask no reward	
And here sall I lere it thee.		And here I shall teach it to you.	
As the Jewis wondide me,		As the Jews wounded me,	
Thay wende to wonde me fra the grounde:	15	They wounded me from the ground up:	
helyd my-selfe bathe hale & sounde.		I healed myself both whole and sound.	
Ga to the cragge of Olyvete,		Go to the crag of Olyvet [Mount of Olives],	
Take oyle de bayes, that es so swete,		Take oil of bay that is so sweet,	
And thris abowte this worme ye straye.		And thrice around this worm you shall stroke.	
.....		[Line omitted that introduced quoted charm text?]	
"This bethe the worme that schotte noghte,	20	"This is the worm that didn't cause pain,	
Ne kankire noghte, ne falowe noghte;		Nor ulcerate, nor turn yellow;	
And als clere hale fra the grounde,		And as cleanly healed from the ground up	
Als Ihesu dide with his faire wondis.		As did Jesus with his fair wounds.	
The Fadir & the Sone & the Haly Gaste."		The Father & the Son & the Holy Spirit."	
And Goddis forbott, thou wikkyde worme	25	And God's prohibition, you wicked worm,	
That euer thou make any ristyng or any sugorne,		That ever you rest where you are or sojourn,	
Bot away mote thou wende		But away you must go	
To the erthe & the stane.		To the earth and the stone.)	

This unit opens dramatically with direct address to the three brothers, introduced mid-journey. Narrative charms in this tradition rarely give any backstory, but rely heavily on direct dialogue such as we see here, and roads and travel are common images, figuring the journey from illness to wellness. The goodness of the brothers is established by the idiom “gud gatis gange ye” (you travel on good paths) and by the statement that they seek holy things (2, 3). The speaker of the first three lines could be the healer, or it could be Jesus, the first “he” mentioned in line 4, as we deduce because he is addressed as “Lord” by one of the brothers, the second “he” who begins to speak in line 5. The brother tells Jesus in line 7 that what they seek cannot be found unless he wills it.

In lines 8–13, Jesus agrees to teach the brothers a charm if they will swear by the Virgin’s milk to heal those in need without asking for reward. His request that they kneel corresponds to the position likely to be taken by the healer and patient when they pray as part of the charming ritual. Jesus then relates the new charm, embedded within the first, with its own tiny new *historiola* in lines 14–16: at the crucifixion, Jesus was sorely wounded, but he healed himself. He instructs the brothers to rub an ointment three times around the area afflicted by the “worme” mentioned in line 19. As its emphasis on Jesus’s wounds suggests, the “Three Good Brothers” is ordinarily a charm for wounds or blood staunching, and this “worme” is an unusual departure. The worms thought to afflict teeth tend to be spoken of in the plural, and a roughly contemporary English prose analogue in MS Sloane 3160, fols. 133–34, mentions a “wonde,” not a “worme,” at this point.⁴⁷ However, since the only medical indication Thornton provides is “A charme for the teeth werke,” and the two sets of verses that follow are closely related or parts of the same charm, it appears that the usual wound charm has been adapted for toothache. The healer would presumably suit his actions to Jesus’s words, rubbing or stroking three times around the tooth and gum thought to contain the pain-inducing worm. Such gentle and reassuring human contact must have contributed significantly to the efficacy of charming: in the New Testament, Jesus heals by the laying on of hands, and the detailed utterance instructions quoted above from MS Sloane 521 direct the practitioner to “ley thi ryth hond upon the seke place” while speaking the charm’s words of power.

Jesus sends the three brothers up to the “cragge of Olyvete” (17) (Mount of Olives) to find a healing substance. Mountains serve as potent settings within charms because they are intermediate between earth and heaven,⁴⁸ and indeed it was from the Mount of Olives that Jesus ascended from one to the other (Acts 1:9–12). In many versions of the charm, Jesus sends the three brothers for “black” or unwashed wool and for olive oil, appropriately sought on the Mount of Olives. Thornton’s charm, however, offers a different prescription: “Tak oyle de bayes, that es so swete / And thris abowte this worme ye strayke” (18–19). “Tak” is the formulaic word with which medical recipes begin in the *Liber* and other English remedy books, and “oil of bay” is an ointment made from laurel berries, recommended by the *Liber* for pain (47:8–9, “oil of lorell”). The charm’s crucial healing moment occurs when Jesus, quoted directly, instructs the mythic brothers to

⁴⁷ Printed by Sheldon, “Middle English and Latin Charms,” 66–67; Roper, *English Verbal Charms*, 127; and Olsan, “Three Good Brothers Charm,” 66–67.

⁴⁸ Bozóký, “Mythic Mediation,” 90.

stroke “thris abowte *this* worme,” the one causing pain in the present patient. As we saw in the Saint Apollonia charm, by means of a temporal overlay between an act of healing in the distant Christian past and the desired recovery of the toothache sufferer in the “now” of the charm’s performance, the patient’s pain is eased.

