The Language of Magic

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IL SEGNO E LE LETTERE

*Collana del Dipartimento di Lingue, Letterature e Culture Moderne
dell'Università degli Studi 'G. d'Annunzio'*

In copertina
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Videoimpaginazione: Paola Mignanego
Stampa: Litogì

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A WRITTEN CHARM
IN ORAL TRADITION:
"PETER SAT ON A MARBLE STONE"
IN IRELAND

Barbara Lisa Hillers

ABSTRACT

This contribution examines the Irish variants of the toothache charm known as *Super petram*, one of the most common – and most commented-upon – European narrative charms, which spread throughout Europe from the tenth century onward. The charm is well attested in Ireland, where it is found both in Gaelic and Hiberno-English language traditions. While the Gaelic variants are likely to reach back to the medieval era, the English-language variants attest to later, post-Norman influence from England. This paper focuses on the over 150 English-language variants collected by the Irish Folklore Commission in the first half of the twentieth century, which allow us to reassess the complex question of orality and literacy in the charm's transmission. While in England, extant variants of *Super petram* emanate from a written transmission context, in Ireland, variants were collected from oral sources and bear features characteristic of oral transmission. The Irish ethnographic evidence thus throws new light on the more sparsely attested English evidence and may help us understand better the elusive and sometimes contradictory information we have about the charm's performance and transmission.

Keywords: amulet; epic charms; Irish Folklore Commission; narrative charms; oral composition; oral/written transmission; Peter Sat on a Marble Stone; *Super petram*.

The *Super petram* charm against toothache needs no introduction in the present volume: it is one of the best-known and most widely distributed European narrative charms, richly documented in both medieval sources

and modern ethnographic studies. Its presence throughout Europe has been well-documented; Jonathan Roper, in his study of English verbal charms, notes over twenty variants from England and Wales [1], and Claude Lecouteux refers to variants from France, Denmark, and Germany [2]. The charm is also common in Slavic and, to a lesser extent, Baltic languages [3]. As we shall see, the charm is abundantly popular in Ireland, on Europe's western fringe.

Like many of the most common European narrative charms, *Super petram* belongs to the group of encounter charms [4]: Christ encounters St Peter, whom he finds sitting *super petram*, "on a stone". In the ensuing dialogue Christ asks Peter why he is unwell; Peter replies that he is suffering from a toothache, and Christ responds by commanding Peter to be well. Despite the charm's popularity in vernacular traditions throughout Europe, the earliest extant texts point to a Latin clerical milieu. The punning wordplay of the Latin charm (**Petrus** super **petram**) is not replicated in the vernacular translations, yet Peter is depicted as sitting on a stone in most European vernaculars, suggesting the vernacular charms' derivation from the Latin prototype. The spread of the charm throughout Europe appears to have followed ecclesiastic – and specifically monastic – networks [5].

It is likely that the charm was first introduced into Ireland through these same monastic channels, although no medieval version of *Super petram* has as yet come to light from Ireland. It appears to have been vernacularized into Irish Gaelic at an early date, and certainly before the coming of the Anglo-Normans in the twelfth century: about seventy Gaelic variants, representing well-defined regional oicotypes, have been recorded throughout Irish-speaking areas, suggesting that the charm was already well established throughout Gaelic Ireland before the Anglo-Norman invasion. The native Irish oicotypes differ significantly from English regional forms, most notably in their setting: a cluster of variants from the northwestern county of Mayo locates the encounter "in the wilderness" (*ar an bhfásach*), and in the most common oicotype, ranging from the northern province of Ulster to the southern province of Munster, Peter sits by a river [6]. For an understand-

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[1] Roper 2005, 122-125.

[2] Lecouteux 1996, 53.

[3] Kencis 2013; Babič 2013, 87.

[4] On encounter charms, see Ohrt 1936.

[5] Note the monastic provenance of the twelfth-century Latin variant from Slovenia, written down by the Cistercian monk Bernard; Babič 2013, 87.

[6] For a brief discussion of the Gaelic variants of *Super petram*, see Hillers 2019, 86-88.

ing of the early history of *Super petram* in Europe, the Gaelic variants are of particular interest: witnesses to the charm's long-standing existence on the western fringe of Europe, these regionally entrenched oicotypes may offer clues about the charm's international transmission and distribution in medieval Europe[7].

