BRINGING PROTECTION HOME: SPATIALLY MAPPING THE PERFORMANCE OF MEDIEVAL CHARMS AGAINST THIEVES

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Abstract: This article examines charms against thieves in medieval English manuscripts that make explicit mention of the domestic residence and its environs. In doing so, it considers a particular medieval anxiety around transgression of the property's boundary lines. By identifying instructions for the practitioner contained within the texts and their associated rubrics, the article imagines how the performance of these charms may have looked in practice, and how, in some cases, there is a parallel with the parish ritual of 'beating the bounds'. It argues that the performance of these charms creates a relationship between the practitioner, the words of the invocation, and the space in which the charms are recited, and that this performance is a means of asserting ownership and exerting control over the domestic residence, as well as averting the danger posed by potential thieves.

Keywords: charms against thieves, performance, theft, domestic property, medieval.

INTRODUCTION

Therewith the nyght-spel seyde he anon-rightes
On foure halves of the house aboute,
And on the thressfold of the dore withoute;
'Jhesu Crist and Seinte Benedight.
Blesse this hous from every wikked wight,
For nyghtes verye, the white *pater-noster*!
Where wentestow, Seinte Petres soster[1]

In Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*, John the Carpenter is provoked into an anxious frenzy by the apparently supernatural slumber of his lodger Nicholas. He performs the sign of the cross and recites a charm, a 'night spell', otherwise referred to as the White Paternoster. Hurrying to each corner of the house as he chants, he weaves a protective web around the entire property with his words. John's recourse to a charm for protection is deployed here to comedic effect; his panicked reaction to Nicholas's feigned loss of consciousness serves to highlight his credulity, while his anxiety over the transgression of his property's boundary lines is ironic in light of the transgression he is actually facing inside the walls: an adulterous liaison between his wife and his lodger. Ryan Perry has argued that the 'spiritual inadequacy' embodied by the carpenter in this performance, and his admission that he has scarce knowledge of Christian devotional practice beyond learning his creed, is commensurate with his position among the lower strata of society (Perry 2011: 421). Julia Boffey, too, notes that such "doggerel spells" are apt in "the mouths of simple, unlearned characters from whom we would hardly expect a rhyme royal stanza or a roundel" (Boffey 2010: 40). But the use of charms is not restricted to Chaucer's socially inferior characters. In *Troilus and Criseyde* when Troilus appears sick, a number of elite Trojans claim to be able to heal him: "in this manere/Men curen folk; this charme I wol ȝow lere", demonstrating that even those in court society made recourse to charms.[2] This may reflect Chaucer's own ambivalence towards the use of charms, or otherwise simply mirror the world in which he was writing, where charms were ubiquitous and used across all strata of society.[3] I do not cite this passage from *The Miller's Tale*, however, in order to analyse Chaucer's stance on charms, nor to critique the proficiency of John the Carpenter's devotional practices, but instead to reflect upon how the description of John's recitation of the White Paternoster provides us with a rare insight into the medieval performance of a charm to protect the domestic space.[4]

The literary depiction of John blessing each of the four 'halves' of the house, encompassing every corner, as well as the threshold and the door, in a kind of protective forcefield, makes clear that the structural form of the house itself is an integral component in the performance of the charm. Furthermore, the combination of speech and movement presented here demonstrates that the performance of the charm is not just concerned with the spoken word, but that it requires physical movement and an active engagement with the surrounding environment in order to be deployed effectively. This essay will examine the textual evidence of practices like the one performed by the carpenter in Chaucer's *Miller's Tale* – more specifically, charms against thieves – to identify the clues they provide for their own performance, and how this is specifically situated within the domestic space and its environs. By analysing both the words of the charms themselves as well as the directions for the practitioner which are often present in an accompanying rubric, it will demonstrate that the charm's power is activated, not simply through the use of powerful or efficacious words, but through a physical embodiment of the charm which triangulates a relationship between space, movement, and speech in order to implement a certain type of protection.

