DREAMING OF DWARVES:

NIGHTMARES AND SHAMANISM IN ANGLO-SAXON POETICS AND THE *WIÐ*

DWEORH CHARM

by

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(Under the Direction of Jonathan Evans)

ABSTRACT

Anglo-Saxon Metrical Charm 3, *Wið Dweorh*, from the British Library MS Harley 585,
provides evidence of remnants of shamanic thinking in the early Christian era of Anglo-Saxon
England. It shows a depth of understanding of dream psychology that prefigures modern
psychiatric techniques; provides clues as to the linguistic, religious, cultural, and folkloric origins
of nightmares, and reflects a tradition of shamanism in Old English poetry. This paper illustrates
these linguistic and folkloric themes, places the metrical charm within the shamanistic tradition
of Old English poetics, and connects the charm's value as a therapeutic device to modern
psychiatric techniques.

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my parents, Brian and Kate Lewis, who instilled in me an early love of reading; and who have uncomplainingly put up with far too many years of my academic puttering about; and to my aunt, Thérèse Lewis, who introduced me to J. R. R. Tolkien by telling me the story of the Lord of the Rings, and thus, unbeknownst to both of us, set me on this path.

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Others who have guided me along my long trip through the halls of academe whom I would like to thank are Tom Sauret and Dan Cabaniss, of Gainesville State College, for helping me begin a new voyage into higher education; and Dr. Charles Doyle and Dr. John Vance, of the University of Georgia, for encouraging me with kind words and recognizing in my work something of worth, and for serving on my Thesis Committee.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The explanations that we humans have used to elucidate the workings of our own minds are so varied as to beggar description. Mankind has, since time immemorial, developed many a bizarre religious, alchemical, magical, or fantastic explanation for the psychological or physical maladies that affect our species. Early medieval Europe, under the auspices of late paganism, early Christianity, folk medicine, and superstition, developed theories of humors, of the magical properties of amulets and charms, and of the value of curing-stones and curses, and in the process gave rise to the beginnings of what we now know as medicine and psychology.

Psychological and psychiatric ailments must have baffled early medical practitioners. At least with physical disease there is often some outward, organic sign of the malady, from the scabrous deformations of leprosy and the swollen glands that are characteristic of the Black Plague, to the more mundane appearance of sprains and broken bones, or of bruises and bleeding. With psychological disorders, there are often no outward physical signs of distress, apart from strange behavior. Small wonder, then, that our medieval forebears blamed such ailments on demons, witches, elves, faeries, devils, or any of a long catalogue of fantastic beings. Psychological disorders, often lacking obvious physical causes, were taken as evidence of the existence of such creatures. Nightmares, in particular, seem to have been fertile ground for the production of folklore. The medieval mind, already prepared to believe in the supernatural or fantastic, readily accepted as explanations for night terrors such things as succubi, incubi, witches, elves, and dwarves.

The modern, scientific explanation for nightmares (or more specifically, night terrors with attendant sleep paralysis and hypnagogic and hypnopompic hallucinations) is of course far more complex, and this paper will explain a much simplified version of it. I will show how the modern clinical diagnosis of nightmare is not entirely dissimilar to the older, folklore- and superstition-based definition, nor are its prescribed treatments. I believe that Anglo-Saxon Metrical Charm 3, *Wið Dweorh*, anticipates modern clinical psychiatry in both its description of the malady and in its prescribed treatment. The Anglo-Saxons could, of course, have had no knowledge of psychiatry or psychology as we understand them, but the similarities between their diagnosis and treatment of nightmare and modern techniques are surprising. The synthesis of ancient mind/soul conceptions with the folklore of monsters, with religion (both shamanic paganism and early Christianity), and with early Anglo-Saxon poetics produced in the *Wið Dweorh* charm a unique device. It simultaneously contains and reflects ancient traditions of folklore and poetry, techniques for controlling and manipulating the mind, and recognition of fears so deeply primal that all humanity feels them.

This paper integrates the folkloric construction of the nightmare; the early medieval conception of the *anima/psyche*, or soul/mind construct; the first adumbrations of psychology in Anglo-Saxon England; Anglo-Saxon shamanic poetics; and the *Wið Dweorh* charm. It examines first the theories of cognition that developed in the early Middle Ages, and which included a conception of the mind that allowed for internal manipulation of the psyche by the patient. I then show how early Anglo-Saxon poetics were shamanic in nature, and encouraged the belief that dreams were real things, which could be deliberately entered into and controlled, and I examine early medieval ideas of the causes of disease and illness. The second section of this paper discusses the nightmare proper; its religio-mythical connotations and the folklore surrounding it,

then explains the psychological reasons for the universal experience of nightmare, sleep paralysis, and nightly hallucinations. The last section describes in detail the *Wið Dweorh* charm itself, including linguistic and folkloric analysis, and examines the ways in which the charm provides a real, workable therapy for nightmares which anticipates modern psychiatry, and culminates in the suggestion that study of the folklore surrounding nightmare phenomenon can give a greater insight into modern psychological understanding of nightmares.

CHAPTER II

ANGLO-SAXON PSYCHOLOGY AND MEDICINE

Early Medieval Theories of Cognition

To begin this discussion, it will be useful to examine the medieval concepts of the

processes of thought, and the history and background of what we now call "psychology."

Formalized study of the workings of the mind was not necessarily an accepted part of medicine

in the early Middle Ages. The term *psychology* does not appear even to have existed until 1520,

when Marko Marulić, a Serbo-Croatian philosopher, apparently coined the word in a manuscript

entitled *Psichiologia de ratione animae humanae* [1] Later usages also make reference to the study

of the soul, the *scientia de anima*.

The earliest reference given by the OED to psychology as the study of *mind* is from 1712.

This serves to illustrate the point that "soul" (*anima*) and "mind" (*psyche*) were regarded as

separate elements by early thinkers. Hellenistic and early Hebraic thought held that, while

conscious thought might be the motivator for gross actions, such as walking or eating,

unconscious thought (more *anima*-driven, as it were) was not recognized as being of human

origin.[2] Unconscious action was motivated by the gods. Julian Jaynes, in analyzing the language

of the *Iliad*, notes that unconscious thought was believed by the Greeks to be driven by the gods,

as was the imagination, and godly influence was behind the thoughts which come, seemingly

unbidden, to the mind. Jaynes points out that

> [t]here is in general no consciousness in the *Iliad* . . . and in general, therefore,
> [there are] no words for consciousness or mental acts. The words in the *Iliad* that

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[1] K. Krstic, "Marko Marulic -- The Author of the Term 'Psychology.'" *Acta Instituti Psychologici Universitatis Zagrabiensis*, No. 36 (1964), 7-13. The Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd Edition (1989) gives an even later date of 1654, when it was used by Nicholas Culpeper in his *New Method of Physick* to mean "knowledg [*sic*] of the Soul."
[2] Morton Hunt, *The Story of Psychology* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 3-6.

in a later age come to mean mental things have different meanings, all of them more concrete. The word *psyche*, which later means soul or conscious mind, [in the *Iliad* refers to] in most instances life-substances, such as blood or breath: a dying warrior bleeds out his *psyche* onto the ground or breathes it out in his last gasp.[3]

Any actions taken because of thoughts that occur to one, or any actions which are driven by emotion, are thus directed by the gods. Aristotle's view, articulated in his *De anima* (which was to influence thought for many centuries), held that the soul was an invisible, intangible, and incorporeal entity which nonetheless was able to perceive its surroundings and to analyze them. Although incapable of movement in and of itself, the Aristotelian soul can initiate certain kinds of movement – "moving" the body to tears or sighs based on nostalgia, for example – and is the receptor for sensations channeled through the organs of sense.[4] It was still, however, a direct medium for godly influence; what the gods wanted, they told man in dreams or visions that were understood to be delivered to the *psyche* through the conduit of the *anima*; thus, thoughts that occur to one, or which seem to simply "appear" in one's mind, are delivered into the mind through the mechanism of the soul; the soul is a telephone line, as it were, to the gods, and the mind is the telephone receiver. Dreams and visions are the messages, sometimes garbled, sometimes clear.

The Aristotelian *mind*, meanwhile, was imbued with the capacity for rational thought, which was thought to be independent of the soul/*anima* but located within it.[5] The *anima*/*psyche* or "soul/mind" construct provided the basic mechanism of intellectual capability. Mind is the device by which the soul thinks and comprehends, based on sense perceptions. How the mind itself knows what it knows is somewhat unclear. In parts of *De anima*, Aristotle seems to

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[3] Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990) 69-70.

[4] Simon Kemp, *Medieval Psychology*, Contributions in Psychology, No. 14 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990) 12.

[5] Kemp 12.

recognize that knowledge is empirical, based in the abstraction of perceived stimuli. However, he sometimes reverts to the Platonic view of ideal forms that are innate within the mind. In this case, sense experience and thought processes are coeval, with the physical world operating on the senses and the mind operating on that which is capable of being thought.[6]

The Hellenistic conception of thought as being derived from godly influence, and knowledge from the soul's interpretation of sensory data held sway until it became important for early Christian thinkers to emphasize free will as part of theological dogma. The first Christian philosophers needed to imbue man with a degree of free will that was entirely absent from the ideas of the Hellenistic thinkers. It was no longer acceptable to be directed solely by outside forces; man must make a conscious choice to behave in a certain way; to do either good or evil. No longer could the gods be blamed for one's actions. Early Neoplatonic thinkers, notably St. Augustine, began to solidify the conception of the soul as a distinct entity within man, which endows him with reasoning ability and therefore with free will. This soul was also imbued with a certain degree of innate knowledge, of God and of the world. It was left to the senses to "direct" the knowledge that the soul already possessed. Sensation, as Augustine explained it in his *On Genesis*, serves to activate the soul's innate "memory" of Platonic ideals of form and of thought. The images that appear in dreams are, for the dreamer, as real as sense-images of the waking world. Not only could this innate "memory" give the conscious mind knowledge of God, but of more earthly things, such as mathematics. Certain persons, as well, notably the insane and the divinely inspired, see spiritual images as completely real, as if their minds had cross-wired the waking and the dreaming worlds. [7] Memory, therefore, was a sacred thing, and memorization of information necessarily brought one closer to God.

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[6] Kemp 14.

[7] Augustine, *On Genesis*. trans. Edmund Hill (New York: New City Press 2002) 465.

Even for Augustine, though, such innate knowledge was simply that: information placed by God into the soul of man to be released upon memorization of scripture, or remembered when circumstances warranted. Later thinkers began to examine the actual process of cognition. The Augustinian conceit of innate knowledge was kept (known as *universal knowledge*), but to this was added the idea of *particular knowledge*. The two were distinct in that they took place in separate parts of the body (and neither necessarily in the brain). Simon Kemp and Garth Fletcher's analysis of a theory of "inner sense" puts it thus:

> Universal knowledge comprised general principles, or ideas, such as the mathematical fact that 2 plus 2 equals 4, or knowledge of abstract propositions about God. . . Particular knowledge, on the other hand, was more closely tied to perception, and it concerned particular objects in the world. Knowledge and thinking about universals was carried out in the mind, a faculty that was not associated with any bodily organ. On the other hand, following Aristotle's suggestion, a number of other cognitive processes were believed to take place in bodily organs. These processes included "common sense," a term not to be understood here in its modern connotation, which was believed to combine input from different sense modalities (like touch and vision), imagination (which included the power of retaining and recalling sensory images), and memory.[8]

The soul was generally believed to have a distinct existence, separate from (although integral to) the body, a pilot, so to speak, for the ship of the body. Information (or "knowledge data," that is, *intellectual* information, rather than the merely sensual) provided by the body's senses was filtered and interpreted by the soul, and integrated into the universal knowledge that it already possessed. The body's *particular* knowledge, based on everyday perception (the sensual rather than the intellectual) was separate from its *universal* knowledge, and indeed was stored separately, in its own memory centers.

