NOTES ON OLD ENGLISH CHARMS II

After my discussion of the Nine Herbs Charm and the magical remedy for a horse with a sprained leg in an earlier volume of this periodical¹, I should like to comment on some other items in Grattan and Singer’s standard edition of Old English incantamenta.

Grattan and Singer’s No CLXXIII runs as follows²:

wið cyrnla: ‘Arcus supe[r] assedit uir3o’, cana bi[s]; ‘lux’ et ‘ure’, cana bi[s]; sin3 dis ni3on siban 7 ‘pater noster’ VIII on anum berenan hlafe, 7 syle þan horse etan.

The purpose of the charm clearly emerges from wið cyrnla and from þan horse at the end: the text is intended to cure a horse afflicted with cyrnla, i.e. either “a hard growth in the flesh”³, or “a lymphatic gland”. The latter meaning is favoured by Grattan and Singer since they precede their translation by the heading: “Christian charm for glands in horses”, whereas Storms translates the opening words as: “Against kernels”⁴.

The charm itself is clearly corrupt and a satisfactory explanation has not yet been given.

It would seem, however, that valuable clues to its solution may be found in parallel charms in Middle English. Indeed, comparison of these with the Old English text just quoted proves beyond doubt that Grattan and Singer’s interpretation of it, is not correct.

Before introducing some parallel texts, it is worthwhile to have a closer look at the charm as it is printed by Grattan and Singer. Three words have been emended: the Ms. has suped which they changed to super; the words cana bid are twice changed to cana bis. These changes have the advantage of resulting in good Latin words, whereas to suped and bid no clear meaning can be attached and they are therefore probably corrupt.

The words: Arcus super assedit uir3o are translated by Grattan and Singer as: “Above the heavens sat a virgin” and cana bis is rendered as: “Sing twice”. According to their translation also the words lux and ure, the latter of which is, we are informed in a footnote, a Hebrew synonym for Lat. lux, should be sung twice.

So far this interpretation seems very convincing although it is rather unusual in magical formulas that something is requested to be said or done twice and not the usual three, seven or nine times⁵. The next sentence in the charm, however, can hardly be said to fit in with the preceding two: “Sing this nine times and Paternoster nine time . . .”.

The word “this” (dis) obviously refers to what in the charm precedes, so that, in spite of the repeated request that the preceding words should be sung twice, it now appears that they are actually to be sung nine times, the usual magical number.

The OE sentence: sin3 dis ni3on si3an sounds very familiar as it occurs in

Neophilologus 67 (1983) 605–610
many charms, so that it is beyond doubt correct as it stands. The same cannot be said of the *cana bis*. Not only is *bis* a very unusual number in charms, it is actually not in the MS. but the result of an editorial emendation. It is clear therefore that Grattan and Singer’s attempt to clarify the meaning of *canabid* by changing it into *cana bis* is not satisfactory.

Once this is granted, one wonders whether the interpunction, added to the charm by the same editors in corroboration of their emendations, can possibly be correct. Indeed, in the editors’ view the charm is divided into two distinct parts, which are separated from each other by the prescription “sing twice”. Since this prescription turns out to be very questionable it would seem far more probable that the words: *Arcus super assebit ur5o canabid lux et ure canabid* are in fact part of only one formula which is to be sung nine times.

Some curiously similar charms from medieval English manuscripts, which throw new light on the Old English one under discussion, have hitherto not been connected with the *widcyrnla*-charm.

The first parallel text has been printed by G. Henslow from a fourteenth-century manuscript in his possession. It runs as follows:

> A charme for a womman pat trauelyt on childe. Arcus forciour super nos sedebit semper Maria lux et hora sedule sedebit nator natoribus saxo silet memorial esto et sic puere uel puella exit foras quum7 Christus natus est nullum dolorem passus est venit homo fugit dolor Christus exquisitor adiuro to virgam per patrem et filium et spiritum sanctum et habeas potestatem commingendi8.

The text goes on in Middle English to say that this charm is to be repeated three times. In a footnote Henslow tentatively suggests that in *adiuro te virgam*, the last word should be *virgum*, but the other parallels favour the reading in the manuscript.

A similar Latin charm with many minor divergencies has been edited by M.S. Ogden from a mid-fifteenth-century manuscript. It is also intended to help a woman “trayellyng of childe” and the number of times it must be recited is also the same as above. This is the text:


A third version of this charm is found in British Library, MS. Sloane 2457, fol. 30°. Here too the fifteenth-century charm is intended “for child beryng”:

> Archus forciour super nos sedebit uirgo maria natabit lux et hora sedebit sedule nator natoribus saxo salet. Memor esto et sic puerialis19 puella eius erit fons quando Christus natus est nullum dolorem passus est. Venit homo fugit dolor exiiut adquisitor. Adiuro te uirgo per patrem et filium et spiritum sanctum ut habeas potestatem coniungendi.