The performative nature of charms is universally acknowledged: it is an intrinsic part of their definition as an "oral performance to accomplish a purpose by means of performative speech in a ritual context" (Olsan 1999: 403). This performative aspect is further connoted by the small rubricated crosses which frequently intersperse the words of charms in manuscripts, indicating to the user or practitioner that they should cross themselves or the patient at those particular moments of the invocation (Klaassen 2019: 21). Lea Olsan and Peter Murray Jones employ the term 'performative ritual' to describe a range of practices, including charms, to aid childbirth and conception, noting that such rituals are performed to be effective at that particular moment, but that efficacy is instigated by drawing on the tradition and accumulation of all the previous performances of the ritual (Jones and Olsan 2015: 409–410). However, the performative nature of charms against thieves as a particular genre, or subset, of charms in general has yet to be examined. Generally, their study has instead been restricted to an examination of their prominent motifs, and to identifying potential lines of transmission and evolution. T. M. Smallwood, for example, investigates one of the simplest and most commonly occurring charms for theft, which he labels the 'God was born in Bethlehem' charm, inspired by the phrase which serves as the first line of the text in all surviving examples (Smallwood 1989). Smallwood traces the transmission and evolution of this charm, identifying a number of different derivatives, particularly by following the trajectory of one key motif, that 'neither wolf nor thief' was present at the nativity. The chronology of this exploration begins with an Old English example and ends with a creative re-working of the text found in an early seventeenth-century manuscript. Smallwood's investigation reveals that the charm split into two branches during at least one moment in its transmission, leading to the mention of the wolf dropping out of use in one chain of texts, but continuing to circulate in another.

Like Smallwood, Stephen Stallcup records and analyses various examples of just one text, in this case a ritual to identify a thief, frequently referred to as the 'Eye of Abraham' charm (Stallcup 2015). This particular practice involves painting an eye on a wall, gathering those whom you suspect before it, and hammering a nail into the painting, causing the eye of the guilty party to weep and water. This experiment has a surviving analogue in a fourth-century Greek papyrus, but the earliest Middle English example occurs in the mid-fifteenth century manuscript now known as London, British Library, Additional MS 34111 (Stallcup 2015: 25–26). Stallcup identifies and prints five different versions of this charm, but he acknowledges that it is as yet not possible to determine a chronology for these five texts, nor a stemmatic relationship between them (Stallcup 2015: 26).

This essay will not select the texts for discussion based on their prominent motifs, as Smallwood does with the 'God was born in Bethlehem' phrase, or Stallcup does, with the illustration of the Eye of Abraham; instead the charms presented here are united by the fact that they make reference to the location in which they are to be performed, specifically, the domestic residence and its immediate surroundings.[5] It may seem obvious that domestic property would serve as the primary locus for a charm against theft, but this is not always the case. The range of charms against thieves in circulation in the medieval period spoke to a number of circumstances in which theft

could occur. For example, there are many other such charms which, instead, make provision for protection while travelling. Indeed, a fifteenth-century charm against theft in British Library, Sloane MS 56 makes clear that the user is seeking protection from robbery while on the road, rather than burglary at home.[6]

> this wordis þu shal say
> be þu in towne wodde or way
> If any þeffe þe robbe or reve
> of any goode þat ben þe leve.
> Ne stirre he no mor þan the stone
> stot on footte motte þer ferrere goone
> Til ihesu have done his wrethe
> þat of sorowe is best leche.[7]

By homing in on texts which make specific reference to the domestic residence and its surrounding land, I will demonstrate that there is a category of texts which speak to a particular fear or anxiety of the medieval practitioner, one which centres around transgression of the property's boundary lines. Furthermore, identifying a specific location for performance allows us to begin to reconstruct how this performance might have looked in practice. This moves the study of these texts out of their written, or manuscript, contexts; moreover, it offers us the opportunity to make comparisons with other rituals, such as the church-sanctioned parish ritual of 'beating the bounds', which will be discussed in due course.