By the 4th century CE, although the soul was still considered to be noncorporeal, emphasis was placed more on its immortality and its activity during sleep. Nemesius, writing in

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[8] Simon Kemp and Garth J. O. Fletcher, "The Medieval Theory of the Inner Senses." *American Journal of Psychology,* Vol. 106, no. 4 (Winter, 1993) 559-60.

his *De natura hominis* (*circa* 390 CE), believed the soul took the place of the mind, as it were, during sleep. The soul separated from the body and sleep itself was a result of this leaving; according to him, the soul maintained just enough connection to the body to keep it alive, and even though the physical state of sleep superficially resembles death, the soul is dreaming, thinking, and processing information.[9] Much as the waking mind processed sensory data, the soul did the same with dream data; sometimes dreams were messages from God, sometimes prophetic visions, and, occasionally, by dint of the soul's already tenuous connection with the physical body, dreams could allow the body to be controlled by malevolent forces.

It has been noted that conceptions of the soul in Anglo-Saxon thought can be related to conceptions of *self*. Antonina Harbus observes that

> conception of the self changed once Christianity and Latin literacy were introduced into England. . . . Even within the period in which England was "Anglo-Saxon," there is a discernable historical development or change in the conception of the self: the once separate psychological source of agency and the cognitive apparatus of the poetic tradition were melded into a single entity within the prose tradition. [10]

This view, the conception of the soul-as-self (as iterated within Anglo-Saxon prose), reinforces the idea that the soul, even as it flits from the body while the body sleeps, carries with it the *psyche*, the intellectual part of the mind which recognizes its own individuality. This ties the mind to the soul, making it, as Ælfric put it, "a likeness to the Holy Trinity, in that it has memory, understanding, and will."[11] It seems, too, that this "unification" of the soul and the mind, while making the mind more open to visions from the divine, in later contexts also made the soul more vulnerable to attack from diabolic forces, such as the nightmare, the invader of dreams.

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[9] Kemp 18

[10] Antonina Harbus, "The Medieval Concept of the Self in Anglo-Saxon England," *Self and Identity*, Vol. 1 (2002) 82.

[11] *Lives of Saints*, ed. Walter W. Skeat (Oxford: Early English Text Society, 1966), lines 112 – 114.

In Anglo-Saxon poetics, a different (though related) sense of the self is present. Along with this idea of dreaming bringing one closer to God, certain pagan concepts of self-determination are evident in Old English poetry, some of which fit neatly into the Augustinian idea of the soul-as-self. Poetry, in particular, seems to be the vehicle for a multivalent view of the self that ties into a shamanic thread in Anglo-Saxon poetics. The uniquely subjective viewpoint that poetry can provide presents an ideal way to explore the ways in which the soul-self relates to God and to its environment, and to explain or to iterate the mechanism of soul-as-controller that can be seen in this poetry in the light of Augustinian thought. Anglo-Saxon poetry often revolves around the inner substance of its narrators; Harbus says of this that

> [T]his literary culture [of the Anglo-Saxons] seems to privilege the universality of mental experience: subjective psychological reality is widely apprehensible by other individuals. . . . The common focus on the inner person as a thinking subject in turn indicates the primacy of psychology in poetic creation.[12]

This concept, that the soul/mind is a rational thing, and that poetry can evince the soul's independence, will become important in the last part of this paper, when I examine the *Wið Dweorh* charm and the way in which it demonstrates an attempt to assert control by the *anima*/*psyche* construct over the dream-world.

<u>Dream-theory in Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Evidence</u>

Dreaming has been a source of imaginative speculation since prehistory, but fitting it into the religious framework established by St. Augustine and others, of which memory and memorization are key parts, can be troublesome. Some of the early Neoplatonic thinkers (such as Nemesius, noted above) began to establish theories of dreams and of dream-states. Generally, Neoplatonic thought held that dreams could provide access to memories, but were actually

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[12] Harbus, *The Life of the Mind in Old English Poetry*. Costerus New Series 143, (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi B. V., 2002) 11.

another kind of sensation, akin to vision or hearing. Indeed, the standard view, derived from

Aristotle and espoused by Augustine, was that dreams were more or less the same thing as visual

or other sensual experiences:

> You see, when bodily images are exhibited in dreams or in ecstasy [here referring
> to shamanic dream-visions], they are not distinguished at all from real bodies,
> except when we return to consciousness and realize that we were in a world of
> images which we had not imbibed through the senses of the body .[13]

Averroes, the 12th-century Arabic philosopher, believed dreams could be influenced

externally and could in turn influence the body:

> [A]fter the imaginative faculty has formed an image of the object, which it has
> received either externally or from the memorative faculty, it, in turn, will move
> the common sense and the common sense, in turn, will move the faculties. . . .
> Sometimes, a similar condition will occur during waking to one who is frightened
> or sick, and this as a result of the excessive activity of the imaginative faculty on
> such occasions. . . . Indeed the movement of the imaginative faculty will be
> excessive during sleep because it is released from the bond of the cogitative
> faculty and is no longer subject to its control. [14]

In his commentaries upon Job, Gregory the Great says, "*Vox uidelicet Dei quasi per somnium*

auditor, quando tranquilla mente ab huius saeculi actione quiescitur et in ipso mentis silentio

diuina praecepta pensantur" ("The voice of God indeed is heard in dreams, when with a tranquil

mind there is peace from the actions of this world, and in this mind-silence divine precepts are

perceived").[15] Thus the silence of the night allows the dreamer to hear the voice of God, and his

dreams may be directed by the Divine Will in order to transmit some message or lesson.

Early Anglo-Saxon poets used this concept of the dream-as-conduit-to-God as the basis

for several examples of dream- or vision-poetry. The dream-state as one in which supernatural

events may occur, and in which visions may be seen, is evident in *The Dream of the Rood*,

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[13] Augustine, *On Genesis*, 465.

[14] Averroes, *Epitome of Parva Naturalia*, trans. Harry Blumberg (Cambridge, MA, Medieval Academy of America: 1961) 41-42.

[15] Gregory I, *Moralia in Job*, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina, 143-143B. Ed. Marci Adriaen (Turnholt: Brepols 1979) 1172.

Beowulf, and *The Wanderer*, among other Old English poetry. Andrew Galloway says of *The Dream of the Rood* and *Beowulf* that these poems develop dream-theory through

> a narrative mode that is distinctly different from Gregory's comments but fully consonant with Old English poetic idioms. . . . *Beowulf*'s elaborations of the shock of awakening must be reckoned minor masterpieces; these moments – what the narrator at one point calls "morgensweg" – are among the most dramatic aspects of the attacks of Grendel and his mother, moments of measuring the consequences of what has happened, emphasizing the power and reality of what occurs in the dead of night.[16]

Clearly, the dream-state (and what it implied for mental health and for religion) was extremely important to the Anglo-Saxons. The dream-world, and the potential dangers it held for the souls of the devout, was as real for them as the waking world. It must be remembered that the Anglo-Saxons were not so very far removed from an animistic, shamanistic, and polytheistic religion. Their Christianity was new, and although they had something of the zeal of the new convert, they were also close to their pagan roots. *The Dream of the Rood,* for instance, contains many references to pagan iconography, painting the Crucifixion as a battle, with a warrior-Christ behaving much as a Germanic tribal leader, fighting for and alongside his thanes (in this case, believers) and rewarding them not with golden rings, but with heavenly grace. It is, however, only at the end of the poem, when the dreamer awakes, that he puts his words into a more Christianized form.[17] The awakening of the mind, in its metaphoric guise as the awakening of the body, is part of the metempsychotic nature of this poem, which is in turn part of a larger tradition of shamanic dream interpretation, alluded to in the poem, even if it is never explicitly stated. *The Dream of the Rood* is not simply an exercise in Christian enlightenment. It stands on the cusp

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[16] Andrew Galloway, "Dream-Theory in *The Dream of the Rood* and *The Wanderer*." *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, Vol. 45, No. 180 (Nov. 1994) 479.

[17] The rest of the poem is an admixture of Christian and pagan elements, or rather of Christian elements seen through a pagan lens. This combination of Christian and pagan is a feature of Anglo-Saxon medicine that I will return to in my discussion of the *Wið Dweorh* charm, in the last section of this paper.

between full-on Christian thought and a pagan philosophy/psychology for which dreams and dream-interpretation were utterly, perfectly real.

The word "dream," in itself, presents interesting issues that dovetail into a discussion of the pagan/Christian admixture, as well as the *anima*/*psyche* construct of cognition. Clark Hall glosses *drēam* as "joy, gladness, delight, ecstasy, mirth, rejoicing."[18] He gives the Modern English derivative as "dream," but it can be seen immediately that the two words are not synonymous. Clark Hall's definition however, does ring true with Stephen Glosecki's analysis of the shamanistic nature of certain Old English poetry, in its reference to *ecstasy*.[19] I shall return to this analysis shortly, but for the moment, it may be edifying to examine the construction of *drēam* in terms of its resonances with the dream-construct of the Anglo-Saxons as iterated in the above-mentioned poems and in the general idea of "dreams" as conduits to God. In a 1949 paper on development of Germanic *draum-a* into the "dream"-word in Old English, Bogislav von Lindheim noted that "[t]here can be no doubt that the work of Anglo-Saxon missionaries on the Continent must have contributed largely towards shaping the language of the people they converted."[20] No instance, he says, has been seen of the use of OE *drēam* that is synonymous with Latin *somnium*. The Old English word originally meant "transitory, fleeting joys," such as the noise of revelry in the meadhall. This can be seen specifically in *Beowulf*, at lines 88b-89a (when Grendel *drēam gehyrde* / *hludne in healle*)   and 497b (whereat Hrothgar's minstrel sings: *þær wæs hæleða drēam*), and it is in this meaning that we see an echo of pagan times. Von Lindheim says of this: "I strongly suspect that we here get a glimpse of the earliest sense of *drēam* in OE which presumably referred in pre-Christian times to the noise of drunken warriors,

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[18] J. R. Clark Hall, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960.

[19] See Stephen Glosecki, *Shamanism in Old English Poetry*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1989.

[20] Bogislav von Lindheim, "Old English 'Drēam' and its Subsequent Development." *The Review of English Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 99 (Jul. 1949) 195.

before it took on its later and more refined sense."[21] The change of meaning, not merely of

words, but of life itself, that went along with the conversion to Christianity, must have begun a

kind of secondary conversion in the Anglo-Saxon *scop*: perhaps the "dream" (or memory) of the

days when his services were needed at meadhall revelries led the poet of *The Wanderer* or of *The*

Seafarer to cast his still-shamanic verse into a Christian mold. Certainly the "feel" of these

works is wild and pagan, even with the Christian overtones they adopt.

