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RESTRAIN, LIBERATE, KILL: PARSING THE LANGUAGE OF BLOCKING SICKNESS IN IRISH CHARMS

Nicholas M. Wolf

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ABSTRACT

Although the words used within charms have always varied with international context and even within a regional or national community, the importance of the precise selection of words from the perspective of the charmer is often indicated in descriptions of how the charms are used. Focusing on eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Irish-language medical charms found in manuscript sources, this essay considers contemporary meanings of three particular words that appear repeatedly in this corpus, *marbhaim* ("kill"), *cosg* ("block/restrain"), and *saor* ("free/liberate/release").

Keywords: Irish-language charms; manuscript charm corpora; medical charms.

This essay concentrates on a set of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Irish-language charm texts oriented around a specific theme, medical healing, and within this genre, instances that share certain lexical features in their approach to restoring health [1]. These attributes are the use of words that suggest actions of restraint, liberation, attacking, or killing. While this choice of genre and lexical features is seemingly narrow, in fact it includes a strong cross-section of the surviving charms corpus for Ireland in this time period. An estimated sixty-three percent of the nearly 150 surviving charm texts found to date in Irish-language manuscripts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are medical charms, and of these,

[1] The author wishes to thank the anonymous readers who reviewed this essay for their excellent, detailed comments particularly on translations and on the question of word meaning change over time.

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the lexical features of interest here can be found repeatedly throughout this corpus of nearly one hundred instances of content related to healing [2].

A sense of the contents of these Irish medical charms can be gleaned from a charm against farcy, the glandular ailment that afflicts people and horses, that features such language. The ethnographer and folklorist Douglas Hyde included a version of this charm for his publication *Abhráin Diadha Chúige Connacht*, a two-volume miscellany of prayers and religious songs that appeared in 1906. Hyde had taken the charm from a mixed devotional and secular manuscript produced by the County Longford scribe Brian Ó Fearrghaile in the 1770s. Hyde's transcription and translation consists of the following:

Ortha anaghaidh na h-Achma

Marbhaim arpuidhean (?) achma úr
Marbhaim cnumh an fhéir
Marbhaim an phéist úr
Cuirim ortha-nimhe nimhneach
Ar an gconach marbhthach
Ortha do chuir Peadar agus Pól
Mharbhas na cnuimh i bhfeóil
Mharbhas cnuimh i ndéid agus i n-éadaigh

Charm against Farcy

I slay [...] fresh farcy
I slay the maggot of the grass,
I kill the fresh worm,
I put a poisonous poison-charm
On the deadly murrain
A charm which Peter and Paul sent
That kills the maggots in the flesh
That kills maggots in teeth and in clothing. [3]

Here, in the repetition of the verb *marbhaim* (in modern Irish orthography, *maraím*, kill or wound seriously) in lines one through three and lines

[2] The source for this appraisal of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century charm texts is a dataset, not yet completed, compiled from charms directly or indirectly identified in the indices to the two largest collections of Irish-language manuscripts – held at the National Library of Ireland and the Royal Irish Academy – and supplemented by further charms identified in the same collections by Champagne 2001.

[3] Hyde (1906) 1972, 2, 386-387. Translation by Hyde, who was uncertain about the term *conach* in the fifth line. He suggests, correctly, that this should be translated "murrain". See Dinneen (1927) 1996, *s.v.* "conach".

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seven and eight, combined with the allusions to St. Peter and St. Paul, are traits that mark out these charms as a distinct body within the larger corpus of Irish charms – characteristics that also link these charms to similar features in the broader international corpus. These attributes include the use of language referring to resisting, restraining, and killing: the charmer "kills" the illness; similarly, other charms order a stop to bleeding or a liberation from sickness.

Not all Irish charms rely on this convention. Charms in which the actions of named individuals (such as saints) serve as a metaphor for how the affliction is to be vanquished, for instance, involve a more indirect description of how healing is to happen. The *Super petram* charm provides a common example of this form. The extraction of Peter from the stone on which he sits metaphorically stands in for the healing actions that are to take place. Similarly, transferal charms in which sickness in the body is to be swapped for something benign involve a much more indirect description of how healing is to be enacted. By contrast, in these charms of attack and action the charmer orders a direct banishment of sickness or a transformation of the body.