In this contribution, however, I want to focus on Ireland's abundantly documented English-language tradition. A staggering 158 English-language variants of *Super petram* have been recorded from almost every county of Ireland[8]. In their form and wording, the English-language variants so closely resemble *Super petram* charms in England that we must assume an English origin for them. Like most of the variants of the charm collected in England, they contain the distinctive "marble stone" motif in the opening line:

> As Peter sat on a marble stone
> Jesus came to him all alone.
> "Peter why does thou ache?"
> "My Lord and Saviour, it is a toothache."
> "Rise up, Peter, and follow me,
> And from this toothache you will get free."[9]

While overall homogenous in form – at least by comparison with the Irish-language variants – the English-language instances display the characteristic pattern of variation associated with oral-traditional materials. Unlike the *Super petram* variants documented in England, the vast majority of the Irish charms were collected from oral recitation, i.e., the informants communicated the words of the charm to the collectors by word

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[7] The redaction that locates the encounter between Christ and Peter by a river, in particular, does not appear to occur widely outside of Ireland; it may, however, be related to international variants in which Peter's cure takes place near a bridge. Interestingly, the name of this river found in twentieth-century variants is clearly derived from the medieval Irish form of the River Jordan, which suggests this oicotype is likely to be of considerable age.

[8] No version of *Super petram* has been recorded from County Kildare and from the three counties Derry, Antrim, and Armagh situated in Northern Ireland, where the Schools' Collection was not operative.

[9] NFCS 760:407, County Longford. All unpublished texts cited with kind permission from the Director of the National Folklore Collection at University College Dublin. I am most grateful to the Director, Dr Críostóir Mac Cárthaigh, for his help in making available unpublished materials. The NFC Main Manuscripts are referenced here as NFC, the Schools' Manuscripts as NFCS, followed by volume and page number. The texts cited have been lightly edited with regard to punctuation and capitalization, but the spelling of the originals has otherwise been retained.

of mouth. This abundant and unquestionably oral material allows us to examine the apparent paradox at the heart of *Super petram* that was noted by Roper: it is clear that the charm was used widely as a *written* amulet, copied on a scrap of paper and carried on the body, and Roper notes that all of the English variants were preserved in a written context[10]. Yet, as he also points out, a significant number of variants contain features, such as rhyme, that in a folk context would more typically indicate that they were intended to be spoken aloud. In fact, as we shall see, the Irish evidence demonstrates that oral enunciation played an essential role in the charm's performance as well as in its transmission. The Irish material offers incontrovertible and plentiful proof that the charm's performance included both writing and speaking, and makes clear that the two modes need not be in contradiction.

In this contribution, I hope to demonstrate what we can learn about a charm tradition if we are privileged to work with a rich ethnographic record. The abundance of variants, the contextual information reflecting on the performance of the charm, and the oral mode of their collection make a study of the Irish material rewarding and give Ireland a special place within western European charm studies.

Let me sketch briefly the background of the Irish material. A smattering of variants of *Super petram* were preserved in nineteenth-century publications and manuscripts. The vast majority, however – over ninety-five percent – were recorded in the twentieth century under the auspices of the legendary Irish Folklore Commission. Formed in 1935 under the directorship of James Hamilton Delargy (Séamus Ó Duilearga), the Commission focused its fieldwork collecting mainly in the tradition-rich Gaelic-speaking west, where the majority of the Gaelic variants of *Super petram* were collected and preserved in the Commission's so-called Main Manuscripts[11]. To complement the geographically circumscribed scope of the Commission's fieldwork collecting, Delargy collaborated with the Department of Education on a nationwide scheme that employed school children in the twenty-six counties of the Republic of Ireland in collecting folklore from their families and neighbours. The Schools' Collection of 1937-38 was spectacularly successful, resulting in just under half a million pages

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[10] The English variants were either "written on a piece of paper carried about by someone, or recorded in a book" (Roper 2005, 124).

[11] I am greatly indebted to Maebhe Ní Bhroin's index of the healing charms contained in the Commission's Main Manuscripts, "Orthaí Leighis na hÉireann" ("Irish Healing Charms", Ní Bhroin 1999).

of bound manuscripts, which have recently been digitized [12]. The Schools' Collection has emerged as a major resource for the study of Irish traditional medicine [13]. It is clear that in the 1930s the *Super petram* charm was part of a vibrant living folk medicinal tradition, and that many of the informants knew not merely the words of the charm, but had seen it practiced. As many as 118 variants of "Peter Sat on a Marble Stone" – seventy-five percent of the total number – are preserved in the Schools' Collection [14]. While folklorists are well-advised to approach the Schools' Collection with a certain amount of caution, an analysis of the *Super petram* variants leaves little doubt about the material's authenticity [15]. Most variants were recorded along with assorted other charms and cures, and their variety and profusion attest to a living culture of traditional medicine.