Evidence for such pagan influence in Anglo-Saxon poetry is easily found, and the poetic

concern about the dream-state can be easily seen. Glosecki has constructed a framework for Old

English poetry that bases it in shamanism, the animistic and totemistic spiritual worldview that

emphasizes the importance of ecstatic dream-journeys and visions and which surrounds its

believers with a menagerie of spirits, both benevolent and evil, which must be propitiated or

controlled (or avoided). Shamanism, according to Glosecki, involves visionary states, either in

dreams or waking, known as *ecstasies*:

> [S]hamanic ecstasy is like a controlled dream; it is a trancelike state, either fully
> or else liminally disjunctive. . . . It is usually described as a metempsychotic
> journey involving descent, ascent, or lateral flight. [The journeyer] moves through
> mythic time, through the realm of gods and ancestors. [. . .] Shamanic travel
> should not seem incredible to anyone who can recall dreams of flying or falling.[22]

He goes on to show that such Old English works as *Widsið* and *The Seafarer*, usually regarded as

elegies, are also works of shamanistic dream-travel:

> [P]assages in poems like *The Wanderer* reflect psychic dissociation – genuine
> ecstasy – and not just artistic introspection. These Germanic poets often appear as
> wanderers; historic skalds like Egil seemed to have lived the traveling life
> described in *Widsið*[23] and *Deor*, *The Wanderer*, and *The Seafarer*. One wonders
> just how widely Widsið was thought to travel, since evidence of spirit projection –
> especially in *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* – makes the conventional image of
> the poet as rambler seem a metaphor for the shamanic journey. [. . .] The speaker

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[21] von Lindheim 197.

[22] Glosecki 8.

[23] Note that this name means "far-journey."

in *Dream of the Rood* enters mythic time in his vision, too; and the Wanderer and the Seafarer both send their disembodied souls out over lonesome seas.[24]

The Wanderer contains several passages that fit into this idea of a shamanic, dream-vision, or hallucinatory metaphor. At lines 8-9a, the narrator makes explicit that angst and dread fill his thoughts at night:

> Oft ic sceolde ana   uhtna gewhylce
> mine ceare cwiþan.

> (Often I have had to bemoan my anxieties alone, at each dawning.)[25]

His dreams are filled with thoughts of his lost master; he quests nightly, in his dreams, for that which cannot be found. Later, at lines 39-48, the narrator says

> ðonne sorg ond slæp somod ætgædre
> earmne anhogan   oft gebindað.
> Þinceð him on mode þæt he his mondryhten
> clyppe ond cysse,   ond on cneo lecge
> honda ond heofod,   swa he hwilum ær
> in geardagum   giefstolas breac.
> Ðonne onwæcneð eft winelas guma,
> gesihð him biforan fealwe wegas,
> baþian brimfuglas, brædan feþra,
> hreosan hrim ond snaw,   hagle gemenged.

> (When grief and sleep combined together enchain the wretched solitary man, it seems to him in his imagination that he is embracing and kissing his lord and laying hands and head on his knee, just as at times previously in days of old he enjoyed the gift-throne. Then the friendless man awakes again and sees before him tawny waves, sea-birds bathing, spreading their wings, rime falling and snow, mingled with hail).

Here it is again made plain that the dream state of the narrator is where his wandering is happening – Glosecki's "psychic dissociation."[26]

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[24] Glosecki 69.

[25] Translations are from S. A. J. Bradley's *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*. London: J. M. Dent, 2004.

[26] Also note the concept of binding (or "enchaining," as Bradley's translation has it). The idea of being bound by sleep and emotion, or of being unable to break free of some kind of spiritual (or otherwise supernatural) chains, is an important function of the Anglo-Saxon conception of nightmare.

Further hallucinatory images occur at line 50b-53, upon the narrator's awakening:

> Sorg bið geniwad,
> þonne maga gemynd mod geondhweorfeð;
> greteð gliwstafum, georne geondsceawað
> segca geseldan. Swimmað eft on weg!

(Sorrow is renewed, when the memory of his kinsfolk passes through his imagination, the man greets his comrades with cheerful words, eagerly he watches them, but they swim often away.)

Here the narrator's fantasies of his lost *duguð* overwhelm him; Glosecki says of this particular passage that it shows how "[a] roaming exile, deprived of distractions, gains a heightened awareness of inner and outer nature."[27] Again a pagan concept, the shamanistic vision-quest aligns with a Christian motif, that of the ascetic; and both ideas dovetail neatly into the Anglo-Saxon perception of the dream-state as one in which both emotions and perceptions are heightened and against which there is little defense. The visions come, unbidden, even to those like the Wanderer, who might wish desperately that they could stop them. Even at the end of the poem, in the famous *ubi sunt* portion of the narrative, the speaker continues to envision his lost friends, although here his vision-quest has turned inwards, has allowed him to become introspective.

A similar situation prevails in *The Seafarer*. Bradley places this poem squarely within the Augustinian tradition, and claims that the narrator's travels and travails are metaphorical,[28] and so they are, but they are also, at heart, symptomatic of the metempsychotic nature of the poet-as-seer. When he speaks of thought "roam[ing] beyond the confines of my heart" (line 58), the narrator is speaking from the depths of the shamanistic experience of a dream-quest that is no mere metaphor, but an actual, real event. These poets were not simply singers or entertainers, but shamans. Their stock-in-trade was the dream-journey; their *scopcræft* was as psychological as it

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[27] Glosecki 84.
[28] Bradley 331.

was artistic. The poet's work allowed him a measure of control over the unseen and unknowable, and this is an important consideration in my examination of the *Wið Dweorh* charm, which is another example of poetry designed to exert control over the otherwise uncontrollable. The words of the *scop* were thought to exert real influence, to describe real things. Glosecki says of this that

> the songs of the oral poet were not only visionary, ecstatic; they were also effective. . . . In Anglo-Saxon England, vestiges of this belief lingered on after the conversion; otherwise scribes would have had no practical reason to preserve metrical charms intended to drive out disease spirits through the agency of psychoactive verses.[29]

By the late tenth or early eleventh century, when the *Lacnunga* was probably first compiled, the role of the *scop*-as-shaman had been taken over, as it were, by the physician, but the conceptions of dream-states as dangerously liminal was still very much in evidence – thus the "psychoactive verses" Glosecki describes. The relatively newly-Christianized Anglo-Saxon, while maintaining his Christian faith, would, in all probability, also have had recourse to what would have by that point become folk medicine, which carried over some (if not all) of the shamanistic characteristics of its pagan origins. Such shamanistic medicine included the charms to be found in the *Lacnunga* and elsewhere, which combine Christian motifs with obviously pagan ritual.

Dreams, then, to the Anglo-Saxons, could represent visions of God, prophecies, or spiritual journeys; not necessarily or only in the figurative sense, but also in the literal: the soul journeys forth from the body at night and explores the spirit realm. The seer/poet is the reporter of these quests; his dreams, and the freedom of his soul that his dreams imply, were very real to his audience. Dreaming was a time when the soul was unfettered, and set loose upon the cosmos. But it was also, by its very nature, a dangerous time, when the thread of connection between soul and body, between *anima* and *corpus*, was at its most tenuous. Without the soul to protect it,

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[29] Glosecki 77.

without the shield of the *anima*, the body becomes vulnerable to attack from without. The

malevolent spirits of the pagan Anglo-Saxon did not simply disappear when he became

Christianized. They changed shape, shedding their merely monstrous disguises and revealing

themselves to be demons, devils, and succubi. The poets described the journey of the soul, but

seldom gave directions for how to protect the bodily shell that remained behind.

<p style="text-align:center">Anglo-Saxon Conceptions of Disease and Illness</p>

Much medieval "medicine" revolves around the idea of humors, which is that imbalances

in bodily fluids lead to disease. Otherwise, theories of disease seem to have been somewhat hit-

or-miss, often based in rituals of purely sympathetic magic. In *Anglo-Saxon Magic and*

Medicine, their translation and discussion of the *Lacnunga*, J. H. G. Grattan and Charles Singer

seem to believe that there was no real theory of disease among the Anglo-Saxons:

> Surveying the mass of folly and credulity that makes up A.S. leechdoms, it may
> be asked: "Is there any rational element here? Is the material based on anything
> that we may reasonably describe as experience?" The answer to both questions
> must be "Very little." [30]

This is, however, patently untrue. On its face the theory of humors is in fact quite logical. Our

bodies are full of fluids that seem to come leaking out whenever illness or injury strikes us:

blood from cuts, phlegm from coughs, lymph from blisters, sweat from fevers, pus from

infections. It seems only natural that, in some way, the production of these fluids should lead to

(or be in some way related to) disease. Of course, we recognize this as confusing correlation and

causality, but to early physicians, it seemed perfectly sensible. In fact it is basically a logically

sound – if incorrect – theory of disease, based on empirical observation.

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[30] J. H. G. Grattan and Charles Singer, *Anglo-Saxon Magic and Medicine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1592)
92.

Many of the diseases for which remedies are cited in the *Lacnunga* or in that other great Anglo-Saxon pharmacopoeia, *Bald's Leechbook*, are described as originating from the imbalances of humors, or from external imbalances such as excess of temperature. Such diagnoses, again, are based on observation. Nigel Barley, in a discussion of A-S magic and medicine, gives three separate ways disease was considered:

> Disease can be seen as caused by the invasion of the body by alien matter or force from without. Treatment then consists of removing it. It can be viewed as the loss, by a man, of something normally inherent to him. In this case, treatment consists in returning it to him. A third possible view would be to see disease as caused by a disruption of the natural order within the body. Here, treatment would entail reestablishing that order.[31]

Interestingly, however, neither the *Leechbook* nor the *Lacnunga* seem to place much emphasis on humor-based *remedies*. The remedies given are generally more directly physical; they involve the use of herbal concoctions, poultices, and so on, without much emphasis given to restoring the order of humors. In any event, it can be seen that, although Anglo-Saxon medicine was necessarily "primitive," it was still reasonable in its approach to diagnosis, given the state of knowledge of anatomy and physiology at the time. Problems arise, however, when attempting to correlate these methods of diagnosis with purely *mental* afflictions.

The physical causes of disease and injury are often readily apparent: falls and blows can cause bruising, sprains, and fractures; cuts cause bleeding, overeating causes indigestion, and so on. The medieval herbariums, and compilations such as the *Leechbook* and the *Lacnunga*, are filled with remedies for such physical ailments. But the appearance of mental ailments is not so easy to diagnose. An angry person can be said to be choleric, a lazy person phlegmatic, but what of the insane? With little or no knowledge of the ways in which the brain functions, or of the results of organic causes of brain disorders such as lesions or strokes, perhaps it is forgivable that

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[31]Nigel Barley, "Anglo-Saxon Magico-Medicine." *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford*, Vol. 3, No 2 (1972) 68.

our medieval forebears often blamed such ailments on demons, witches, elves, faeries, devils, or

any of a long list of fantastic beings.