THE HOME AS THE EPICENTRE OF PROTECTION

Several surviving charms against thieves include linguistic cues which make clear that they are intended for deployment specifically within the domestic space. A number of charms for theft have been recorded in a manuscript from the turn of the fifteenth century, now known as British Library, Sloane MS 2584. One of these incorporates the domestic application of the ritual into the overarching purpose, or utility, that it is ascribed through its title. Rather than being assigned the descriptor '*carmen contra latrones*' as is common, it is introduced as '*coniuracio bona pro latronibus venientibus ad domum*': a useful charm for thieves coming into the house.[8] Similarly, a short, sixteenth-century charm in Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ashmole MS 1378 describes its purpose as "[t]o binde a house a gaynste theffes".[9] The phrasing of the title here suggests that it is the house which is the object of the charm, rather than the potential thief, who is usually the more common target for 'binding' or immobilising.[10] Other charms instead reveal that the house is the primary locus for defence through the wording of the invocations themselves. A text in Cambridge, Trinity College Library, MS R. 14. 45 (916) uses the word 'house' three times in its invocation:

> Hous I the be ken to þe best þat ys in hevyn oure lorde hymselve and hys
> apostyllys xij God and seynt Clere and seynt rechere seynt crystofyr and
> seynt benedicte kepe thys hous and thys place thys ny3ght yff there any mann
> woman or chylde by hous or place þat hathe eny spyte to the he stonde as
> styll as stone on hyll as stone on more as dede mann on flore.[11]

A curious fifteenth-century text that survives in British Library, Sloane MS 3556
makes reference to the home, but subsequently it refines the epicentre of protection
even further. Granular in its detailed description of the domestic space, it paints a
tableau of the practitioner's bed surrounded by five divine or supernatural agents:
Saints Peter and Paul, the Archangel Michael, God, and the Virgin Mary, primed to
waylay any would-be-thief.

> Erliche in a mornynge was I of my bedde, I fonde cristis hi3e name wryten
> on my nebbe. hit is sooth hit is no lees / mi3chel and marye and seint Col[…]
> he schal wise me the weie to seint Thomus that he mot be my leche in to
> domesdaie / I wente forth by the grene weie. Þer I mette our ladie soore
> wepinge. Sche bar here sone upon here arme toward naylyng/ peter bere
> me lorde quod he y dar not whie so peter lorde for these þeefis / peter alle
> þese thefis stille schal thei stonde. As stif stake doth in londe. ffor þei can
> so manye wordis as I canne/ peter that schal neuer be. lete hem stonde til
> I bidde hem goo/ as stille schal þe thefis stonde as stif stake stonte in londe
> for y bydde hem goo/ peter that schal neuer be lete hem stonde til y bidde
> hem goo/ ffrom home I schal goo thys place I wil be sette 3if enie thef heere
> with þou come my kynde catel or good to fette/ I set the holye goost hem bi
> fore these thefis for to lette. marchus. matheu. luke. And Ion/ that beth the
> foure gospeleres closid in oon the fader and the sone/ closid in oo[n] god-
> hede. As clerkis in here bokys doo rede/ peter at the heed poule at the foot,
> mi3chel a mydde/ God and seynt marie stonde to fore my bedde the thefis
> for to lette. These wordis that y haue seid heere schal bynde these thefis
> so soor as dyde seint Barthilmewe þe deuyl with his berde so hoore/ The
> deuyl he bonde but neuer he lete/ But doun he trad him under his ffeet/ I
> schal bete men thus and bynde men thus of wikkyd mood and all thoo that
> wolde me oþer than good/ In the vertue of cristis preciouse blood. And with
> vertu of the masse and all þe wordis more and lasse/ In the vertu of gras.
> erthe. and ston/ and goddis bodie to leve upon I wis þere was neuer god but
> on neuer was nor neuer schal be/ hit is the fadir. sone. and holie goost that
> beth yloke in Trinite ffirst be he at our comynge. and sithe at our endynge/
> In nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti amen.[12]

This text is unusually long in comparison to other texts of this genre and combines
motifs from a number of other charms against thieves that usually circulate independ-
ently in the manuscript tradition, as well as other short popular rhyming prayers.
For example an eighteenth-century antiquarian project, which provides a commentary

on certain extracts of early printed texts, makes note of some handwritten "popish rhimes" that occupy the margins of a printed *Horae* from 1502. One of these rhymes possesses a clear intertextuality with the Sloane MS 3556 charm in its narrative of the Virgin weeping for her crucified son "by the grene weie".