1. "Peter Sat on a Marble Stone"

The earliest Irish variant of *Super petram* to appear in print is from Kilkenny. In response to a posting in *Notes & Queries* of a southern English variant, a contributor ("J .G.") from Kilkenny reports in the March 1850 volume that he has "often heard the charm," which is "used by the lower orders in the county of Kilkenny". J. G. cites the distinctive first lines of the charm [16]:

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[12] See www.dúchas.ie. Thanks to a very successful crowdsourcing initiative, over ninety percent of the English-language material is now fully text-searchable.

[13] The topic of "cures" elicited about nine thousand responses (8170 in English; 722 in Irish).

[14] The charms in the Schools' Collection were never fully indexed in the Commission's subject card index (and consequently were not covered in Ní Bhroin 1999). It is likely that more variants of *Super petram* may still come to light once all the material has been digitally transcribed.

[15] The main challenge with Schools' Collection materials is the tendency of some school children – and some teachers as well – to copy materials from books. In the case of "Peter Sat on a Marble Stone", however, only a small handful of versions of the charm had appeared in print by 1937, and of those few, none were in publications that were either popular or easily accessible.

[16] J. G. may not have felt the need to give the complete charm, since he is responding to a contribution earlier that month of an English version "from the south-eastern counties of England". However, the omission of the second line might suggest that his recollection of the charm, which he appears to have learned in an oral context, was imperfect and that he did not want to venture the full rendition (J. G. 1850, 349).

Peter sat upon a stone;
Jesus said, "What aileth thee, Peter?"

Aside from the fact that the customary second line is omitted, these lines are strikingly similar to variants collected over eighty years later in Kilkenny, when school children in the county collected six variants as part of the Schools' Collection:

As Peter sat on a marble stone,
Jesus Christ Himself came there alone
Saying, "What ails thee Peter,
That makes thee quake?"
"O Lord God, it is the toothache."
"Rise up Peter and be thee hale
Its not you alone, but all mankind
Whosoever shall repeat these words for my sake,
Shall never be troubled with a toothache." [17]

Kilkenny folklore – in common with many areas in the east and northeast of the country – has a strong admixture of early English folk traditions, reflecting a history of settlement by incomers from Britain going back to the medieval period. "Peter Sat on a Marble Stone" is a witness to that heritage; its roots are not in Gaelic charm tradition but originate in England and Wales. Irish variants – such as the ones from Kilkenny – are closely related to variants in England, where *Super petram* is one of the most common charms attested, as Roper has demonstrated [18]. The marble stone motif is particularly associated with England: in an eleventh-century Latin manuscript from England the protagonist is seated *super marmoreum* [19], and the motif is plentifully attested in modern variants from England and Wales:

Peter sat on a marble stone.
Jesus came to him all alone.
"What's up, Peter?"
"The toothache, My Lord."
"Rise up, Peter,
And be cured of this pain
And all who carry these few lines for My sake." [20]

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[17] NFCS 866:15, County Kilkenny.
[18] Roper 2005, 122-124.
[19] Storms 1948, 288.
[20] Owen (1887) 1896, 264-265.

The English charm's distinctive first line, as well as the rhyming pair stone/alone, the injunction "Rise up, Peter", and the promise that "All who carry these […] lines" shall be exempt from toothache, are all recurrent features in Irish variants of "Peter Sat on a Marble Stone".

The English origin of "Peter Sat on a Marble Stone" is reflected in the modern distribution of variants throughout Ireland. The charm is found in all the areas that experienced English settlement at various times: along the east coast, in the midland counties, and in the eastern parts of Connacht. It is also well attested in the northern province of Ulster, settled by planters from England and Scotland in the seventeenth century. By contrast, despite the intensive folklore collecting undertaken in the Irish-speaking western counties, including Kerry, Cork, Waterford, and Donegal, only a handful of variants were recorded in those counties[21].

While a pronounced east/west gradient continued well into the twentieth century, as the use of English expanded, "Peter Sat on a Marble Stone" made its way into previously Irish-speaking areas. By the 1930s, it had expanded to the western-most counties and could be encountered, though less profusely, anywhere in the island of Ireland. The process of acculturation and expansion to Irish-speaking or bilingual regions had clearly begun well before the twentieth century. Joseph Flahive documents two English variants of "Peter Sat on a Marble Stone" among Gaelic charm texts in two nineteenth-century manuscripts in the Royal Irish Academy[22]. One of the manuscripts, dated to 1857, was compiled by a scribe from County Clare, John Lysaght:

> Peter sat on a marble stone with his hand under his cheek. Christ, coming by, said "What ails you, Peter?" "My tooth that aches," said Peter. "Get up, Peter," said He, "and be thus healed: not you, but whosoever believeth in these words in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen."[23]

Lysaght's charm, copied down at roughly the same time as "J. G." reported the Kilkenny variant, suggests that the English charm had already reached Gaelic Munster by the mid-nineteenth century. The second variant identified by Flahive throws light on the process of linguistic acculturation by which the charm entered the Gaelic-speaking west: The English charm

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[21] Three or fewer variants each were recorded from Waterford, Donegal, and even from Cork, one of the most populous counties in the republic.