We enter now into the shadowy world of Anglo-Saxon supernatural beliefs. Grattan and

Singer point out that one "barbaric" (their word) view of the origin of sickness is "Projection of

an object into the body [by a malign supernatural force]."[32] Such projection is often known as

elfshot. It was believed that, apparently out of sheer malignancy, elves (or other magical

creatures) would fire invisible arrows into their victims, causing any number of physical or

mental ailments. Elves and faeries were believed to lead people astray, especially at night or in

the fog, causing them to be "pixie-led." Later, *pixilated* came to mean "crazed, bewildered,

confused [. . .] or intoxicated."[33] The OED also claims that *stroke* (in the sense of a thrombosis or

other sudden, severe loss of blood to the brain) was originally part of the phrase "the stroke of

God's hand," but, interestingly, Lindahl, *et al*. suggest that it comes from "fairy stroke," that is, a

bolt shot at the sufferer by a supernatural creature – a fairy, elf, dwarf, or so on.[34] Barley's

assertion in part of his definition of disease is similar: "invasion of the body by alien matter or

force from without." An alien force invading the body could well have been directed by an elf or

dwarf, firing their elfshot into a hapless human. These creatures were usually considered to be

cohorts of Satan, but their origins in folklore are obvious; Christianity has no elves or faeries.

Grattan and Singer note a liturgical refrain that was apparently used as an exorcism:

> The passage ends with a recommendation to wear as a periapt some writing in
> corrupt Latin equivalent to: "Devil of Satan, Elf, I adjure thee, by the living and
> true God and by the awful day of Judgment, depart from this man that hath this
> written letter with him." Note the equation of *devil* and *elf*, and the magic prestige
> of the written word.[35]

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[32] Grattan and Singer 3.
[33] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd Edition (1989).
[34] Carl Lindahl, *et al.*, "Fairies." *Medieval Folklore* (Santa Barbara, ABC-CLIO Inc., 2000).
[35] Grattan and Singer 50.

Bonser notes that Neolithic arrowheads and spear points, often found in Britain, were known locally as "elf-shot," and were taken as evidence of the existence of elves and faeries.[36] Akin to elfshot is the concept of being "ridden" by some creature or other. Grattan and Singer make note of "Two Christian periapts" to be written *ondlang ða earmas* ("along the arms," presumably actually written on the skin) which seem to be amulets against dwarf-riding.[37] The nightmare beings waylay the unsuspecting sleeper and ride him like a horse, until he awakens, terrified and exhausted. The derivation of the modern English word "haggard," meaning anxious or terrified, may be connected with "hag-ridden" or "hag-rode," describing such nightmare conditions.[38] This idea, that people are ridden at night by some monster, ties directly in with the folkloric origins of the nightmare, and, via such devices as the *Wið Dweorh* charm, into folkloric remedies for nightmare as well.

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[36] Wilfrid Bonser, *The Medical Background of Anglo-Saxon England* (London: University Press, Oxford, 1963) 161-62.

[37] Grattan and Singer 158-59.

[38] David J. Hufford, *The Terror that Comes in the Night: An Experience-Centered Study of Supernatural Assault Traditions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982) 54.

CHAPTER III

DREAMS GONE WRONG: THE NIGHTMARE

Before discussing the nightmare *per se*, some understanding of the ways in which early

medieval thinkers understood the functioning of brain and body will be beneficial. In the middle

Ages, one's mental faculties, as we have seen, were predicated upon a comprehension of the

anima/*psyche* construct. Physical disease, on the other hand, could be caused by a variety of

factors, not all of them corporeal. No germ theory of disease was known, and much of the

medicine that was applied to diseases was herbal or complementarily magical in nature. This

section examines the conception of mental illness (including nightmares) as a result of

interference by supernatural creatures, and the psychological effect of charms upon sufferers of

nightmares, with reference to the ways in which Metrical Charm 3 (the *Wið Dweorh* charm)

operates within the Christian/shamanistic mode, as a primitive psychiatric method of controlling

dreams.

Medieval Conceptions of Nightmare: The *Mara*

"Nightmare" is derived from Old English *mara*, "nightmare, monster,"[39] which was in

turn adopted from the same word in Old Norse. In modern parlance, of course, it generally

describes any kind of bad dream or night terror. The medieval conception of the nightmare,

however, was much more specific. It referred to a kind of demonic night visitor, a shape-shifting,

generally female being that entered the room of a sleeper and physically abused him, often

sexually. For the early Anglo-Saxons, elements of Norse folklore colored their conception of the

nightmare. The very word "nightmare," like so many words, carries within it clues not only to its

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[39] Clark Hall, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*.

underlying denotation, but a much deeper connotation beyond its literal meaning. Lindahl, *et al.*, in their definition of "nightmare," note that

> [t]he ability to change shape and act outside the ordinary body in a temporal guise were vital characteristics in many different Norse myths and conceptions. The materialized will, power, or lust was a theme common to many texts. Etymologically, the [Old Norse] term *mara* is related to the Indo-European root **mr*, "to crush, which is most interesting considering the actions ascribed to the mara in Norse texts."[40]

This etymology is somewhat disputed; Owen Davies says that "although there seems no agreement as to its Indo-European meaning, *móros* ("death"), *mer* ("drive out"), and *mar* ("to pound, bruise, crush") have all been suggested."[41] Calvert Watkins' dictionary gives the original Indo-European root as *mer-* "nightmare," and he notes: "Probably suffixed zero-grade form **mr̥-to-*, "ground down."[42] The crushing, stifling, paralyzing effect of the nightmare leads to the next part of this discussion, on the general role of nightmare in Anglo-Saxon folklore.

An early example of the nightmare in Scandinavian folklore comes from the *Ynglinga Saga* of Snorri Sturluson. In Chapter 16, Sturluson speaks of Vanlande, son of Swegde, who deserts his wife Driva to go adventuring. She turns to a "witch-wife" named Huld, who bewitches Vanlande, and causes him to fall asleep. Laing's translation continues:

> [B]ut when he had slept but a little while he cried out, saying that the Mara was treading upon him. His men hastened to him to help him; but when they took hold of his head she trod on his legs, and when they laid hold of his legs she pressed upon his head; and it was his death. The Swedes took his body and burnt it at a river called Skytaa, where a standing stone was raised over him. Thus says Thjodolf:
> "And Vanlande, in a fatal hour,
> Was dragg'd by Grimhild's daughter's power,
> The witch-wife's, to the dwelling-place

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[40] Lindahl, *et al.*, "Nightmare."
[41] Owen Davies, "The Nightmare Experience, Sleep Paralysis, and Witchcraft Accusations." *Folklore*, Vol. 114 (2003): 181-203. Further linguistic and etymological analysis of "nightmare" may be found in Section 2 of Part II of this paper.
[42] Calvert Watkins, *The American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000).

> Where men meet Odin face to face.
> Trampled to death, to Skytaa's shore
> The corpse his faithful followers bore;
> And there they burnt, with heavy hearts,
> The good chief killed by witchcraft's arts." [43]

The crushing, pressing, paralyzing effect of the *mara* is immediately obvious. Even though Sturluson was writing in the 13th century, a century or two after the first manuscripts of the *Lacnunga*, the concern about the *mara* as a source of suffering and terror remained.[44]

The idea of the *mara* as a malevolent spirit is akin to the belief in elves and dwarves[45] as similarly evil creatures. All were usually invisible, all are malicious, and all could cause actual physical affliction. The *mara*'s actions upon a sleeper were similar to those of elves upon persons who had been "elf-shot." The *mara* is another supernatural agent of harm, another demonic force sent to visit evil upon mankind. The idea of such a creature lends itself, as did concepts of elves and dwarves, to being revisioned through the lens of Christianity into another kind of Satan-spawned devil: the succubus.

The belief in a creature that invades the dreams of humans and subjects them to (often sexual) abuse is not new. A similar being can be seen in the ancient (c. 4000 BCE) Sumerian storm demon Lilitu, who came into Hebraic tradition as Lilith, a child-stealing demon who was

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[43] Chapter designations and translations are from Samuel Laing's 1884 edition, found at < http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/heim/02ynglga.htm>.

[44] A discussion of the controversy surrounding the dates of origin of this saga is outside the scope of this paper, but it should be noted that if a 2002 study is correct, then the origin of the saga of Valande is coterminous with the *Lacnunga* itself, somewhere around the 10th century. See Olaf Sundqvist, *Freyr's Offspring: Rulers and Religion in Ancient Svea Society*, Uppsala : Universitet, 2002.

[45] The OED does not recognize this plural, preferring "dwarfs," but both the Random House and American Heritage dictionaries accept it as standard. "Dwarfs," to me, carries connotations of congenital, physical, human dwarfism, and is best used to describe those with such a condition. The creature mentioned by the charm, and the dwarf-beings of legend in general, are not simply stunted humans; indeed, they are not human at all. Tolkien, in Appendix F to *The Lord of the Rings* (*The Return of the King*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1973, p. 518), noted that his use of *dwarves* in his books was intended to reflect the "true" plural, descended from OE *dweorh*, which should, linguistically speaking, be *dwarrows* or *dwerrows*. Given that "dwarves" has entered the lexicon, based largely upon his usage, and that I feel for the same reasons as he that it rings truer than "dwarfs" as a descriptor for these supernatural beings, I have chosen to carry over the spelling.

eventually thought to have been the first wife of Adam.[46] Lilith's progression from

Mesopotamian weather-spirit to vampiric succubus is, like much folklore transmission,

extremely complicated, but it is significant that by the time of later versions of the Talmud (c.

500 CE), she is mentioned as being a demonic night visitor, who entraps unwary sleepers:

"Rabbi Hanina said: One may not sleep in a house alone, and whoever sleeps in a house alone is

seized by Lilith."[47] There is but one reference to Lilith in the Bible, from Isaiah 34:14, where

"lilit" (Hebrew לילית) is mentioned in a list of night-creatures that will dwell in the desert

wasteland that will remain after God's wrath has been visited upon the world in the endtimes.

Various translations alter the meaning of the word; the King James Version has "screech-owl,"

the 1901 American Standard Version and the 1995 New American Standard Bible have "night

monster," while the 1947 Revised Standard Version has "night hag." The Latin Vulgate

translates the word as "lamia," evidently from the Greek monster of the same name, who steals

children while they sleep. What is of most interest to this discussion, though, is the common

theme of *night* amongst all these versions.[48] Lilith is a creature of the night, who, in her various

incarnations, was thought to seduce men in their sleep, to steal male children, or, in some cases,

to behave like a *mara*, paralyzing her victims with fear and crushing the life out of them.[49]

    In their eagerness to find ways to paint their pagan predecessors as evil or demonic, Early

Christian authors conflated earlier night-demon myths with Satanic devils. In a 1974 study of the

incubus (the male version of the succubus), Nicolas Kiessling notes that an incubus appears in

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[46] This idea seems to stem from the *Alphabetum Siracidis*, a probably satirical and possibly anti-Semitic text, *circa* 700-1000 CE.

[47] Talmud, Shabbath 151b.

[48] In the interest of fairness, it should be noted that the Septuagint has *onokentauros* "tailless ape," but this may have something to do with an ancient (and obviously false) perception of the sexually perverse nature of apes, which connotes with the sexual nature of the Lilith-motif.