> The little Credo
> I mett with our lady in a greene way
> With a stocke and a locke I say
> Shee signed full soare for her deare sonne
> Which was nayled through hande
> And foote to his brayne panne
> Well is the man that this creede canne
> His fellowe to teache
> To heauen he shall reache.[13]

Similarly, where the Sloane MS 3556 charm draws on the virtue of the Mass, as well as the virtues of grass, earth, and stone, it is possible to recognise elements of another shorter charm against thieves, such as this one found in British Library, Sloane MS 2457:

> For metyng of theues saie thou this charm that suwid. Lord god in trinite fader and sone and holy gost y worschiped mote ȝe ever be and as wise as y leue an on god that is in persones thre. and boren of a maiden clene and fre so mote ich euer ysaued be. And by thi grace and by thi myȝth saue me bothe day and nyȝth. And in the vertu of thi rith arm saue and defende me fro al harm. And [be the vertu of that hie masse] þat euer was y saide more and lasse. And be alle the uertues of .word. ston. gras. and tre. And al other vertues that euer may be. That ȝif ther ben any fon aboute me to roben. or to slon pouwer hafe thei non a-wei to gon. bot stille thei stonden as any ston til thei haue leue of me as wis as þou hongedest on the rode tre. Ihesu crist þou grante me this as wis as thou art kynge in heuene blis. amen amen lord y be seche now the.[14]

The Sloane MS 3556 text is unique; it is the only extant witness for this exact version of the charm, perhaps a written record of one particular iteration that was in oral circulation at the time, or otherwise a creative endeavour by the scribe, who amalgamated a number of protective texts in order to maximise the charm's power. [15] It contains another significant phrase which shows evidence of intertextuality with other charms against thieves: "ffrom home I schal goo thys place I wil be sette ȝif enie thef heere with þu come my kynde catel or good to fette/ I set the holye goost hem bi fore these thefis for to lette." This phrase directly correlates with a text that is usually referred to as the 'St Bartholomew' charm against thieves, and which in fact also incorporates the motif used later on the in the Sloane text of St Bartholomew

binding the devil.[16] This particular passage consolidates the home as the locus for performance, while providing an insight into the belongings the practitioner is most afraid of losing: livestock, as well as other material possessions. But it is the words "be sette" that are of particular interest. This phrase, also commonly found in Middle English more generally as one word, 'bisette', carries several meanings, but the most relevant here is 'to surround or envelope'.[17] The text suggests that the practitioner will deploy the charm immediately prior to leaving the house, but that more specifically, their performance of the charm will cover – or envelope – the domestic residence with a sphere of protection. Here, we return to the idea that the words of the invocation possess the power to create a forcefield around the property, and I will now consider how movement, in combination with spoken words, can be understood to anchor this forcefield in place.

WEAVING A WEB OF PROTECTION WITH WORDS

A second charm against thieves in British Library, Sloane MS 2584, includes the supplication: "God and seint trinite, saue alle þinges þat is me lof, wiþinne þis hous and without and alle þe way aboute. I be teche God to day and to nyȝt and to seint feyþolde þat he kepe us and oure hom from alle manere of wyckede enemys and þeues."[18]

As with the texts cited above, the references to 'hous' and 'hom' make clear the practitioner's concerns for their domestic property, but the language used here also allows us to begin spatially mapping the performance of the charm. The construction of the phrase "wiþinne þis hous and without" suggests that the charm could be performed from inside the property, in anticipation of a threat. The continuation of the phrase then extends the defence beyond the four walls of the house to encompass the full residential plot, "alle þe way aboute". Here perhaps, the practitioner stands at the centre of the web of protection, using the words of the invocation to propel the property's defence, a nascent shield that can be expanded and stretched, as far as is desired. But by verbally touching on the different areas the charm will protect, the construction of the supplication allows us to imagine that the charm may have in fact been performed while circulating the property, crossing the threshold to encompass both the interior and exterior of the house, much like John the Carpenter does when performing his own night spell.