The analysis below interprets these charms of active intercession through a series of steps. First, the lexical features of the charms are placed against a wider contextual understanding among charms scholars of the way such characteristics operate from the point of view of the charmer and his or her community. Second, an understanding of the meaning of three commons words found in these texts – *marbhaim* or its verbal noun form *marbhuigheadh*, *cosg* (modern Irish orthography, *cosc*), and *saor* – will be drawn out by examining what contemporaries might have understood, either directly or indirectly, by these terms. Finally, the potential significance of these charm types in helping us recover something of the vernacular understandings of sickness in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Ireland will be proposed.

1. The power of words in charms

It is well established that the lexical content of charms – whether words recognized as part of that language community's repertoire or nonsense words that lack inherent meaning outside of the intended use as magic speech – are not considered arbitrary or variable by charm practitioners. The lexical content of the charm – the words – are what H.S. Versnel has

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called the "ritual words" (as opposed to the "ritual action") that are necessary to enact the goal of the charm [4]. This is not to say that lexical meaning is essential to a charm. The use of nonsensical words in charms has long been recognized as an international feature of the phenomenon, as are sound features such as the alliteration that is present in the charm for farcy noted above [5]. Nor are the lexical contents of charms always affixed. The international charms corpus exhibits far too many variants on the same motifs – for one, we have a multilingual corpus – for us as scholars to share the view of charmers regarding the supposed fixity of the precise words of charms in conjunction with precise actions.

But a helpful framework presents itself in the approach of Gábor Klaniczay, who draws our focus to "efficacious words" in the context of Christian church-sanctioned rituals, verbal magic, and prayers [6]. Whereas practitioners of praying, Klaniczay notes, see the words of the prayer as petitioning a higher being to accomplish something, Catholic rituals such as the Eucharist are based on the understanding that the sought goal is accomplished concurrently with the uttering of the words, via divine intercession. The oral performance of the words enacts the transubstantiation, for example, rather than trigger its accomplishment later. This, Klaniczay notes, is more akin to how charm practitioners see the performance of the specific words contained in the charm – much to the chagrin of theologians (he is speaking of the medieval variety) who saw charms as the demonic antithesis of church ritual. In short, while the focus of charm scholars must necessarily be on the micronarratives, the orally significant nonsense words, and other features such as alliteration, it is worthwhile to see lexical meaning, insofar as we can recover those meanings for past communities, as yet another key feature of charm texts.

2. Three irish-language words

There are a wide variety of "action words" concerned with vanquishing illness or healing a patient that appear in Irish-language texts, among them *slánadh* or *slánaigh* (heal), a word long associated with charms in Irish-language exemplars, as medieval instances attest; *fóir* or *fóirthint* (help/relieve/

[4] Versnel 2002, 107.
[5] Passalis 2012, 7-8.
[6] Klaniczay 2013, 283.

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save; both forms of this word, incidentally, have strong religious usages); and intriguingly, *leigheas* (to cure/remedy), a word with strong medical connections. But it is the contemporary meanings of *marbhaim/marbhuigheadh*, *cosg*, and *saor*, three words that appear in Irish-language charms that are not obviously connected with healing and yet find their way into a number of examples, that are of interest here.

The word *marbhaim* appears in a second example taken from the same scribe mentioned above as a source for Hyde, this time in a manuscript currently held at the Royal Irish Academy as MS 23 E 7 and dateable to the 1770s and 1780s. Scribe Ó Fearrghaile recorded in this volume the following:

> Orrtha mharbhuigh achma asbuin, no peiste a bfeoil
>
> Marbhuim thú a pheist ruadh
> Marbhuim thú a pheist ceannruadh
> Cuirrim Criost dod lagan, Dia fire dod lagan
> Na 9 noird Ainglidhe ata a bflaithios
> Dod ruagadh agus dod lasgad as do leabaigh
> Agus na raibh do shaoghal agad a pheist
> Acht go ndearfaid missi mo phaidir
>
> A charm for the killing of _____ farcy, or worms of the flesh
>
> I kill you, red worm
> I kill you, red-haired worm
> I send Christ to weak you, true God to weaken you
> The nine orders of angels that are in heaven
> To expel and thrash you from your bed
> And may you not have your life, worm
> When I will say my prayer. [7]