[49] *Succubus* is derived from Latin *succubāre*, "to lie under," whereas the male form, *incubus*, derives from L. *incubāre*, "to lie upon," which definitions reference both the sexual nature of these beings and their physical habit of pressing upon their victims.

the Gospel of Thomas, and that a succubus appears in Athanasius' *Life of St. Anthony*, and tries

to seduce the young holy man.[50] Thus, Kiessling says,

> [T]he existence of molesting demons suggested by Biblical and Apocryphal writings was made concrete in the commentaries and biographies of early church fathers. Later Christian scholars and commentators then drew upon this sizeable literature and perpetuated the myth of the specific demon called Incubus. [51]

In any event, the ancient idea of a demon which moved by night and which was dangerously

predatory or sexual in nature obviously carried through Western tradition.[52]

When these Classical and Hebraic/Christian traditions moved into northwestern Europe,

they encountered similar Germanic and Celtic traditions. Christian thinkers were quick to

combine these Germanic ideas of night monsters with their own existing conceptions of these

creatures. Kiessling notes that

> [i]n Germanic areas this practice can be seen most obviously in Old English and Old High German glosses, where Old English *maera* [sic] . . . is equated with *incubus*, *satyrus*, *monstrum*, or *pilosus* [hairy beast], and Old High German words for the wood hag, water sprite, witch, and masked spirit (for example, *holzvrowe*, *waltminne*, *mermine minie*, *striga*, and *masca*) are equated with *lamia*.[53]

A similar case can be seen in the construction of the Celtic *morrigan* as a demonic figure.

Originally a tripartite war-goddess, the *morrigan* (Old Irish *mor* "demon"[54] and *rígan*, "queen")

was identified in Roman writings as *lamia*, and she shares many aspects of the

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[50] Nicholas Kiessling, "Demonic Dread: The Incubus Figure in British Literature," *The Gothic Imagination: Essays in Dark Romanticism*, ed. G.R. Thompson, Washington State University Press, 1974, pp. 26-27. Interestingly, Kiessling also notes that Jerome's *Life of St. Paul* speaks of an incubus encountered by St. Anthony which (in a fascinating display of authorial awareness of the fusion of folkloric traditions) "confess[es] that he is one of those worshipped by deluded Gentiles as 'fauns, satyrs, and incubi'" (27).

[51] Kiessling 27.

[52] Tolkien adopted this theme, among many other Anglo-Saxon motifs, in *The Lord of the Rings*. Gandalf describes to Frodo the spectre of Gollum, who is wandering about in search of Bilbo Baggins and the Shire, in terms that reflect Gollum's *mara* nature: "The Woodmen said there was some new terror abroad, a ghost that drank blood. It climbed trees to find nests; it crept into holes to find the young; it slipped through windows to find cradles" (*The Fellowship of the Ring*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1973, p. 91).

[53] Kiessling 29.

[54] Another, less likely translation is *mor* "great, mighty." See the discussion below on Grendel as *mæra*.

Lilith/succubus/lamia myth, such as movement by night, violent sexuality, and shapeshifting.[55]

The combining of the northern and the southern traditions reinforced the demonic nature of the

Germanic monsters, giving them a new, Christianized plausibility. What before had been

monsters, creatures that were dangerous and were to be avoided, but were (more or less) part of

the natural world and simply accepted as such, now became demons, devils that could not only

endanger one physically, but which threatened one's very soul.

An early and obvious instance of this process of blending may be seen in *Beowulf*.

Grendel and his mother are described as descendants of Cain, part of the lineage that produced

all manner of monsters and giants. They are *scuccum ond scinnum* "monsters and demons" (line

939), and Grendel is *deorc dēaþ-scūa* "dark death-shadow" (line 160).[56] At line 103, the monster

is first named:

> Wæs se grimma gæst Grendel hāten,
> mǣre mearc-stapa,   sē þe mōras hēold,
> fen ond fæsten[57]

Problems in translation are immediately apparent when one examines various editions of the

poem. Heaney's translation is "Grendel was the name of this grim demon / haunting the marshes,

marauding around the heath / and the desolate fens," whereas Liuzza gives "This grim spirit was

called Grendel, / mighty stalker of the marches, who held / the moors and fens."[58] The Norton

Critical Edition (2002) has a somewhat more literal translation, in prose: "The grim spirit was

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[55]Kiessling notes: "In an early Irish Vulgate (A.D. 876 or 877), a Christian cleric glossed the *lamia* of Is. 34.14 with '*monstru[m] in femine figura .i. morgain*." (p. 31). The *morrigan* may enter Arthurian mythology as Morgaine le Fay; see *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, eds. J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon, 2nd edition, rev. Norman Davis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 129. Related to this is the possibility that the young man who appears to and seduces the mother of Merlin in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* is an incubus.
[56] Translations are taken from *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*, Seamus Heaney, translator. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2000.
[57] Limitations of the Times New Roman font dictate that the long "ash" character (with macron) must be in another font. I have chosen to use Lucida Sans Unicode, as it seems to be the least graphically intrusive.
[58] *Beowulf*, R.M. Liuzza, translator. Toronto: Broadview Press, 2000.

called Grendel, known as a rover of the borders, one who held the moors, fen and fastness,"[59]

while Raffel's somewhat peculiar translation is: "[. . .] that fiend / Grendel, who haunted the

moors, the wild / Marshes, and made his home in a hell / Not hell, but earth.[60] These examples

serve not only to show that translations of Old English by modern editors can be idiosyncratic

(not to say haphazard), but also to point to an issue that arises within these lines; the problem

with the word *mǣre*. Clark Hall gives its meaning as "famous," but there is another, similar

word, *mǣre* (without the macron), which Clark Hall says is synonymous with *mara* "nightmare,

monster." It seems not unlikely that, due to a combination of scribal error and linguistic

evolution, the two words became confused. Kiessling contends that

> in the course of the two or so centuries generally thought to have intervened
> between the composition of the poem and the copying of the oldest manuscript
> extant, the meaning of the original term had become more specialized, being
> applied then only to the kind of night spirits which predominated in the folklore of
> the Middle Ages.[61]

If correct, not only does this recapitulate the issue of Old Irish *mor*, discussed above, but it would

indicate that Grendel is in fact another aspect of the night monster, a *mara* in the flesh, so to

speak. Consider his habits: he comes only by night, he is ferociously strong, and he strangles and

drinks the blood of his victims. Born out of what Kiessling calls the "eclectic milieu" of early

England, Grendel encapsulates many of the aspects of the nightmare, from the sheer horror of his

appearance, to his coming by night, to his rending and crushing of his victims.

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[59] *Beowulf: A Prose Translation*, E. Talbot Donaldson, translator. Edited by Nicholas Howe. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2002.
[60] *Beowulf*, Burton Raffel, translator. New York: Penguin Books USA, 1963.
[61] Kiessling, "Grendel: A New Aspect." *Modern Philology* Vol. 65, No. 3 (February 1968).

Identifying the Nightmare

These many references to night-devils, the *mara*, demonic crushers, and so on lead naturally enough to the question of what, exactly, is informing these folk motifs. Often, the original underlying reasons for folklore and for mythology are hidden behind so many impenetrable layers of time, scribal error, and metaphysical misperception that they are all but lost. The nightmare, however, is one instance in which the original cause of the legend is not only known, but has had its veneer of superstition removed and has been analyzed scientifically.

Nightmare, in its modern clinical sense, is a very real, diagnosable psychiatric ailment.[62] The clinical name for this ailment is sleep paralysis (SP). Sufferers are, to a degree, conscious during episodes of SP, but are unable to move. This paralysis is often accompanied by auditory or visual hallucinations, which can be very realistic. Psychologists are still uncertain as to what exactly the mechanism behind SP is, but it is speculated that an imbalance of chemoreceptors in the brain of the sufferer is somehow to blame; or possibly some abnormal amount of neuro-electrical activity; or a semi-obsolete fight-or-flight reaction in the brain (see below). Cheyne *et al.* note that SP has been connected (at least experimentally) with REM (Rapid Eye Movement) states.[63] REM states are points during the sleep-cycle at which sleep is deepest, when the sleeper is most unconscious, and during which the most dreaming occurs. At these times, the body is at its most relaxed. During an SP episode, for reasons that are not entirely clear to researchers, the

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[62] I refer here specifically to phenomena accompanied by sleep paralysis and hallucinations. Clinicians separate the general term "nightmare" into several types: bad dreams (or "anxiety dreams"), such as may be experienced by anyone in REM sleep, which, though often frightening, are usually quickly forgotten; night terrors, which may involve minor bouts of sleepwalking and are usually accompanied by physical symptoms such as rapid heartbeat and heavy perspiration, but which are not associated with paralysis (their hallucinatory content is not usually remembered); and what Cheyne, *et al* (see n. 58 below) call "night-mare" (with a hyphen), which is associated with sleep paralysis and hypnagogic or hypnopompic hallucination, and which is usually remembered vividly by the sufferer (Hufford, 121-22; see n. 64 below).

[63] J. A. Cheyne, Steve D. Rueffler, and Ian R. Newby-Clark, "Hypnagogic and Hypnopompic Hallucinations during Sleep Paralysis: Neurological and Cultural Construction of the Night-Mare," *Consciousness and Cognition*, Vol. 8 (1999), p. 319.

sleeper's brain awakens almost instantly from an REM cycle, doing so before the body can adjust to a wakeful state. Put simply (somewhat overly so), SP involves the brain being awake while the body is still asleep. Compared to other sleep ailments, SP is very common; Cheyne *et al.* claim that between 25 and 40 percent of people report "some SP experience."[64] Episodes last anywhere from a few minutes to as much as a half an hour, but sufferers may believe that they have lasted much longer, as one's time-sense can be distorted, as it often is in normal dreaming.[65]

The sufferer may experience what amounts to a waking dream, seeing and/or hearing hallucinations, but being unable to move because his body is still unconscious. A second kind of hallucination can occur as the sufferer is falling asleep, in this case, the body falls asleep before the brain does (again, this is an oversimplification, but a workable one). These accompanying hallucinations are of two varieties, based on when in the sleep cycle they occur: hypnopompic hallucinations, which occur on waking, and hypnagogic hallucinations, which occur upon falling asleep. These are termed HHEs (hypnagogic and hypnopompic episodes) in psychological literature. Sensations associated with HHEs are varied, but generally negative. They include

> an acute sense of a monitoring "evil presence," combinations of auditory and visual hallucinations, pressure on the chest, as well as suffocating, choking, floating out-of-body, and flying sensations. . . . HHEs accompanying SP appear to be substantially more vivid, elaborate, multimodal, and terrifying.[66]

A study performed by Cheyne, *et al* at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, found that 360 of the 1273 persons interviewed (28.4 percent) reported SP experiences, most of which involved feelings of fear, the "sensed presence" of an outsider, "incubus" assaults (that is, violently sexual hallucinations), pressure on the chest, and/or some form of pain. A second part

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[64] Cheyne, *et al*, 319.
[65] Owen Davies, "The Nightmare Experience, Sleep Paralysis, and Witchcraft Accusations." *Folklore*, Vol. 114 (2003): 181-203.
[66] Cheyne, *et al*, 320.