The imperative to encircle the property in order to deploy the charm is more explicit in an early sixteenth-century charm against theft – more specifically the theft of clothes – found in British Library, Harley MS 2389, which indicates that there is a link between the recitation of the invocation and the spatial performance of the charm.[19] "To save your clothes from stealynge all nyght: Jasper, Melcher, and Balthasar: stand ye my enemis, even as the sterr stode ouer Bethelem where Jesus was. Say this thrise goynge by the hedge over nyght."[20]

The injunction to circulate the perimeter, or 'hedge', of one's property while repeating the invocation, which here calls on the supernatural agency of the three magi, suggests that movement is imperative to the efficacy of the charm. The spoken words

may have power, but that power can be considered transient unless it is anchored in place through movement: movement creates a relationship between the words of the invocation and the location that they are designed to protect. In circling the property while performing the charm, the words of power integrate with the space the practitioner moves through.

While the performance of the charm imbibes the boundary lines with a protective power, this power has more active defensive qualities too: it will force the prospective thieves to 'stand', thus frustrating their attempt to break and enter. This concept is further propagated by the instructions of a third charm for theft in Sloane MS 2584. The Latin charm, in full, draws on several common narratives and phrases found in charms against thieves, including mention of Dismas and Gismas, the two thieves crucified beside Christ, and the citation of a particular line from Luke 4:30, "*Jesus autem transiens per medium illorum ibat*".[21] The words of the charm are proceeded by directions for its use: "*hoc carmen dico ut non perdam mea furto. Hos versus dicas circa domum vel faldam et si latrones intraverunt non exient donec precipis.*"[22] As with the text in Harley MS 2389, here too, the instructions make explicit that the performance of the charm requires a perambulation of the property as well as the recitation of the invocation.

This requirement to circulate the boundaries of the property draws an interesting parallel with the custom of 'beating the bounds'. Probably inspired by the processional walks that marked specific moments in the liturgical calendar, particularly Rogationtide, ceremonial perambulation had been practiced since the early days of Christianity in England (Gittos 2013). By the later medieval and early modern periods, these open-air processions had evolved in some communities to become concerned with demarcating the territorial boundaries of a parish (Hindle 2016). Not only was there a process of delineation at play, in which communities, in a way, defined and described themselves through this process of circumscription, but the performative raising of banners, handheld crosses, and ringing of bells, accompanied by the chanting of psalms and recitation of passages from the gospels which formed part of the processional activity, was designed to expel evil spirits, disease and sickness (Walsham 2011: 252–273; Hindle 2016: 206). Thus, we can understand these charms against thieves which require the perambulation of the domestic residence as a sort of microcosmic reproduction of this church-sanctioned ritual. In the physical performance of the charm, the practitioner is delineating the boundaries of their own property: their ritual procession around the parameter is as much a statement of ownership, or a territorial inscription, as it is a defensive tactic. Meanwhile, the recitation of the charm and its efficacious words, often calling on supernatural agents for assistance, mirrors the performances that accompanied beating the bounds, where the words of the psalms and the gospel were understood to drive away evil.

Enchanting the boundaries of one's property, however, did not just have a protective effect but, as mentioned above, also had more offensive properties. The Harley text cited previously is designed to halt the would-be-thief before they can break in; we can imagine that the performance of the charm aims to create an invisible but impenetrable bubble surrounding the property. Meanwhile, one text in Sloane MS 2584 allows the perpetrator entry, but once they enter they will be trapped inside

until permitted to leave (*donec precipis*), affording the victim the opportunity to iden-
tify their assailant and, if desired, exact revenge. A fifteenth-century charm found in
British Library, Sloane MS 2457 is enacted through a similar process of encircling
the property, but the protective shield it creates has a different effect on the potential
thief. The invocation itself is in Latin, but it is preceded by a Middle English rubric
which informs the practitioner:

> ʒif any man be so vn-sele
>
> That wold thi good stele
>
> Thi schep that ben in thi fold
>
> ʒounge other the hold
>
> Other any other good þat is in feld
>
> With this oureson þou schalt it scheld
>
> Al round thou schal gon a-bout
>
> Be it with-inne hous other with-out
>
> And this oureson þou saie with deuocion
>
> And þen a-non as the thef is com
>
> Al round a-bout he schal gon
>
> Al the nyʒt be seint Ion
>
> And power he schal haue non
>
> Awei þenne forto gon.[23]

Here, the text specifically uses the word 'scheld' or shield to describe the protective
quality of the enchantment, which will surround whichever parts of the property the
practitioner encircles as they perform the charm. However, there is an interesting
mirroring effect at play between the performance of the practitioner and the effect
this shield will have on the perpetrator. The rubric instructs the practitioner to cir-
cumscribe the perimeter of the property – "Al round thou schal gon a-bout" – while
reciting the invocation. If a thief does attempt to transgress this boundary created by
the practitioner, they will not simply be paralysed in place until the victim returns
home but instead, mirroring the movement of the practitioner in their deployment
of the charm, will be compelled to circle the property – "Al round a-bout he schal
gon" – until the owner returns home and can exact justice. Through this mirroring
effect, there is a kind of irony in the way that the would-be-thief is made to respect
the boundary lines delineated by the practitioner: compelled to circumscribe them
indefinitely while unable to transgress them.

This retributive element of the charm might be described by a modern reader
as 'karmic', but this is not the only instance where such a practice seeks to enact
retribution or punishment. As mentioned above, there is an implicit threat in the
third text cited from Sloane MS 2584, in which the perpetrator is trapped inside the
property until the victim returns. But other texts discussed here are more explicit
in their desire for justice. The Sloane MS 3556 text asserts: "I schal bete men thus

and bynde men thus of wikkyd mood and all thoo that wolde me oþer than good". The Cambridge, Trinity College charm draws a sinister comparison between the immobilised thief and a corpse: "he stonde as styll as stone on hyll as stone on more as dede mann on flore". The desire for punishment revealed by these texts reflects an anxiety over the invasion of the domestic space, one that goes beyond the fear of losing material goods and becomes personal. Barbara Hanawalt's in-depth study of fourteenth-century court records finds that robbery and burglary had a higher conviction rate than the majority of other felonies (Hanawalt 1979: 60). She suggests that these are crimes in particular which the public fear: while robbery carries with it the threat of physical harm, burglary is more than a property crime, it is an invasion of privacy, the exposure of the intimate and interior parts of a dwelling place which are not intended to be made public (Hanawalt 1979: 60). Modern studies in psychology too, support the notion that the psychological impact of burglary cannot be underestimated (for example, Beaton et al. 2000). Recent scholarship suggests that burglary should be seen as an interpersonal crime, rather than a property one: it carries with it a sense of violation and challenges the victim's feeling of control over their own territory, by extension affecting their feeling of identity (Harsent and Merry 2018). Thus we can perceive a duality in the performance of charms against thieves within and around the domestic property: there is both an assertion of control, in which the practitioner's relationship with their personal property is cemented, as well as an attempt to avert the psychological damage caused by an invasion of privacy, alongside the loss of material goods.