Once again, it is the worm (*péist*) that the speaker kills. What understanding, however, did an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century charm practitioner attach to the term *marbhaim*? For modern Irish, the foundational Irish-English dictionary *Foclóir Gaedhilge agus Béarla* (1904-27) compiled by Patrick Dinneen glosses this as "kill, slay, slaughter, oppress"[8]. A slightly later reference work, the later twentieth-century dictionary *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla* produced by Niall Ó Dónaill, translates this into English as "kill", but not always in the sense of person-to-person action – an example is *mharaigh an galar é* (disease killed him), or *iasc a mharú* (catch a fish).

[7] Translation by author.
[8] Dinneen (1927) 1996, *s.v.* "marbhaim."

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Marbhaim thus has a more expansive definition referring to all manner of killing or arriving at death, whereas a separate term prefixed with *dún* (close, shut), *dúnmharaigh*, is used only to refer to "murder," making the latter a narrower term more closely connected to interpersonal violence [9].

Turning from twentieth-century dictionary attestations to more contemporary uses, it is beneficial to make use of the recent *Historical Irish Corpus, 1600-1926,* completed by the Royal Irish Academy, a compilation of printed texts in the Irish-language that allows for full-text searchability of keyword terms. *Marbhaim/marbhuigheadh* shows up in several instructive cases that expand on the limited explanations of the word's definition found in the Irish-English dictionaries. Notably, as a supplement to the glosses provided by Dinneen or Ó Dónaill, the word is taken to refer to a just killing – that is, a killing conducted within the context of a conflict between communities or carried out as a justified order from authorities. An Irish-language sermon by the Cork priest Maurice Power, composed in 1836, for example, speaks of a general carrying out a killing at the orders of a king. Similarly, a Fenian story collected from an oral source and included in the late nineteenth-century folklore collection *Siamsa an Gheimhridh* (1892), tells the story of a king's son who strikes out to seek his fortune with the hero Fionn, only to meet death at the hands of a foreign prince whom he angers. The term *marbhuigheadh* appears in the delivery of the message of his death: "He has been killed" [10]. *Marbhuigheadh/marbhaim* thus presents a particularly strong word that signifies the slaying or killing of something or someone – but one that may have suggested a more complicated interpretation as to motive or justification than an English translation like "murder" would provide.

Turning to the next term, *cosg*, in modern Irish orthography *cosc*, this word is glossed by the Dinneen dictionary as "the act of restraining, preventing, hindering, impeding". In Ó Dónaill's dictionary it is presented as synonymous with "check, stop, prevent, restrain", as in *tuile a chosc*, "to stem a flood", *ocras* or *tart a chosc* ("to check hunger" or "to check thirst"), or, most notably, *fuil a chosc*, "stem blood". This focus on the restraint of flowing blood is common in the charm corpus, as in an example from the Limerick scribe Tomás Ó Conchubhair recorded in the National Library of Ireland manuscript MS G 233 and originally written down in 1791. The

[9] Dinneen (1927) 1996, *s.v.* "dúnmharbhaim"; Ó Dónaill (1972) 1992, *s.v.* "maraigh", "dúnmharú". Ó Dónaill defines the latter sparsely as "murder, to commit murder".

[10] *Historical Irish Corpus, 1600-1926*, n.d., *s.v.* "marbhuigheadh", http://corpas.ria.ie?fsg_word=marbhuigheadh.

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charm consists of a blood staunching narrative with a Longinus motif, clearly a variant of the same blood charm identified in twentieth-century oral tradition that has been linked more closely to Irish-speaking contexts (and before that, Latin-antecedents) [11].