of the study, this time administered over the World Wide Web, yielded 470 respondents claiming

some kind of SP experience. Interestingly, the WWW respondents indicated a much higher level

of fright at their experiences, with 64 percent giving "fright" the maximum rating. That these

experiences are more common than might be thought is indicated by Cheyne's comment that

many of the WWW respondents "expressed astonishment and relief when they encountered

many of the questions because they had previously assumed their experiences were unique."[67]

The clinical model of SP and HHEs is based in the "activation-synthesis" theory of

dreaming. This theory describes REM cycles as being activated by "REM-off" cells in the

brainstem, which, according to Cheyne, "inhibit motor output [that is, muscular movement] and

sensory input and provide the cortex with internally generated activation. A major function of the

cortical centers is one of synthesizing quasi-random activation into meaningful patterns."[68] In

other words, when this cycle is disrupted, by some as-yet unknown factor, these cells stimulate

the cerebral cortex (the outer layer of the brain, responsible for memory and spatial awareness) to

produce hallucinations that seem completely realistic, and which the mind attempts to rationalize

into some kind of significance. Exactly what significance the mind places upon the

hallucinations seems to differ, throughout cultures and epochs, based on cultural awareness, but

since the content of the hallucinations is generally similar from person to person (and even from

culture to culture), it may be construed that the same physical parts of the cerebral cortex are

being affected. Thus far, though, no one has been able to determine the precise location of these

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[67] Cheyne, *et al*, 323-29. An updated and revised version of this WWW questionnaire may be found at
<http://watarts.uwaterloo.ca/~acheyne/spquest01.html>.
[68] Cheyne, *et al*. 322.

parts, although a theory has been proposed (see below).[69] The terror and crushing paralysis that accompany SP and HHEs, though, are common to the majority of sufferers.

HHEs are not necessarily associated with sleep paralysis; it is entirely possible to experience these hallucinations and still be able to move. But when the two coincide, the impression made upon the sufferer is much greater. The vividness of the experience, coupled with its seemingly near-universality across cultures, has led many researchers to suggest that the similarly cross-cultural folklore of the night-demon, succubus, etc. must in some way be related. The fact that all functions of the nightmare (as clinically defined) are associated with an "intruder" of some kind (or with actions that may be attributed to an intruder) is significant. It has been suggested that the root cause of SP and HHEs is a semi-vestigial function of the limbic system, the "paleomammalian" part of the brain that provides us with our emotional responses to motivational stimuli, such as fear, pleasure, or reward. This region includes the amygdala, a part of the brain buried deep inside the median temporal lobes which is responsible, in part, for the "fight-or-flight" response.[70] During a nightmare, when this center is activated (by whatever stimuli), the message that danger is present is transmitted to what Cheyne has called the "threat-activated vigilance system," or TAVS:

> The proposed function of [TAVS] is to disambiguate suggestive but inconclusive signs of danger. In response to initial environmental threat cues, this amygdalar vigilance system lowers sensory thresholds and biases perception as well as invoking procedures that monitor the environment for further cues that might corroborate or disconfirm the existence of threat. The TAVS bias therefore results in a greater likelihood of acceptance of ambiguous stimuli as portents of danger.[71]

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[69] Some research has indicated that high levels of temporal lobe lability (the amount of spontaneously-generated neuro-electrical activity in the temporal lobes of the brain) may be associated with HHEs and SP, but no conclusive proof of correlation has yet been delivered. See Susan J. Blackmore, "Alien abduction." *New Scientist*, 19 November 1994, pp. 29-31, and "Abduction by aliens or sleep paralysis?" *Skeptical Inquirer*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (May/June 1998) pp.23-28.
[70] See <http://www.scholarpedia.org/article/Amygdala>.
[71] J. A. Cheyne, "Sleep Paralysis and the Structure of Waking-Nightmare Hallucinations." *Dreaming*, Vol. 13, No. 3, September 2003, p. 165.

In other words, this system reacts to the stimuli provided by the SP experience by assigning a threat-meaning to it, and trying to influence the higher brain to perceive this "threat" as such. The result, a sort of cerebral cross-wiring, causes the higher brain to recognize (if erroneously) almost *any* stimulus – noises, lights and shadows, air movement, and so on – as a physical threat. These stimuli are then interpreted as the most primal of fears: suffocation, crushing pain, and sexual violence. In attempting to correlate these stimuli and assign meaning to them, the higher brain creates HHEs as "explanations." This explains the commonalities of nightmare experience across cultures; we are all human, with the same brains, all of which react in the same way (at the primitive, amygdalar level) to the same stimuli.

The physical similarities between humans that explain the organic basis of the nightmare are reflected in the linguistic similarities of the words we use to describe the phenomenon. Linguistic historians have made note of the etymological similarity in words for nightmare. The **mr* or **mar* "crush" morpheme is so common in European languages that it seems to rival the widespread Proto-Indo-European **ph₂tēr* "father" morpheme found in so many European languages (for instance Latin *pater*, Spanish *padre*, German *vader*, or Gothic *fadar*). Davies notes that

> [i]n Norway to have the nightmare is to be *mareritt*, and we find *nachtmahr* in German, *nachtmerrie* in Dutch, and *cauchemar* in French. The *mare* concept also forms the basis of Slavic and other central and eastern European terms for nightmare – *zmora* in Polish, *morica* in Croatian, *móre* in Serbian, *muera* in Czech, *kikimora* in Russian.[72]

Equally well-distributed across languages (even including some that do not share the "-mar" morpheme) is the idea that the nightmare is a pressing or crushing force:

> The first element of French *cauchemar* derives from *caucher* ("to tread on"). The second element of Icelandic *martröd* comes from *troda*, meaning "to squeeze, press, ride." [. . .] In German we find *alpdrücken* ("elf-pressing") and

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[72] Davies 184. Also note the modern English word *mar* "to hamper, hinder, to impair or damage" (OED).

> *hexendrücken* ("witch-pressing"). [. . . M]edieval French *appesart*, Italian *pesuarole*, Spanish *pesadilla*, and Portuguese *pesadela* all derive from the verb *peser*, meaning "to press down upon," [. . .] Hungarian *boszorkany-nyomas* means "witches' pressure." The Estonian word for nightmare, *luupainaja*, means "the one who presses your bones," and the Finnish *painajainen* similarly describes "something weighing upon you." In Irish, *tromluí* or *tromlaige* likewise derives from the act of weighing or being pressed upon.[73]

Another cross-cultural similarity is the recurring reference to being "ridden" by the nightmare: Norwegian *mareritt*, and English "witch-ridden" and "hag-ridden," with dialect variants such as "hag-rod" and "hag-rided" in England and Newfoundland.[74]

Other cultures, more disparate not only linguistically but geographically, describe the phenomenon in similar terms. The Japanese believed it was caused by a Buddhist god tying one down with iron bands. On the island of St. Lucia, it is known as the *kokma*, the spirit of a dead baby which jumps up and down on the sleeper's chest. In Zanzibar, the *popabawa*, a bat-like demon which rapes men as they sleep, is blamed.[75] The fact that so many cultures have so many essentially similar words for the same phenomenon (or if not linguistic correlation, at least empirical understanding of the same phenomenon) points to the fact that awareness of the existence of sleep paralysis is very ancient. This overall consistency fits into what has been termed the "experiential-source hypothesis": the source of the folklore surrounding nightmares seems to be independent of culture; all cultures that experience it describe it similarly, even if their beliefs as to the cause differ.[76]

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[73] Davies 184.
[74] Davies 184.
[75] Davies 194.
[76] Hufford 15.

Treatment of Nightmares

Such a widespread malady has given rise to numerous treatments, ranging from the

magical to the scientific. Modern treatment of nightmares, SP, and HHEs may revolve around

drugs that alter brain chemistry in an effort to render the limbic system and the amygdala less

sensitive to their own chemical receptors. Usually, drug therapy involves antidepressants, often

selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), which prevent the reabsorbtion of the

neurotransmitter serotonin (a chemical which aids transmission of electrical impulses between

neurons). Lack of serotonin, or too-fast serotonin reuptake (reabsorbing of the chemical by brain

cells), limits the amount of the chemical available to facilitate neurotransmission. In ways that

are not fully understood, this can lead to psychological effects such as depression, hyperactivity,

and (in extreme cases) hallucination. Minor success was reported in 1982 with L-tryptophan, an

amino acid complex which can increase serotonin levels, but these results have apparently not

been duplicated.[77] Unfortunately, the use of SSRIs has been linked to many adverse side effects,

ranging from sexual dysfunction to instances of psychotic behavior – in some cases the very

behavior the drug was originally intended to prevent.[78]

Psychiatric therapies have been more effective. Freudian dream analysis, developed

before the biological and organic nature of SP/HHE phenomena was understood, focuses on the

violent and sexual nature of the hallucinations as evidence of projection of internal conflict over

aggressive libidinal instincts.[79] Freudian analysis, though, fails to take into account biological

factors and assumes that "all dreams are to be understood to be attempts to portray unconscious

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[77] See S. Snyder and G. Hams, "Serotoninergic agents in the treatment of isolated sleep paralysis," *American Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 139 (1982), pp.1202-1203.

[78] The recent controversy over such drugs as Prozac and Paxil (both of which are varieties of SSRI) illustrates this. A 2008 study determined that such drugs were overprescribed and largely ineffective. See Kirsch, *et al.* "Initial Severity and Antidepressant Benefits: A Meta-Analysis of Data Submitted to the Food and Drug Administration," at <http://medicine.plosjournals.org/perlserv/?request=get-document&doi=10.1371/journal.pmed.0050045>.

[79] See Peter Buirski, "Nightmare in Psychoanalysis." *The Nightmare: Psychological and Biological Foundations*, Henry Kellerman, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987) 3-14.

wishes as being fulfilled."[80] Given the organic nature of the SP/HHE construct (and its universality), this interpretation seems unlikely.

More effective treatments for nightmares have proven to be patient-controlled. When nightmares are regarded as if they are psychologically traumatic events and treated as post-traumatic stress disorder is treated, with analysis and psychotherapy, better results are achieved. One particularly effective method of psychiatric treatment is known as *lucid dreaming*. This is a technique in which the sufferer is encouraged by the therapist to take control of their dreams, by maintaining a "waking," or lucid, awareness that they are dreaming, even during the dream itself. The patient is instructed by the therapist as to how to induce a lucid state within the dream, and then how to take control of the direction of the dream. Using this method, the patient can direct the flow of the dream toward whatever state is desired. Clinical nightmares, even those involving SP/HHEs, can be redirected into simple sense-experiences, without the attendant terror and crushing or suffocation sensations, if the sufferer can manipulate him- or herself into realizing that what is happening is only a dream, and is not real: a case of "mind over matter," so to speak.