[22] Flahive 2019. See also Nicholas Wolf's survey of medical material in nineteenth-century Gaelic manuscripts in the National Library of Ireland and Royal Irish Academy: of the ninety-three medical charms surveyed, seventeen are against toothache (Wolf 2019, 115).

[23] Royal Irish Academy, Dublin, MS 23 L 40, p. 29; printed in Flahive 2019, 121-122.

was accompanied by an Irish and a Latin translation [24]. A handful of charm variants from Irish-speaking areas clearly represent such translations into Irish; one example published by Douglas Hyde references a *cloch mhearbhail*, clearly an attempt to render the English "marble stone" [25].

In England, the marble stone motif competed with another, slightly less popular, motif: About a quarter of the English variants locate the encounter between Christ and Peter at the "gate of Jerusalem" [26]:

> As Peter stood at the gate of Jerusalem,
> Jesus saith unto him, "What aileth thee?"
> He said, "My teeth do ache."
> Jesus said, "Whosoever carrieth these lines about them
> or beareth them in memory
> shall never have the toothache any more,
> In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen." [27]

The Jerusalem gate motif is also found in Ireland. It is already attested in the second of the two nineteenth-century variants printed by Flahive [28]:

> As Peeter sat at the gate of Jerusalem,
> and Jesus came to him and said, "What troubels thee Peeter?"
> Peeter answered, and said, "Lord, I am troubeled with the toothake."
> And Jesus said, "Arise Peeter and be healed:
> and not you alone but every one whome carrys these words about him
> in the name of the Father, Son, & Holy Gost. Amen."

But while the marble stone motif is universal in Ireland, the gate of Jerusalem is found in only about a dozen of the 158 English-language variants [29]. The Royal Irish Academy variant is the only Irish variant known to me in which the Jerusalem gate motif stands on its own; in the twentieth-century oral variants, the Jerusalem gate motif is always found *in combination with* the marble stone:

> As Peter sat on a marble stone,
> Outside the gates of Jerusalem,

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[24] Royal Irish Academy, Dublin, MS 24 C 57, f. 1155v. All three are printed in Flahive 2019, 128-129, note 24.

[25] Hyde 1906, 58. The form *mearbhail* may be due to medial lenition; alternatively, it may reflect the form "marvel stone" documented by Roper as a by-form of the more common "marble stone" (2005, 123).

[26] On the background and distribution of this motif, see Roper 2005, 124-125.

[27] Hartland 1913, 507.

[28] Flahive 2019, 128-129, note 24.

[29] The motif also occurs in three Irish-language variants.

Our Lord came to him alone.
"What ails thee, Peter?" he said,
And Peter said, "A toothache."
"Rise up, Peter, though healed.
Not you alone but all who carried those lines for my sake." [30]

This distinctive combination of the two locational motifs, which in England and elsewhere are found in competition with each other, was presumably prompted by the ubiquitous strength of the marble stone motif in Ireland: the marble stone was felt to "belong" in the first line and could not be dislodged from it.

2. The performance of the charm

So far we have focused on the words of the charm; yet in the performance of a cure, the words are combined with ritual acts, "clothing a metaphorical procedure in the operational or manipulative mode of practical action", to quote Stanley Tambiah's classic formulation [31]. The increased attention paid to the context and performance of charms is one of the most important and beneficial shifts in modern charm studies, benefiting from anthropological approaches such as Tambiah's, and the "performance turn" in folkloristics. Methodologically, it is not always easy to avoid prioritizing text over context, particularly when dealing with pre-modern charms, where the contextual evidence is frequently sparse or altogether lacking.

The survival of decontextualized charm texts from the past is hardly a coincidence. The words may have been viewed as the most stable, tradition-bound and authoritative part of the charm performance, not merely by scholars and collectors, but even by the charmers themselves, who, Tambiah suggests, tend to emphasize the role of the charm's sacro-sanct "words of power":

> If the ethnographer questions his informants "Why is this ritual effective?" the reply takes the form of a formally expressed belief that the power is in the "words" even though the words only become effective if uttered in a very special context of other action. [32]

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[30] NFCS 867:296.
[31] Tambiah 1968, 176.
[32] Tambiah 1968, 194.