As indicated in my rendering of Thornton’s “Thre gude brether” above, a line appears to be missing after line 19, as the charm’s form is rhymed couplets, yet there is no rhyme word for “strayke.”⁴⁹ In the English prose analogue for our charm in Sloane 3160, the speaker changes at exactly this point from Jesus’s own first-person speech to his recitation of the charm he has offered to teach the brothers, which is about his wounds, and refers to him in the third person.⁵⁰ In the analogue, Jesus instructs the brother to “say þ[i]s charme” over the wound and then recites a charm often called the “Uncorrupted Wounds of Christ” or “Neque doluit neque tumuit” (It neither hurt nor swelled).⁵¹ If a line to rhyme with “strayke” is missing from Thornton’s version, and that missing line signalled the shift to direct quotation of the new charm, as with the analogue’s “say þ[i]s charme,” it would clarify the third-person reference to “Ihesu” and “his faire wondis” in line 23 of Thornton’s version, where, in the absence of an indication to the contrary, Jesus appears still to be the speaker. Thus in punctuating the charm, I place double quotation marks around Jesus’s direct speech (8–24) and single around the charm he recites in lines 20–24, beginning “This bethe the worme that schotte noghte.”

The “Neque doluit” (Uncorrupted Wounds) charm that Jesus teaches the brothers heals by the same curative logic we have seen in our other narrative charms: just as Jesus’s wounds didn’t cause pain or fester, so may the present patient’s affliction cease to give pain and heal cleanly. Both as embedded in the “Three Good Brothers” and in circulation on its own, this charm shows intriguing variation in the list of pathologies that did *not* happen to Jesus’s wounds. In the Sloane 3160 analogue, “þat wonde ne blede not longe, ne rotide, not ne oke, noȝt ne swelled, ne fesstarde noȝt” (that wound neither bled long, nor rotted, nor ached, nor swelled, nor festered).⁵² In Thornton, where “Three Good Brothers” has been adapted to treating toothache, the “wonde” that doesn’t hurt or swell becomes the “worme” that “schotte noghte, / Ne kankire noghte, ne falowe noghte”; that is, it doesn’t inflict pain or cause the tooth to ulcerate or turn yellow. Then follows, in most charms of this type, the mention of the wound in Jesus’s side inflicted by the Roman centurion Longinus. In Lincoln, however, Jesus places the responsibility upon “the Jewis.”⁵³

49 The other exception is the extrametrical and possibly misplaced line 24, “The Fadir & the Sone & the Haly Gaste.” Charm text adapted from Horstmann, *Yorkshire Writers*, 1:375–77; thorn (*þ*) transcribed as *th*.

50 In the version found in Sloane 3160, immediately after the instruction to apply oil, Jesus says, “& say þ[i]s charme þer-ouer,” that is, over the wound. See Sheldon, “Middle English and Latin Charms,” 166–67.

51 “Neque doluit neque tumuit” is the name Roper, *English Verbal Charms*, 113–15, gives this widespread European charm in his index. See also Keiser, *Works of Science*, 3672, who calls it the “Uncorrupted Wounds of Christ” and lists (3871) seven occurrences in English manuscripts.

52 Roper, *English Verbal Charms*, 114–15, gives examples of this variation, and Olsan, “Three Good Brothers Charm,” 52–54, gives further examples.

53 For the suggestion that the Thornton books may show a special antipathy towards the Jews, see

The *historiola* of the embedded “Neque doluit” charm is particularly striking in Thornton’s version because Jesus narrates the story of his wounding and healing, recalling that his enemies wounded him “fra the grounde” (22) (from the ground up; extensively). In the Thornton version, repeated language reinforces the key connection between the two temporalities, early Christian history, and the present of the healing act: just as Jesus was wounded “fra the grounde” and healed himself “hale & sounde,” so in this situation the patient is described as “als clere hale fra the grounde, / Als Ihesu did with his faire wondis.” Nearly identical to the final four lines of “I conjoure thee,” the evocative final four lines of the unit beginning “Thre gude brether” share some of the poetic quality of charms that survive in Old English: “And Goddis forbott, thou wikkyde worme, / That euer thou make any ristyinge or any sugorne, / Bot awaye mote thou wende / To the erthe & the stane.” “Stane” can mean “gravestone”; thus to consign the cause of pain to “the erthe & the stane” could simply mean to cause its “death” or cessation. But if the “wikkyde worme” here is a malign spirit to be cast out of the patient and into “the erthe & the stane,” this final segment becomes an act of exorcism. Very likely both possibilities operate: in commenting briefly on our charm, Douglas Gray suggests that the “wikkyd worme,” also called a “laythely beste” in “I conjoure thee,” “is probably both a spiritual and a physical creature—a demon of disease and also the worm which for centuries was thought to cause decay.”⁵⁴