Methods of lucid dreaming are varied, but they all involve instruction sessions designed to convince the patient that he can control his own dreams. The simplest method is known as mnemonic induction of lucid dreams (MILD), and involves simply willing oneself to remember to recognize when one is dreaming.[81] More complex methods include wake-induced lucid dreaming (WILD) in which the patient trains himself to enter REM sleep fully aware that he is doing so. There are even externally-applied methods, such as lucid dream supplement therapy, which involves the use of nonprescription drugs or herbal supplements to induce changes in

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[80] Buirski 14.
[81] See Stephen LaBerge, "Lucid Dreaming: Psychophysiological Studies of Consciousness during REM Sleep," In *Sleep and Cognition*, R. R. Bootzen, J.F. Kihlstrom, & D.L. Schacter, eds. (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 1990) 109-126.

serotonin levels, or the use of induction devices such as flashing lights or vibrators, attached to an electroencephalograph, which "alert" the patient subconsciously when REM sleep is entered and thus help to trigger the recognition/control process. These techniques have been found to be effective in the treatment of night terrors and nightmares.[82] The main point here is that all these techniques have in common the establishment of control *by the patient*. Once he has convinced himself that he is in control of his own brain, freedom from the terror of the nightmare can be achieved.

This kind of establishment of control over dreams relates directly back to the shamanic dream control discussed in the first part of this paper. At this juncture, the folkloric/shamanic interpretation of dreaming intersects with the poetic shamanism of the Anglo-Saxon *scop* and with Christianized ideas of demonic visitation to synthesize a conception of dreams and dream-reality that allows for individual control over dreaming, which in turn reflects an overall philosophy of "actual" waking reality. Dreams are real, as real as the waking world, but they can be controlled in a way that the waking world cannot. The *Wið Dweorh* charm itself is an example of a folkloric/shamanic, semi-Christianized method of such dream control, and its construction seems designed to compel the same behavior as modern techniques of lucid dreaming do.

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[82] For case studies, see Victor I. Spoormaker and Jan van den Bout, "Lucid Dreaming Treatment for Nightmares: A Pilot Study," *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics*, Vol. 75, No. 6 (2006) 389-394; A.L. Zadra and R.O. Pihl, "Lucid dreaming as a treatment for recurrent nightmares," *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics*, Vol. 66, No. 1 (1997) 50-55, and A. Brylowski, "Nightmares in crisis: clinical applications of lucid dreaming techniques," *Psychiatric Journal of the University of Ottowa*, Vol. 15, No. 2, (June 1990) 79-84.

CHAPTER IV

METRICAL CHARM 3: AGAINST A DWARF

Over time, Anglo-Saxon Metrical Charm 3, *Wið Dweorh*, has been subjected to editorial

emendation, mistranslation, misinterpretation, reconstruction, and deconstruction. It has been

passed over as unintelligible gibberish, dismissed as merely a superstitious magic spell,

condemned for its pagan elements, and generally misunderstood, misread, and misconstrued

since its transcription in MS Harley 585, in the eleventh century CE. Almost every facet of this

bizarre charm has been debated, from translation of its title to its linguistic construction. Scholars

have never been entirely certain what, exactly, the charm is supposed to protect against. Its

language is obscure; its poetic value more so. It has a surreal, unearthly quality that is only

deepened by its peculiar subject matter. I hope to show, though, that an examination of the charm

demonstrates that is *not* unintelligible, that it is in fact indicative of a reasonably sophisticated

understanding of basic psychology, even if the foundation of that understanding is based in

superstition and magic rather than in science. There is of course no evidence to show that the

charm was ever even used, or that if it had been, it was in any way efficacious, but I believe my

analysis shows that it could have been so, for reasons I will elaborate upon below.

The Charm in Question

To begin with, we should examine the charm itself. It is entry LXXXVI in the *Lacnunga*,

a book of remedies first translated by the Reverend Oswald Cockayne in 1864-66. The name

Lacnunga is not part of the manuscript; it simply means "Remedies," and was given to the book

by Cockayne himself, in Volume III of his classic *Leechdoms, Wortcunning, and Starcraft of*

Early England, a collection of texts "Illustrating the History of Science in this Country before the

Norman Conquest," as the Reverend himself put it in his subtitle. The text of the charm, as given

in the Harley MS, is this:

> [**LXXXVI**] Wið dweorh man sceal niman VII lytle oflætan swylce man mid ofrað, **7**
> wri[t]an þas naman on ælcre oflætan: Maximian(us), Malchus, Iohannes, Martimianus,
> Dionisius, Constantinus, Serafion. Þænne eft þ(æt) galdor, þ(æt) heræfter cweð man sceal
> singan, ærest on þ(æt) wynstre eare, þænne on þæt swiðre eare, þænne [b]ufan þæs
> mannes moldan. **7** ga þænne an mædenman to **7** ho hit on his sweoran, **7** do man swa þry
> dagas; him bið sona sel.

> "Hēr cōm ingangan,   inspidenwiht**.**
>   Hæfde hi(m) his haman on handa,   cwæð þ(æt) þū his hæncgest wǣre,
> Leg[d]e þē his tēage an swēoran.   Ongunnan hi(m) of þǣm lande līþan.
> Sōna swā hy of þǣm lande cōman   þā ongunnan hi(m) ðā liþu cōlian.
> Þa cō(m) ingangan   dēores sweostar.
> Þa g(e)ændade hēo,   **7** āðas swōr
> ðæt nǣfre þis ðǣ(m) ādlegan   derian ne mōste,
> ne þǣm þe þis galdor   begytan mihte,
> oððe þe þis galdor   ongalan cūþe.

> Am(en). Fiað." [83]

The translation of this charm is problematic from the very start. *Wið dweorh*, usually

given as the title of the charm, is probably best translated as "With [or 'Against'] a Dwarf,"

dweorh meaning, according to Clark Hall, the same as *dweorg*, "dwarf." Cockayne mistranslated

the word in his original edition of *Leechdoms*, rendering it *weorh* "an eruption of the skin," – or a

wart – thus rendering the charm even more incomprehensible. Griffiths says the charm "has a

surreal effect, though this may result simply from the probable corruption of the opening line,

psychoneurotic emendations thereof, and the basic uncertainty of who is being addressed – the

patient or the cause of his disease"[84] Cockayne's mistranslation was the beginning of a long line

of questionable interpretations, none of which do much to further understanding. Singer calls it

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[83] This transcription is based upon Edward Pettit's *Anglo-Saxon Remedies, Charms, and Prayers from British
Library MS Harley 585*, (New York: The Edwin Mellin Press, 2001)72-75. I have carried over Pettit's use of the
numeral "**7**" to indicate the Tironian shorthand "et"; of square brackets to show editorial emendation (Pettit's, that
is); and of round brackets to indicate expansion of abbreviations found in the original.
[84] Bill Griffiths, *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Magic*, (Norfolk, UK: Anglo-Saxon Books, 2003) 200.

The Lay of the Night Goblin, Grattan names it *The Nightmare Charm*, and Griffiths thinks it

might be *Against a Dwarf or a Fever*. Pettit translates *dweorh* as "fever." Skemp even calls the

charm *Wið dweorg*, thus emending the operative word itself, rather than its translation. In any

event, the translation proceeds:

> Against a dwarf, one must take seven little wafers such as one might offer, and write these names on each wafer: Maximianus, Malchus, Iohannes, Martimianus, Dionisius, Constantinus, Serafion. Then the *galdor*[85] that is hereafter spoken of one must sing, first in the left ear, then in the right ear, then above the person's head. And then let a virgin go to him and hang it on his neck, and do this for three days; he will soon be well.

> "Here came walking in a spider-creature.
> With his coat in his hand, saying you were his horse;
> He laid his fetters on your neck. He started sailing from the land;
> As soon as he came away from land, his limbs started cooling.
> Then the beast's sister came walking in.
> Then she ended it and swore oaths
> That this must never hurt the sick,
> Nor he who could obtain this charm,
> Nor he who could chant this charm.

> Amen. Let it be so."[86]

Even translated into modern English, the charm seems obscure at best. But analysis in light of

current linguistic, folkloric, and psychological theories of nightmare begins to shed some light

upon it.

<u>Analysis of the Charm</u>

To begin with, given the symptoms expressed in the *galdor*, the *dweorh* of the first line is

demonstrably not a fever or a wart. Fevers do not bind one; warts do not fetter one. Something

more is going on here. Obviously the creature that is spoken of is behaving in ways that mimic

the *mara*, even though the *mara*-word is not used. It has been established in the first line that the

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[85] Clark Hall: "*galdor*: sound, song, incantation, spell, enchantment." The *galdor* is the incantatory part of the charm that comes after the ritual instructions.
[86] This translation is my own, based on Pettit's and Griffiths' versions.

creature is a dwarf, and as we have seen, a dwarf is one of the varied incarnations of the *mara*. The fact that the creature, whatever its form, describes the sufferer as his "horse" is evidence of this. The *mara* rides its victim like a horse, hence "hag-ridden," "dwarf-ridden," or many of the other terms or motifs associated with the nightmare experience.

Also immediately noticeable is the Christian tone of the opening lines of the charm. The wafers that are to be used as the physical components of the amulet are evidently similar to sacramental wafers ("such as one might offer"), although no suggestion is made that they actually *be* so (this would likely have been considered a grave sin). It seems probable that had this charm any provenance prior to the Christian conversion of England, the wafers might well have been any kind of ceremonial food, or indeed any sort of ritual object. The more explicitly Christian section, the names that are to be written on the wafers, requires a little more explanation. The names listed are those of the "Seven Sleepers of Ephesus," a group of Christian youths who, according to legend, fled the persecution of the Roman emperor Decius in 250 CE. They hid in a cave on Mount Celion in Ephesus, in what is now western Turkey. Upon praying for help, they were placed by God into a deep sleep, whereupon Decius had the cave walled up as a punishment. Some two hundred years later, during the reign of Theodosius II, in order to reawaken the flagging faith of his followers, God awoke the seven, and opened the cave. The men emerged, thinking they had slept only one night. Maximian told Theodosius that they had been awakened to affirm faith in the resurrection of the dead, and the men then returned to the cave, to sleep until Judgment Day.[87]

The appeal of this story is obvious. Ephesus itself has a long tradition of religious significance. It was home to one of the original Seven Wonders of the World, the Temple of Artemis, and later became home to one of the Seven Churches of the Apocalypse mentioned in

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[87] Lindahl, *et al*. "Seven Sleepers," *Medieval Folklore* 901-02.

the Book of Revelation. Quite apart from the religious significance of the city itself, though, is that of the Seven Sleepers. Obviously, sympathetic magic is at work here: the Sleepers were put to sleep by God, and awakened by God, and therefore work very well as patrons of sleepers, especially those who are in some way persecuted or victimized. Also note that the Sleepers number seven, a traditionally significant numerological value. Thus, invoking them in a charm to avoid or repel nightmare is doubly effective: not only are they protectors of sleepers, but their very number has magical implications.[88]

Another problem stems from misinterpretation of the *sweostar* in the *galdor*. Illegibility of the original leads to frequent emendation of *d[?]eores*, "the beast's" to *dweores*, "the dwarf's" which Griffiths says "prejudges the purpose of the text and asserts that the title means dwarf not fever," indicating that it is the sister of the defeated dwarf who is swearing the oaths.[89] Grattan's translation is *eares sweostar*, "Earth's sister." He claims it is impossible for the female creature to be the being's sister:

> That the female divinity, who makes an end to the evil and promises future immunity through the use of the Charm, is not the sister of the incubus creature, is clear from the alliteration: *deores* is obviously corrupt…The beneficent deity, then, is *Eastre*, the Goddess of the Dawn…It remains however to find a god whose name will give the necessary vowel-alliteration and who may conceivably be brother to Eastre.[90]

He goes on to speculate on the runic translation of the original hiding the name of some forgotten god. Bonser comments that the reading should be "[*eā*]*res sweostor* "'the sister Ear.' That is Eástre, goddess of Dawn and naturally the disperser of the terrors of the night."[91]

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[88] Skemp says "the magic names in our charm are those of the Seven Sleepers, elsewhere invoked against fever, so that the disease is probably violent or spasmodic in its effects" (293-94). I believe he was correct, to a degree, but missed the actual cause of the affliction, attributing it to disease, rather than nightmare.