The documentation gap with regard to context and performance makes the twentieth-century ethnographic material, such as the corpus collected by the Irish Folklore Commission, all the more important. The accounts taken down by the Commission's full-time collectors are particularly rich in contextual ethnographic detail, but even the material from the Schools' Collection – which makes up by far the largest proportion of extant variants of "Peter Sat on a Marble Stone" – offers valuable insights into the performance context. It is clear from the evidence that the charm was widely known throughout Ireland; the fact that in 1937-38 well over a hundred school children were told the words of the charm by their family or neighbours attests to its popularity, and the Irish evidence begs the question whether the charm may have been similarly widespread elsewhere. Writing in the early 1900s, British folklorist Margaret Eyre calls *Super petram* a "universal incantation", which suggests that it may have been as widely known in England and Wales then as it was a generation later in Ireland. Eyre made a useful division between "domestic magic" and the cures practiced by expert charmers. She specifically mentions "Peter sat on a marble stone" as an example of the former:

> By domestic magic I mean ordinary helpful charms, where the power lies in the charm itself, and which can be practised by anyone. "Peter sat on a marble stone," for instance, is an universal incantation, helpful in itself, to be administered by anybody. [33]

It would seem that the Irish material by and large supports Eyre's claim that *Super petram* was a "universal" charm, "practised by anyone". The abundant ethnographic record shows that the words of the charm were widely known and shared within the community. On the other hand, there is also evidence of the tendency observed in traditional medicine for specific charms to become associated with certain individuals: a number of accounts refer to such healers known locally for their performance of the charm. The healer might "hand on" the charm to another person to carry on the cure, a transfer that was typically carried out from a man to a woman or vice versa, as in this account from Mayo:

> A few years ago a woman lived in the neighbourhood of Scregg, Ballyhaunis, and she had a famous cure for toothache. This was given to her by her father at his death. Many people who suffered from toothache went in in order to get the cure. [34]

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[33] Eyre 1905, 167.
[34] NFCS 107:259.

However, the informants who describe such local "specialists" are themselves able to provide the words of the charm, indicating that knowledge of the words was not restricted to the specialists. Individual and collective concepts of charm "ownership" need not be mutually exclusive but could happily coexist, as a county Meath informant articulates: "The prayer for the cure of toothache belongs to Julia Coakley of Belleview, Raharney, but many people know the prayer and use it"[35].

It is clear that in the 1930s *Super petram* was at least to some extent still practiced in many parts of Ireland. This is suggested by the use of the present tense in many accounts, and by the first-hand testimony collected from charmers and their patients as well as from other eyewitnesses. Some accounts describe healer and patient engaging in a performance that included the words of the charm (whether written or spoken) as well as carefully prescribed actions; some accounts describe the healer's or the patient's actions while performing the charm. A variant from County Clare states, "When a person has a violent pain in the tooth he should kneel down and say three times 'As Peter sat on a marble stone [...]'"[36]. A variant from county Meath advises, "The person saying the prayer should rub his hand to the jaw at the same time"[37].

Many accounts attest to the charm being regarded as efficacious: "If you say this when you have the toothache it will go away and it will never come back"[38]. A few variants stress the element of faith in the cure: "The person must have belief in the prayer"[39], but generally the charm's efficacy is presented as a matter of fact: "Anyone who has a tooth-ache would get cured by saying this"[40]. There is, however, some evidence that the practice was regarded by some informants as a thing of the past. A variant from Carlow hints at a generational disjuncture, associating the charm with "old people" ("*Old people* have a prayer which is *supposed to be* a cure for the toothache"[41]).

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[35] NFCS 694:304.
[36] NFC 1371:247.
[37] NFCS 694:304.
[38] NFCS 942:427.
[39] NFCS 402:193.
[40] NFCS 53:39.
[41] NFCS 911:286; my emphasis.

3. The charm as amulet

Super petram is widely regarded as a "predominantly written charm" in international charm scholarship[42]. In England, as in other parts of Europe, *Super petram* was used as an amulet, as Roper has demonstrated: the words of the charm were written on a piece of paper and given to the patient, who wore it on the body[43]. All the extant English variants appear to emanate from a written context[44], and Roper has argued that there is no indication that oral recitation played any role in their performance: "None of the contextual data surrounding the twenty-one database examples mentions that the words should be spoken"[45].

In the face of this overwhelming evidence for *Super petram* as a written charm, my analysis of the Irish evidence presents a dramatically different picture. While the charm's use as an amulet is attested in Ireland, as I shall outline below, and while writing certainly played a role in the way *Super petram* was performed in Ireland, oral and written aspects appear to have coexisted in Ireland, and there is ample evidence for oral performance and transmission of the charm; in fact, most of the extant evidence points to a vibrant oral charm tradition.