In a recent consideration of the place of magical tricks and illusion in medical manuscripts, Hannah Bower notes that these tricks often make reference to the house as the locus for performance, while such specific allusion to the domestic space is unusual in recipes of a more medical nature (Bower 2022: 202). While Bower's analysis focuses on practices of a more playful, rather than protective or defensive nature, her observation – that naming the house as a central locus for these practices plays on notions of the vulnerability of the threshold, and is provocative in the face of typical anxiety around exerting control over the domestic space – provides an interesting point of comparison with charms against thieves. Comparing the 'carnivalesque energy' of these magic tricks with medieval fabliaux that also centre around the household – including *The Miller's Tale* – Bower suggests that the 'circumscribed, ordered, and hierarchal domestic settings make the overturning of order more palpable. In both the recipes and the fabliaux, then, the violation of social, sexual, and conceptual thresholds is mapped onto the imagined violation of physical ones' (Bower 2022: 202–203). In this way, the physical threshold becomes representative of more than just a barrier between the would-be-thief and material goods, it is conflated with the social and psychological boundaries of the victim. Thus we come full circle, returning to John the Carpenter, the fabliau character whose concerted efforts to protect his domestic threshold correlate with, or respond to, (albeit in a ridiculous fashion) the violation of the social and sexual thresholds which the two other occupants of the house are planning to commit. But we can assume that Chaucer was only able to successfully deploy the Carpenter's night spell to comedic effect because the practice it portrayed resonated with his intended audience. We can assume that they recognised the night

spell as part of a corpus of ritual practices designed to protect the home, of which the texts discussed above would have formed a part, and in which they identified the attempt to exert agency or control over the domestic setting as an act that was at its most emphatic when it combined the recitation of an invocation with the physical perambulation or demarcation of the property's boundary lines.

CONCLUSION

All of the charms cited above explicitly reveal the domestic residence to be the primary locus for their performance. A closer examination of the language of these charms and their accompanying rubrics affords us a number of critical insights. In noting the words used to describe the objects to be protected, we can identify the items and possessions that a medieval household may have been most anxious to retain: clothes and household goods, sheep, cattle, and other livestock. This tallies with medieval records of the items most commonly lost to theft (Hanawalt 1979: 71). Further to this however, we can begin to conceive of how these charms may have been performed. While some charms are less explicit about their contexts for performance, indicating only that they are specific to the domestic residence through references to the house and home, others provide clear instructions which allow us to reconstruct how they may have been enacted. The circumscription of the property's boundary lines mirrors many elements of the medieval custom of beating the bounds, suggesting the appropriation and adaptation of this ritual performance on a microcosmic level. Furthermore, it reveals a similar assertion of ownership and the same desire to create a kind of protective forcefield around a property as that connoted by the ritual of beating the bounds.

Reconstructing the performance that is implied by the words of the text also permits us to consolidate the intrinsic link between words and action, and to understand how the two in collaboration can enact an effect that words alone might not necessarily deliver. Circulating the property while reciting the charm creates a relationship between speech, movement, and location, anchoring the protection in place. Finally, by examining the way in which the protective forcefield also possesses offensive properties which produce a number of different effects on the would-be-thief, and by identifying the implicit or explicit threat of retaliation that is present in many charms against thieves, we gain a deeper insight into the practitioner's anxiety around transgression of the threshold. In the implied desire for retribution, we get a sense of the shame that such an invasion of privacy might provoke. Such a focused study on charms which cite the house as the locus for performance allows us to move the examination of these texts beyond their manuscript contexts, to infer what they reveal about the practitioner's relationship with their domestic space, and to imagine and reconstruct how the charms might have looked in practice during the medieval period.

MANUSCRIPTS

Cambridge, Trinity College Library, MS R.14.45(916)
London, British Library, Additional MS 34111
London, British Library, Harley MS 2389
London, British Library, Sloane MS 2457
London, British Library, Sloane MS 2584
London, British Library, Sloane MS 3556
London, British Library, Sloane MS 56
Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ashmole MS 1378

NOTES

[1] Geoffrey Chaucer. The Canterbury Tales. Fragment 1, lines 3480 – 3486. All citations of Chaucer taken from Benson, L. D. (ed.) The Riverside Chaucer, 3rd edition 1988. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

[2] Geoffrey Chaucer. Troilus and Criseyde. Book II, lines 1578 – 80; see also Smallwood 2004: 12.

[3] This is supported by the manuscript evidence of the Middle Ages: Lea Olsan for example has demonstrated how charms were used by many types of medical practitioner, including university-trained physicians who practiced at court, see Olsan 2003.