[89] Griffiths 201. As far as this "prejudgment" goes, however, it seems to me to be an accurate one, if only accidentally. The charm is about dwarves, after all!

[90] J. H. G. Grattan, "Three Anglo-Saxon Charms from the '*Lacnunga*." *Modern Language Review*, Vol. 22 (1927) 4-6.

[91] Bonser 166, n.1.

I will not speculate on the accuracy of the *sweostar* readings, except to note that, if

correct, Grattan's interpretation would only be further evidence of the expression of a pagan

image in a charm that begins with an explicitly Christian motif. At the time these charms would

have been first used, the Christianity of the Anglo-Saxons was still relatively new, and among

the peasantry folk tradition and superstition still prevailed, especially with regarding medicine

and "leechcraft." Grattan and Singer simply say in a footnote regarding the charm that "the

Christian preamble with its Seven Sleepers is evidently an addition to the purely Pagan Lay."[92]

Other charms have a similarly dual theological nature; for example, a charm found in the

otherwise explicitly Christian Cambridge Corpus Christi MS 41 calls for the use of a *gyrd*, a

"rune-stick" or magic wand.[93] Entry LXXVI in the Harley MS specifically invokes the Anglo-

Norse god Woden against snakes invading one's house only six lines before making reference to

the *wītig Drihten* "wise [Christian] Lord." While Grattan and Singer attribute this mixing of

pagan and Christian motifs to "confusion" on the part of the leech/physician, it may be that a

deeper motivation must be considered.[94] The explanation might well be that the creator of the

charm was hedging his bets. He was ministering to the common folk, who were still in the

liminally ill-defined space between Christian orthodoxy and pagan tradition; he had to fit his

cure into that particular place and time. Fusing the pagan and the Christian was therefore not a

case of ignorance or carelessness, but a deliberate attempt on the part of the compiler to suit the

varied religious attitudes of his patients. It is also possible evidence that the charm-compiler was

working within the shamanic tradition established by the Old English poets.

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[92] Grattan and Singer 163, n. 2.
[93] Audrey L. Meaney, *Anglo-Saxon Amulets and Curing Stones*, BAR British Series 96 (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1981) 18.
[94] Grattan and Singer 7.

Examination of the non-Christian motifs of the charm raises another question, this one

stemming from mistranslation and misinterpretation of the *spiderwiht* mentioned in the *galdor*.

Spiderwiht is commonly translated as "spider-person" or "spider-creature," and the charm has

been analyzed as being against spiders crawling upon one in the night. Grendon claims that this

is indeed the case, and that the *hit* ("it") in *ho hit on his sweoran* refers to a spider that is to be

hung around the unfortunate patient's neck. He claims that the dwarf is then "ridden away" by

the spider.[95] Gotfried Storms suggests that the charm is calling for an amulet of two spiders hung

around the neck.[96] Griffiths eliminates the spider completely, suggesting that "*spiden* may go

back to *swiðe* (strong, powerful), since minuscule 'p' and 'w' are very alike. *Wiht*, corresponding

to Icelandic *vættr*, may denote a supernatural being in its own right."[97] Grattan translates

spidenwiht as *in[wr]i[ð]en wiht*, "a creature all swathed," and proposes that "the word corrupted

was some compound with *in-*. Cf. *inbewindan*, *inbewreon* [sic], *infrod*, *inhold*. My conjectural

emendation is based on the assumption that the incubus took the form of a corpse swathed in its

grave-clothes." [98] Skemp suggests that the spider-wight is the dwarf himself, and points to

Grimm's connection of dwarf and spider.[99] While contradicting Grattan, Gay also points out a

folkloric and linguistic relationship between dwarfs and spiders,:

> [A]s noted in the *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens* […] Swedish
> *dverg* can mean both dwarf and spider, and that *dvergs nät* (lit. dwarf's net) is
> "cobweb." Grattan and Singer have noted too that in Breton, Welsh and Cornish
> the word *cor* can mean both dwarf and spider. It seems certain in view of the
> evidence of folk tradition that the dwarf and spider are the same creature in
> different forms. Grattan's emendation to *in[wr]i[ð]en wiht* should therefore be
> rejected as unfounded.[100]

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[95] Felix Grendon, "The Anglo-Saxon Charms." *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 22 (1909) 215.
[96] Gotfrid Storms, *Anglo-Saxon Magic* (The Hague, M. Nijhoff, 1948) 136.
[97] Griffiths 200
[98] Grattan 5
[99] Skemp 294
[100] Gay 175

On various grounds, I too believe this reading may be rejected. As we have seen, *mara* carries within it the idea of crushing or paralyzing, and it does not seem too great a logical leap to imbue a spider with those qualities. Spiders, after all, paralyze and wrap up their prey; there may be some connotation here of the swathing of the victim in mystical spider-webbing. Invisible, spiritual, or mystical "webbing" is as plausible a superstition-based explanation as any other for the effect of a sleep paralysis episode, similar to the Japanese god mentioned above, who encloses his victim in iron bands. The explanations that equate the spider with the amulet, or which attempt to linguistically explain away its seemingly odd existence, are not for the most part based in any real study of nightmare as a psychological phenomenon, although, to be fair, many of these analyses were written before there was any such study. But the overall idea of a dwarf/spider creature "bridling" a victim to be ridden and enfolding its victim in swathes of mystical webbing fits exactly into what we now know of the SP/HHE phenomenon. The feelings of crushing, suffocating pressure associated with SP/HHE might well be described as being wrapped up like an insect in spider silk. The fact that "dwarf" and "spider" share similarities within certain folk-linguistic traditions may in fact stem from their pairing in descriptions of nightmare, rather than being simply a linguistic coincidence. Readings such as Griffiths' and Grattan's do not take this possibility into account.

Conclusions

What, then, can we suppose this peculiar charm to have availed its users? The answer is obvious: it served as a kind of dream-therapy. It should be recalled that the most effective treatment for nightmare thus devised thus far has been lucid dreaming therapy. What is this

charm, if not a prescription for lucid dreaming? The very words of the charm itself demonstrate this: the "beast's sister"

> …ended it and swore oaths
> That this must never hurt the sick,
> *Nor he who could obtain this charm,*
> *Nor he who could chant this charm* [emphasis added].

This could well imply that the mere speaking of this charm is prophylactic; in its own way, it is a shamanistic method of dream-control. Part of lucid dreaming therapy involves the therapist's convincing the patient to convince *himself* that he can control his own dreams – what psychiatrists call the "subject-expectancy effect." This charm may be a device to allow just such convincing. Nelson points out that the oaths sworn by the *sweostar* "assert that not only will the patient not be harmed, but no one who obtains the song (learns it by hearing it?) or knows how to sing it will ever be afflicted by this illness."[101] One may picture a sufferer of nightmares chanting the charm, or having it chanted over him by a leech, and being convinced by it that he can, in fact, take control of the dreams that haunt and oppress him and reverse their effects, just as a modern psychotherapist helps a patient to convince himself that his SP/HHE problems stem from the workings of his own mind, and that he can take control of them. One wonders whether nightmare sufferers who used the charm, if there ever were any, recognized that they were participating in the remnants of a long tradition. Perhaps they simply took the word of their leeches, as we sometimes tend to take that of our physicians today, when they said that that the remedy was effective. Certainly there must have been an element of expectancy or placebo effect. But there can be no doubt that, whatever its efficacy, the charm was designed to fit neatly into the Anglo-Saxon conception of what the mind was and how its workings might be influenced.

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[101] Marie Nelson, "An Old English Charm against Nightmare." *Germanic Notes*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (1982) 17-18.

The poetic experience of nightmare is not, therefore, purely metaphorical or allegorical; it stems from a shared and culturally constant experience; it is psychological and organic in origin, based in the construction of the human brain, rather than simply a happenstance cross-cultural metaphysical construct. It is the higher brain that places meaning upon the experience, and attempts to assign cultural relevance to it. The experience of nightmare is defined by culture and by cultural expectations, including folklore, politics, religion, and general philosophy. For pre- or non-Christian cultures, the explanation is (or was) monstrous; dwarves, elves, or night-hags. For early Christian peoples, the cultural explanation was demons or witches. In today's world, very often the meaning assigned to SP/HHE experience is defined by our own cultural memes, often as abduction by aliens, or as some kind of generically spiritual, "New Age" phenomenon, such as an out-of-body experience, reflecting not only that which represents cultural normality for us (science fiction films and television, or an accepting credulity regarding spiritual experience), but our fears and concerns for and uncertainty about our world. The "phenomenon" of alien abduction could not have occurred any earlier in human history than it has, for the simple fact that the very idea of alien beings invading from other planets would simply not have occurred to our forebears, whose concerns were rooted in their own cultural experiences and definitions.

None of this is intended to imply that the Anglo-Saxons composers of Metrical Charm 3 had any knowledge of psychiatry comparable to that of the modern era, or even that they had any real understanding of brain function. What they did have, though, were the remnants of a shamanistic tradition which made dreaming, for them, a very real-world thing. Steeped in both metempsychotic shamanism and Christian doctrine, with an overlay of the Aristotelian in its conception of the *anima*/*psyche*, the Anglo-Saxon mind understood dreaming to be no mere illusory state; it was another kind of existence, and this allowed them to think of dreams as

something which could and should be controlled and directed. The themes of dream-visions and of the journeying of the soul iterated by the shaman of prehistory could have become those of the *scop* of Anglo-Saxon poetry. This could have led to the inculcation of these ideas into Anglo-Saxon culture, where they would have become part of psycho-medical practices now mostly lost to us. When it chanced that these methods were finally written down, the Christian conversion had already begun, and Augustinian and Neoplatonic concepts of mind and of free will had entered into the mindset of both physicians and the scribes who recorded their work. The solidification of the identity of the self occasioned by such thinking fused with existing folk/pagan concepts of dreams-as-reality. The very real world of the shamanic dream-quest sublimated into later Anglo-Saxon culture through poetry, and eventually became a paler, watered-down version of itself in the banalities of charms. This is not to say, however, that the charms are any less exemplary of shamanistic thought than, say, *The Wanderer*. The shamanic concept of the dream-as-real that underlies Metrical Charm 3 is still readily apparent, however weakly it is reflected. The charm contains dim echoes of a glorious past, one in which far-seeing transmigratory voyagers spanned vision-worlds on journeys of spiritual enlightenment.

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