Let us begin by laying out the evidence for the written charm. One of the earliest printed variants from Ireland, reported by Lady Wilde in 1888, suggests that "Peter Sat on a Marble Stone" was carried on the body as a written amulet: "This is the charm to be sewn onto the clothes"[46]. Half a century later, the Irish Folklore Commission collected a variant from an informant in Cavan, who described the process as follows: "You write that for the man, and write this on a bit of paper, and tell him to sew it in his clothes and to carry it but not to open it"[47]. The charm's use as an amulet is also explicitly stated by an informant from county Limerick:

> [T]here used to be great charms for toothaches. The charms used to be worn around the neck like a necklace and the toothache would go away. My own

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[42] Roper 2005, 124.

[43] Roper 2005, 124.

[44] "The representatives of this charm-type were either found in use, i.e., written on a piece of paper carried about by someone, or recorded in a book (either in a charmer's notebook, or on the blank leaves of a sacred book such as the Book of Common Prayer or the Bible), presumably for later written use" (Roper 2005, 124).

[45] Roper 2005, 123.

[46] Wilde 1888, 196.

[47] NFC 212:260.

sister Mary had a toothache very bad and she got a charm one morning and put it on her and, faith, the toothache was gone in the evening.

– What was the charm like?

Yezza, 'twas only a bit of paper and an *ortha* ("charm") written on it. [48]

A County Galway informant, speaking in Irish, describes the actions of a local healer as follows: "When he would give the charm to someone, he would go down on his knees. [...] He'd have the words jotted down on a small piece of paper and when one would be given that paper, one wasn't supposed to read it or to open it at all" [49]. A county Fermanagh practitioner also states the traditional injunction not to read the charm once it is written: "I have a charm for the toothache myself. [...] The way it is used is, I write it out and give it to whoever asks me for it, but they are not supposed to open it or read it" [50]. Other accounts, on the other hand, suggest that the patient *was* supposed to read and recite the charm. Patients of the charmer from Ballyhaunis, County Mayo, already mentioned, were apparently instructed to open the piece of paper and recite the words of the prayer "morning and evening" before folding it up again:

> She would write a certain prayer and *this was to be said* morning and evening. She would fold this prayer as a Gospel then she would make the sign of the cross on the side where the toothache was three times. When the person would open the prayer they were again to fold it the same way and always carry it. [51]

An account from county Limerick similarly incorporates an element of oral recitation or "repetition" of the words of the charm:

> I got a charm for a toothache wan time.... 'Twas from a woman I got it..., and she wrote it down for me, and she gave it to me, and she wrote it in ink, yes, in a paper, for me, and *I used to repeat it* and I used carry it about me." [52]

In some cases, rather than wearing the written charm on the body, the writing was dissolved in a liquid and ingested, as in the cure performed by a County Clare healer by the name of McKeon that was described by a local informant:

> He wrote the cure on a piece of paper and folded three corners of it. You took it with you when you went to him for cure, and brought it home and boiled it in new milk. Drink the milk and burn the paper. [53]

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[48] NFC 1164:100.

[49] NFC 433:3; my translation.

[50] NFC 559:383.

[51] NFCS 107:259; my emphasis.

[52] NFC 658:84; my emphasis.

[53] NFC 1517:190.

An account from County Galway describes the elaborate performance of a local charmer by the name of Tom O'Hara, which involved writing the charm on a piece of wood, apparently without producing an amulet, however. The performance was accompanied by a ritual of the patient taking sips of water and spitting them out again in a carefully prescribed manner:

> He was a very clever man. He was able to make a "pass" for the tooth-ache. This is how he did it.
> He wrote these words on a black piece of wood:
>
> > "As I sat on the marble stone,
> > St. Peter came to me alone,
> > St. Peter said, arise up for my sake,
> > And no more you'll suffer from tooth-ache."
>
> Then he used to get a cup and half-fill it with hot water, and fill the other half with cold water. Then he used to make the sign of the Cross on it three times. He used to give it to the sufferer and he would have to rinse his mouth with it three times, and throw it in behind the fire. He also had to throw what was left in the cup in behind the fire, and after that, the toothache left. [54]

All of these accounts attest to the role of literacy in the charm's performance. One is struck by the variability and range of the performance, where the act of writing takes on a number of functions ranging from the pragmatic to the magical, and interacts with other performative elements, including spoken voice and body movement.