> Ortha na fola do chosg
>
> Allevemus ainm an fir do sgoilt air taobh an Dáluigh shug [*sic?*]
> uisge fuil & fion amach air taobh árdrighe
> *An nomine patrie* cois[g] an fuil *et fili* tá camhair
> *spiriti sancti amen Jesus* coisg an fhuil & tá si trean
>
> Charm to staunch blood
>
> Allevemus [Longinus] is the name of the man who split the side of Dáluigh [?]
> water, blood, and wine from the side of the High King
> *In nomine patrie* staunch the blood *et fili* there is help
> *spiriti sancti amen Jesus* staunch the blood and it [the blood] is [flowing] strong [12]

An additional example included by Hyde in his collection and reportedly taken from a late nineteenth-century source relies instead on a native saint, Bridget, as a source for its efficacy:

> Ortha Cosgtha Fola
>
> Taraidh a athair le do chabhair
> Taraidh a mhic agus fóir
> Taraidh a Bhrighid a bhan-naoimh
> Agus an dá abstol déag
> Agus cuir coisg [ar] an fhuil
> Atá teacht go tréan.
>
> Charm for Stopping Blood
>
> Come, Father, with thy help
> Come, Son, and relieve
> Come, Brigid, female saint
> And the twelve Apostles
> And put a stop to the blood
> That is coming powerfully. [13]

In both cases, the charm pairs the stoppage with commentary on the nature of the blood flow, using the term *tréan* (strong) to describe its power.

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[11] Hillers 2019, 90; Ní Fhloinn 2019, 138-139.
[12] Translation by author.
[13] Hyde (1906) 1972, 2, 380-381. Translation by Hyde.

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The term *cosg* lacks the punch of *marbhuigheadh* or *marbhaim*, which suggests a complete obliteration of the ailment rather than its mere restraint. But contemporary texts of the eighteenth and nineteenth century indicate a complex, even metaphysical meaning attached to the word *cosg*. In these examples it has connotations of restraint of bodily needs in particular, as in releases from thirst or hunger. Contextual meanings also shade into religious restraints, such as checks on the urge to sin. The mid-eighteenth-century poetic composition *Duanaire na Midhe* thus speaks in several instances of *cosg íota* (to quench one's thirst). On the other hand, the well-known collection of sermons assembled in 1818 and referred to now as *Seanmóirí Mhuighe Nuad* refers to *cosg do chur ar an gcuirptheacht* (place a restraint on corruption) and *cosg do chur ar an olc* (to place a restraint on evil) [14]. A third text, particularly helpful because it is a diary kept in the 1830s by the Kilkenny schoolteacher Amhlaoidh Ó Súilleabháin and therefore takes us more squarely into natural writing and usage of the time, presents the word *cosg* in the sense of "suffocating", that is, stopping the breath. He uses the term to describe the actions of the famous Burke and Hare murderers in Scotland (1828) in which victims were smothered to death in order to sell their body to science [15]. Thus, while the use of *cosg* connotes a restraint on natural, occasionally evil, and sometimes essential bodily functions, when deployed to describe a restriction on vital human needs can have similar fatal associations, if indirectly.

Both *cosg* and *marbhuigheadh* are relatively generic in their use, with broad application in a variety of contexts but typically apoliticized in meaning. This feature does not hold true for the third term used in the charms, *saor*. This word could command distinctly political meanings, as the work of scholar Peter McQuillan (2004) in tracing its noun form (*saoirse*) has revealed. An example from the 1860s, collected from a County Limerick charmer, Daniel Sheahan, found in a charm for pregnancy and childbirth pain illustrates its use:

> Artha mná a d-tinneas cloinne
>
> Do dhá gheal cioch, a Mhuire, máthair agus búime Iosa,
> ó n-gádh rug slán sin a tabhairt fóir a's fuasgladh anála
> don m-ban so tinn a b-pianta gaibhtheach.
> Saor í a athair, saor í, a mhic, ós tú fuair thús baisde

[14] *Historical Irish Corpus, 1600-1926*, n.d., *s.v.* "cosg", http://corpas.ria.ie?fsg_word=cosg.

[15] McGrath 1936, 108.

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do ghein a Spiriod naomh,
fág do cabhar aguinn agus beir leat isi slán.

Women's charm for child pain

Your two white breasts, Mary, mother and nurse of Jesus,
from distress carried safe, give help and release breath
to this woman sick from dangerous pains
Save her, Father, save her, Son, as you who received a baptismal start
born of the Holy Spirit
leave us your help and carry her safe. [16]

Saor can be translated here with the English words "save" or "free," meant in the sense of liberation from pain and the threat of death. But wading into the modern dictionaries by Dinneen or Ó Dónaill reveals a list of complex meanings. Dinneen mostly focuses on the ideas of saving and salvation and rescue, perhaps no surprise given his clerical background. Ó Dónaill prioritizes "raising to free status", "to free or to liberate", similarly proposes "save, redeem", and, at entry six, to rid, as from disease.