[4] Much ink has been spilled analysing the use of magic, though predominantly necromancy, astrology, and illusion, in Chaucer's works, but as Daniel Pigg notes, it is important not to cede to the well-known fallacy of literary scholarship, in which assumptions are made about the author's stance on a topic based on the way it is portrayed in their writing or described by their characters, see Pigg 2017: 507.

[5] George Keiser too, for example, categorises these charms based on their most prominent motif in Keiser 1998: 3874–3876. Chiara Benati on the other hand provides a summary of much of the existing scholarship on charms against thieves, categorising them according to their purpose, i.e., to prevent theft, to stop the thief in the act, or to identify a thief after the fact, see Benati 2017.

[6] In the Middle Ages, robbery, burglary, and larceny were treated as three distinct forms of theft: whereas larceny specifically indicated the felonious act of removing goods from a property, burglary, while similar, was differentiated in legal terms by the specification that it involved breaking into a property, as well as carrying away goods and chattels. Robbery, on the other hand, indicated physical violence to a person in order to steal their property, often through a surprise attack, and could happen either on the road or within a person's home, see Hanawalt 1979: 64–113.

[7] Folio 100r; transcription in Sheldon 1978: 133–134.

[8] London, British Library, Sloane MS 2584, folios 74v–75r.

[9] Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ashmole MS 1378, p. 83.

[10] As we will shortly see, usually the 'binding' element of these charms is directed towards the thieves, who will become immobilised.

[11] Cambridge, Trinity College, R. 14. 45 (916), p. 118; my transcription, capitalisation reflects that found in the manuscript.

[12] London, British Library, Sloane MS 3556, folio 8v; my transcription, the text has seemingly been inserted on a blank folio by a subsequent user of the manuscript (though still in what appears to be a fifteenth century hand) as it is upside down; though the text approximates verse it has been written out by the scribe as prose with the line breaks indicated, this is reflected in the transcription. A small stain prevents full transcription of the first saint mentioned.

[13] Printed in Ames 1812: 108–109.

[14] Folios 8v–9r, my transcription; the phrase "be the vertu of that hie masse" has been scratched away, but is readable with the use of ultraviolet light.

[15] I have not identified an analogue text in my database of over 130 charms against thieves. While the Sloane MS 3556 features passages from other common charms against thieves, there are no close matches for the Sloane charm in full.

[16] For a list of manuscripts which contain this particular charm see Keiser 1998: 3874–3876. For a transcription of one version of this charm found in Sloane MS 2584 see Gray 1974: 66.

[17] See 'bisetten' in Frances McSparran et al. (Eds.) 2000–2018. Middle English Compendium. University of Michigan Library. Accessed online at http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/, last accessed December 2022.

[18] London, British Library, Sloane MS 2584, folio 73v; my transcription.

[19] Clothes often featured among stolen items listed in medieval court records pertaining to burglary, see for example Hanawalt 1979: 95–96.

[20] London, British Library, Harley MS 2389, folio 26r; transcribed in Bühler 1962: 48.

[21] For more on these two motifs or phrases, see Benati 2017: 151, 153.

[22] I say this charm so that I will not lose my [things] by theft. Say these lines around the house or farm and if robbers enter they will not leave until they are told, London, British Library, Sloane MS 2584, folios 74r-v, transcription and translation my own; the word 'faldam' here appears to be a Latinisation of the Old English word 'ffald' becoming the Middle English 'fold' – an enclosure for sheep and other domestic animals – showing interesting ties with the vernacular in spite of the Latin language of the charm: see 'falda' in du Cange, et al. 1883–1887. Glossarium mediae et infimae latinitatis. éd. augm. L. Favre, Niort: t. 3, col. 402a. Accessed online at http://ducange.enc.sorbonne.fr/FALDA1, and 'fold' in Frances McSparran et al. (eds.) 2000–2018. Middle English Compendium. University of Michigan Library. Accessed online at http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/ both last accessed December 2022.

[23] London, British Library, Sloane MS 2457, folio 7v; transcription as provided in Bühler 1958: 371–372.

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BIO

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