4. "This ould prayer": the spoken charm

While there is ample evidence in Ireland for the use of *Super petram* as a written charm, it is equally clear that it was also a charm performed orally and transmitted by word of mouth. By default, the charms collected under the auspices of the Irish Folklore Collection were recorded from oral testimony, and only one of the almost 150 variants of "Peter Sat on a Marble Stone" preserved in the National Folklore Collection was contributed in the form of a written document [55]. Most variants make no mention of writing, and many stress the spoken nature of the charm: "They used to *say*

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[54] NFCS 141:472.

[55] This is NFCS 738:122, from Mountmurray, County Westmeath. The charm text was accompanied by the following note: "Mrs Slevin, Mt Murray, sent this prayer to school. She says it is a cure for toothache".

the words 'Peter sat on a marble stone [...]'" (NFC 659:474); "Anyone who has a tooth-ache would get cured by *saying* this" (NFCS 53:39); "If you *say* this when you have the toothache, it will go away" (NFCS 942:427; my emphasis).

An unnamed contributor to the Schools' Collection located in Marshalstown, County Wexford, reports what appears to be a parent or grandparent's experience with a local healer, John Saunders. Writing does not appear to have played a role in the healer's performance:

> If you had a toothache you could go to him and ask him to cure it. He would say, "Sit down, my child." Then he would say:
> Saint Peter sat on a marble stone
> and Our Lord came up and said "Why do you moan?"
> "Toothache, my Lord!" says he.
> Then he used to make the sign of the cross and the toothache used to go away. [56]

The remarkable popularity and oral currency of the charm in Ireland is best understood if we recognize its proximity to the genre of the prayer. "Peter Sat on a Marble Stone" is commonly referred to as a "prayer" by the tradition bearers [57]: "This ould prayer was said for the cure of the toothache" [58]. There is a clear preference in Irish traditional medicine for the term "prayer" over the term "charm", which is rarely used except in academic discourse. Verbal charms were regarded as prayers, which put them firmly within the context of legitimate religious lore. In Donegal and Roscommon, *Super petram* was known as "St Peter's Prayer" [59]; St Peter is a ubiquitous figure in Irish apocryphal tradition [60], and there is no doubt that the charm's historiola was viewed as a *bona fide* religious narrative [61]. By conceptualizing "Peter Sat on a Marble Stone" as a prayer, the performance of the charm is put within the folk-religious framework of the oral

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[56] NFCS 893:40.

[57] In the Schools' Collection, "Peter Sat on a Marble Stone" is referred to as a "prayer" in seventy-one instances and as a "cure" in forty-seven; only in three cases is it referred to as a "charm".

[58] NFC 844:82.

[59] NFCS 1075:111; NFCS 264:29.

[60] St Peter is featured in no less than twenty-five distinct religious narratives listed in Frederic Tubach's *Index Exemplorum*; Tubach 1981. For references to St Peter in Irish religious narrative, see Ó Héalaí 2012 and Ó Súilleabháin 2011.

[61] A County Cavan informant contributed a prose retelling of the historiola along the lines of an apocryphal tale which begins "One day St Peter was sitting on a stone along the wayside weeping" (NFCS 979:45).

performance of prayer; many accounts refer to religious gestures, such as kneeling and making the sign of the cross, as part of the performance, or mention the recitation of liturgical prayers ("After these words say three Hail Marys in honour of Jesus, Mary and Joseph"[62]). Like a prayer, the charm is often ritually repeated to effect a cure: "This prayer is repeated nine times after each other"[63]. And like a prayer, the charm might have oral, aural, and written manifestations.

5. "In memory or in writing": a metatextual clue

Roper has astutely pointed out the significance of a line in the charm that refers to its oral/written medium[64]. Christ's parting words to Peter, in variants in Ireland and England, include the injunction to keep the words of the charm "in memory or in writing":

> Rise up, Peter, and thou shalt be healed;
> not only you alone,
> but anyone that keeps those words
> in memory or in writing for my sake
> shall never be troubled with a tooth-ache. [65]

I agree with Roper that we should regard this injunction as a valuable metatextual clue about *Super petram*'s dual oral/written performance mode: the charm text spells out the legitimacy of both media, oral and written, and endows them with added authority by attributing the lines to Christ.