It is this notion of freed status that McQuillan has identified as the primary use of this term up until the eighteenth century – the state of being *saor* was to be free from paying tribute or obligation to those of a higher social status, or to be free from enslavement. But from the eighteenth century onward the term, often superseded by the noun form *saoirse*, began to be imbued with the sense of release from generalized oppression and often specifically to liberation from foreign rule. It was therefore not just a weighty term but a word that was increasingly politicized (and, according to McQuillan, nationalized) in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries against a backdrop of Irish rebellion directed at English rule [17]. This trend is confirmed in the Royal Irish Academy's longitudinal *Historical Irish Corpus*: dominant uses of *saor* adjectively to express the state of freedom from sin begin to be supplemented by the nineteenth century by distinctly political uses such as freeing the land, or freeing one's country [18]. In this sense, the uses of *saor* in the charms appear to beckon more toward the older meaning of freedom from enslavement or liberation from a restricted (i.e., a sinful or ill) state.

[16] Traditions of the Irish Peasantry Compiled by William Smith O'Brien, ca. 1860, MS G 1,252, National Library of Ireland, Dublin. Translation by author.

[17] McQuillan 2004, 183-229.

[18] *Historical Irish Corpus, 1600-1926*, n.d., *s.v.* "saor," http://corpas.ria.ie?fsg_word=saor.

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3. Conclusion

Collectively, these gleanings offer not only a better understanding of how practitioners understood the workings of charms or of the Irish-language context for such healing practices, but also a glimpse of vernacular understandings of illness. The lack of surviving sources offering that vernacular view, particularly for Irish-speaking communities, means that we know far more about middle- or upper-class views of what constituted sickness. Scholars, reviewing the more voluminous surviving commentary of those classes, have emphasized that well into the nineteenth century sickness was viewed as an outcome of pestilential afflictions on the one hand, and moral failings on the other. Illness from this point of view was caused by poor environment, including crowding and lack of sunlight and air. It was also an outcome of the failure to feed the spiritual being or the turning away from orthodox, church-centered religious practices [19]. Indeed the notion of moral failure informed a broad swath of emerging Irish state intervention in health and poverty needs by the nineteenth century, represented by the attempts to differentiate between poor who were "deserving" (those who were poor despite living a moral life) and those who were "undeserving" (impoverished because of immoral living) [20].

What does the vernacular point of view presented in these charms suggest about alternate view of healing in the pre-twentieth-century period? Scholarly investigations into vernacular views of middle-class moralizing of poverty have shown that the distinctions drawn between "deserving" and "undeserving" poor were shared widely by the Irish populace, but that a strong rural-urban divide around the nature of the itinerant poor provided an alternate divide between the emerging state-driven medical charity institutions and an older alms-based rural concept of informal support [21]. Similarly, the concept of illness and healing presented in the charms both replicates and rejects an emerging professionalized and middle-class view of medicine. On the one hand, they are frequently rooted in the perceived goodness and saintliness of the figures discussed in the charm narratives, whether major religious figures (saints, usually), God, or Christ. At the same time, there is little sense of moralizing or time spent ascribing the illness to moral failing – or its eradication to a turn from immorality. Rather, it suggests a contrary vernacular view of illness as an inevitable,

[19] On the persistence of this moral imbalance theory of illness, see Farmar 2004, 68.
[20] Cox 2017, 267-268.
[21] Ó Ciosáin 1998, 98.

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if invasive, aspect of everyday life – a product of general fate, not necessarily one infused with moral causes. And illness was, in this telling, to be met head on, with combative and liberating actions, be they charms or any other remedy. In some ways, this seems distinctly modern – we speak today of a war on cancer, for example. But in its focus on remedy over cause, this vernacular view differed from that of better-off contemporaries and of modern society, who seek to bare the roots of illness first in order to prevent sickness, rather than react to its arrival.

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