The Nightmare Charm in *King Lear*

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In Act II scene iv of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* (1605) there occurs a jingle which can be recognised as a version of a charm against the nightmare current in late medieval and Tudor times. Before discussing it in detail, it is as well to explain its context within the play, which is rather complex. In *Lear* there are two tightly interwoven plots, one concerning the king and his daughters, and the other dealing with the Duke of Gloucester and his two sons, the virtuous Edgar and the villainous Edmund. By a series of vicious lies, Edmund causes such mistrust between his father and Edgar that the latter flees from home, convinced that his beloved father wants to have him murdered. He then disguises himself as a mad half-naked beggar, Poor Tom, and hides in a hovel on the heath, where Lear and his Fool accidentally find him. They do not recognise him, and indeed the transformation in his appearance and mode of speech is so complete that, from the point of view of a theatre audience, the identity of Edgar is rapidly obliterated by the powerful persona of the sinister madman Tom. The shock of the encounter terrifies the Fool, and tips Lear himself, whose mind is already cracking, into complete madness.

The chief subject in Tom’s ravings is the foul fiend that torments and tempts him. He cries out that it leads him through fire and flame, through whirlpools and bogs, tempting him to suicide, and filling him with sinful thoughts. While Tom is ranting, the Duke of Gloucester arrives at the hovel, seeking Lear, but never guesses that this madman is really his own son. Nor does Shakespeare at this point give ‘Tom’ any lines which would reveal the true feelings of ‘Edgar’ at this appalling situation. Instead, on catching sight of Gloucester, Tom immediately reacts by a further outburst of craziness, denouncing him as yet another demon and then bursting into verse:

This is the foul Flibbertigibbet; he begins at curfew, and walks till the first cock; he gives the web and the pin, squinnies the eye, and makes
the hare-lip; mildews the white wheat, and hurts the poor creature of earth.

Swithold footed thrice the old;
He met the night-mare, and her nine-fold;
Bid her alight,
And her troth plight,
And aroint thee, witch, aroint thee!1

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, editors made no comment on these lines, apparently accepting them as simply one among many examples of ‘nonsense’ talk which Shakespeare gives to mad characters and professional fools. The first scholar to identify them as a charm was the American G. L. Kittredge in 1929 in his Witchcraft in Old and New England;2 he repeated the identification in 1946 in his Sixteen Plays of Shakespeare. It is now accepted in standard editions of the Lear.

Kittredge based his interpretation on the similarity between Shakespeare’s lines and a small group of late medieval and Tudor charms against the nightmare, citing first one which is found in Thomas Blundevill’s Fower Chiefyst Offices of Horsemanshippe (1566). In a section on ‘Horse Diseases’, Blundevill describes how the nightmare oppresses either men or beasts at night, so that they cannot breathe, and is called Incubus in Latin. He goes on to say that ‘an old English writer’ recommends ‘a fonde foolishe charme’ to cure it in horses. Speaking from a Protestant point of view, he says he only included it ‘because it may perhaps make you gentle reader to laugh, as well it did me’; he claims that it was invented by ‘the false Fryers in times past’ to get money from the gullible. He then quotes the charm as follows:

Take a Flynt Stone that hath a hole of hys owne kynde [a natural hole] and hang it ouer hym [the horse] and wryte in a bille: In nomine patris &c

Saint George our Ladyes Knight,
He walked day so did he night,
Untill he hir found,
He hir beate and he hir bounde
Till truly hir trouth she him plyght
That she woulde not come within the night
There as Saint George our Ladyes Knight
Named was three tymes. Saint George.
And hang this Scripture ouer him, and let him alone.3