The flexibility of the tradition, which can accommodate a variety of written and oral performances, is reflected in the highly variable phrasing of the injunction. While a significant number of charm variants (over twenty) feature the phrase "in memory or in writing" (or a close variation thereof), many others introduce significant changes in line with the specific performance context. Charm variants preserved in writing, or associated with contextual information indicating written use and function, tend to drop the reference to oral memory and instead emphasize the charm's being written and worn as an amulet. The nineteenth-century charm in the Royal Irish Academy, for example, makes no mention of "memory"

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[62] NFCS 895:113.
[63] NFCS 402:193.
[64] "Perhaps a clue is given by a phrase in one version that mentions the charm being carried 'in memory or wrightin'" (Roper 2005, 124).
[65] NFCS 53:39.

and instead refers only to wearing the written charm as an amulet ("every one whome carrys these words about him"[66]). The majority of the orally collected variants, on the other hand, drop any reference to writing, and instead employ terms of oral utterance ("memory", "prayer", "say", "repeat"): "all who keep these words in memory"[67]; "anyone who repeats these words"[68]; "all these who say this prayer"[69]. Specific aspects of the charm performance, such as the incorporation of liturgical prayers, may be referenced in the charm: "whoever says three Paters and Aves".[70]

The tradition is accommodating: write the charm or recite it like a prayer, preserve it in writing or memorize it, or add liturgical prayers or ritual gestures. Not only can the performance of the charm take all these forms, such practices leave their trace in the charm text itself, offering invaluable clues to charm scholars[71]. In the living charm tradition, the written and the spoken word coexist. Moreover, writing and oral memory both serve to "keep" the words of the charm. A County Westmeath variant uses the formula "in writing or memory;" underneath the words, the informant added the curt instruction: "Either write or remember it"[72].

6. Conclusion: a written charm in oral tradition

Super petram has a long and complex history in Ireland. While Gaelic variants preserve older oicotypes likely to go back to medieval Latin, this contribution focuses on the English vernacular charm "Peter Sat on a Marble Stone", which came to Ireland from England, possibly as early as the later Middle Ages. Originally introduced to the eastern parts of Ireland – where it is still more prevalent – the charm had spread throughout the island of Ireland by the twentieth century, when the Irish Folklore Commission began its collecting work. About 150 variants of "Peter Sat on a Marble Stone" are preserved in the Commission's archives. The rich harvest from

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[66] Flahive 2019, 128-129, note 24.

[67] NFC 1258:4.

[68] NFC 792:61.

[69] NFC 189:182.

[70] NFC 1517:164.

[71] English and Irish Variants of the *Tres boni fratres* charm, for example, reference extra-textual curative elements, such as oil and wool, within the charm texts themselves; see Roper 2005, 128; Partridge 1980-81, 202; Hillers 2019, 86, note 26; Tuomi 2016, 69-96.

[72] NFCS 741:109.

the Schools' Collection is particularly suggestive: well over a hundred children, asking about common cures at home, were told the words of the charm by family members or neighbours. Clearly, "Peter Sat on a Marble Stone" was still in popular oral currency in 1930s Ireland, and its words appear to have been known outside the more select circle of charmers or expert tradition bearers.

This rich ethnographic material provides us with a window into a living charm tradition. About half the variants from the Commission's Main Manuscripts and a third of those in the Schools' Manuscripts provide contextual commentary of some kind[73]. While this may seem like a meagre proportion, given the abundant variants, it makes for a richly detailed and nuanced perspective on twentieth-century charm tradition.

Our investigation of the Irish data showed that charm performances varied greatly, whereas the words of the charm are overall homogenous and stable. There is no indication that charm performances followed a standardized procedure; on the contrary, the evidence suggests that individual charmers freely combined elements from a range of traditional practices. We have seen clear evidence that in Ireland, as in England and elsewhere in Europe, *Super petram* was used as a written charm and carried on the body as an amulet. A relatively small number of accounts describe an exclusively written charm procedure; other accounts indicate that cures involved a combination of written and oral performance elements.

It is equally clear, however, that "Peter Sat on a Marble Stone" in Ireland was first and foremost an oral charm, recited and repeated orally, without recourse to writing. The majority of variants make no reference to writing at all; instead, there are ubiquitous references to oral utterance such as "saying" or "repeating". The charm itself is commonly referred to as a "prayer", a term that in this context is suggestive of oral recitation and performance. Furthermore, since the overwhelming majority of variants were collected from oral testimony, it is clear that the words of the charm were generally known and were transmitted orally.

It is tempting to view oral and literary modes of operation as antithetical, but the two modes are not mutually exclusive or even contradictory. A charmer's use of writing (to produce an amulet) does not necessarily imply that he or she relies on a written exemplar to produce the written amulet. If – as was the case in many parts of Ireland – many people in the community knew the charm by heart, so, assuredly, did the charmer. Oral

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[73] Above and beyond basic ethnographic data such as time and place of collection, and – usually – the name of the informant.

and literary modes may coexist; they may even complement each other. As Roper has pointed out, the phrase "in memory or in writing", which is embedded in English and Irish variants of *Super petram,* offers a metatextual clue to the versatility of tradition. Charm tradition relies on both oral and written modes of performance and transmission, and it uses the words of the charm itself to validate both and to teach us how to "keep those words in memory or in writing".

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