To press just a little harder on the sources of this narrative charm’s efficacy, I have argued following Bozóky and Frankfurter that what matters most is its closing of a temporal gap so that the early Christian event is “rendered present” and the words of the sacred healer (in our charm, Jesus himself) and the words of the performer of the charm merge into one voice. The body of the sufferer in the charm (again, Jesus) merges with that of the patient on whom the practitioner’s hand rests. When Jesus speaks of “*this* worme,” the worm thought to lurk in the late medieval sufferer’s painful tooth, the actual and particular locus of pain that the practitioner rubs with “oyle de bayes,” it is the linking across *time* that heals. Many other narrative charms function by means of this link between past and present: Saint Anne’s successful delivery of Mary fuses with the struggles of the present labouring woman; the falling to the ground, but then rising again, of the three Magi merges with the temporality of a patient afflicted with the “falling sickness,” epilepsy.⁵⁵ I suggest that in this simultaneity we see an instance of what Carolyn Dinshaw has described as “different time frames or temporal systems colliding

Keiser “Robert Thornton,” 94–104. But Olsen, “Three Good Brothers Charm,” 64–65 no. 3, 67 no. 13, prints a thirteenth-century Latin charm that attributes the wounding of Christ to “Longius ebreus” (Longius the Hebrew) and an Anglo-French charm from the same century that names “Longius l’ebreu.” Thornton also gives the name as “Longyous” in “I conjoure thee,” and his version may be informed by this alternate tradition.

54 Gray, “Some Middle English Charms,” 64.

55 Keiser, *Works of Science*, 3673, gives a wealth of examples of childbirth charms evoking the Virgin, Saint Anne, and other holy births. As noted above, a Magi charm for epilepsy occurs in the *Liber*, 42:9–15. Keiser, 3671–72, observes that Magi charms in verse and prose are found “in a large number of learned treatises and in remedy books.”

in a single moment of *now*.”⁵⁶ In premodern thought, Dinshaw argues in *How Soon is Now?*, “desire can reveal a temporally multiple world in the *now*.”⁵⁷ Few desires can be more intense than relieving the pain or staunching the bleeding of a suffering family member. These “collisions” or “fusions” in time happen in the brief but intense moment of charming—the “now” in which the operative words of power are conveyed to the patient. When the temporal fusion is over, the spoken charm dissolves in air and the written one has been consumed or is to be discarded.⁵⁸ As well as helping us think about the efficacy of charms and the keys to their performance that still lie embedded in words recorded over half a millennium ago, the study of charms thus also helps us towards what Dinshaw calls “a temporally complex sense of the past.”⁵⁹

To this point I have tried to view the performance and efficacy of charms from the perspective of a medieval user such as Robert Thornton, to the limited degree possible, but I would like to end with a view from the present. With its strange collisions in time, its loathly beasts and wicked worms as agents of pain and disease, to us charming can sound extremely remote, a relic of a thought world utterly discredited by modernity. In 1971, a Yale professor of anatomy, Thomas R. Forbes, summed up modern science’s view of charming as “the product of superstition, hearsay, ignorance, and, at best, crude empiricism.”⁶⁰ But in the absence of cures, medieval medicine sought to relieve suffering, and Bozóký rightly observes that in a Christian universe, “the assimilation of the patient to the collective mythology and the integration of the individual in a cosmic order must certainly give a feeling of protection and security, providing genuine solace that favours the patient’s actual bodily healing.”⁶¹ The power of such “placebo effects” to relieve pain and other symptoms is now well documented, carefully measured by the pharmaceutical industry. A 2015 article published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* notes that placebo effects work through the same neurotransmitters (such as endorphins) and activate the same areas of the brain as many common medications. Its authors call for more research into the demonstrated efficacy of “attention, gaze, touch, trust, openness, confidence, thoughtful words, and manner of speaking,”⁶² all or most of which must also have figured significantly in charming. In this sense, Robert Thornton was not acting out of superstition, hearsay, and ignorance when he copied charms, but was justified in hoping that when they were enacted by speaking or inscription, the healer’s “attention,” “touch,” “thoughtful words,” and prescribed “manner of speaking” would alleviate suffering and promote the well-being of the household for whom he compiled his book.

56 Dinshaw, *How Soon Is Now?*, 5; emphasis hers.

57 Dinshaw, *How Soon Is Now?*, 5; emphasis hers.

58 Even when written, the enactment of a charm was powerful but temporary: words eaten, drunk or inscribed on perishables soon vanished, and a written charm from the *Liber*, 57:7, for childbirth instructs, “alsone als scho es delyuered, tak it a-waye.” Another (63:21) to be inscribed on mass wafers, instructs that as soon as the patient is healed, the charm should be cast into the fire.

59 Dinshaw, *How Soon Is Now?*, 38.

60 Forbes, “Verbal Charms,” 293.

61 Bozóký, “Mythic Mediation,” 91.

62 Kaptchuk and Miller, “Placebo Effects in Medicine,” 8–9.

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