



CORNISH WITCHCRAFT

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CHARMS AND CHARMERS

Another group allied with conjurors, though they have far outlived them, are the various healing practitioners who went by the name of charmers. Whereas conjurors were closely identified with the causes and diagnosis of illness and the manifestation of witchcraft, charmers were concerned rather with concepts of folk-healing, with the charms and practices to cure ailments rather than the root causes of them. Charmers did not diagnose, and for the most part treated fairly commonplace complaints. In this way, charmers endured while conjurors have withered away as the witchcraft beliefs that sustained them waned. Folklorists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have been unhelpful in confusing charmers with cunning-folk, lumping them altogether under the appellation 'white-witch,' thereby blurring the distinctive differences between them.

Charmers specialised in healing a fairly specific range of ailments that were not viewed or suspected of having supernatural origins. The range of ailments fell into just 2 groups. The first consisted of problems with an underlying natural basis, such as warts, agues (fevers), shingles, ringworm (erysipelas), and toothache. The second consisted of ailments of an accidental nature, such as snake bites, strains and sprains, swelling and inflammation, scalds, cuts, and the staunching of blood, all prevalent in manual employments. Charmers made no pretence to the occult arts or possession of magical powers, rather their ability to heal resided in the possession of charms. The efficacy of these charms depended upon the faith of the charmer and the patient in the ability of the charmer to heal, also in the secrecy surrounding the words used. Many charmers claimed to be able to heal a wide variety of ailments, using a charm specific to each complaint, others specialised in only one ailment. There were also some people who possessed an object thought to be able to heal, and although they didn't claim any abilities for themselves, they were known as charm custodians. One such example is the 'kenning-stone,' which was lent to people afflicted with eye problems, such as styes.

The stone would be rubbed on the problem area until such time as it was cured, after which the stone was returned to its owner.

The power to heal was sometimes conferred by an accident of birth, by being the seventh son of a seventh son, or the seventh daughter of a seventh daughter, more usually people became charmers because a relative or friend conferred the ability onto them. As such the power to charm was a gift, freely conferred, and charmers were never meant to charge customers for their services, although gifts in kind might be discreetly accepted. Customers had to reciprocate by never saying 'please' or 'thank you,' else the virtue of the charm was lost. People were usually initiated along bloodlines, within families. It was believed that the gift had to be passed contra-sexually, that is from male to female or vice versa, so that a father might pass the gift on to his daughter, who might then pass it on to her son, who could pass it on to his daughter, and so on down the generations.

The charms that the charmers used were never meant to be written down and given to a customer in the manner of a conjuror (except perhaps to be worn about the neck in case of toothache, although even then secrecy was enjoined, and the charm was never meant to be read), rather the nature of the charm was to be kept secret, and whispered over the afflicted area when charming took place. From the various charms known to have been used we find that they had a long tradition stretching back to Saxon times, and took the form of prayers to God, to Christ and the saints, or blessings to the patient. Variant versions of each charm for an ailment were recorded over the years, each with subtle differences, though a couple of examples will suffice to illustrate their general format, viz:

For a Scald or Burn:

There came three angels out of the East,
One brought fire and two frost;
Out fire and in frost,
In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.
Amen.

For Toothache:

Christ pass'd by his brother's door,
Saw his brother lying on the floor.
What aileth thee, brother?
Pain in the teeth? -
Thy teeth shall pain thee no more.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.

That charming has survived into the twenty-first century is due to its independence from beliefs in witchcraft and to the many successes that charmers have wrought over the years, offering their charms as an alternative to orthodox medicine, and is an enduring example of a folk tradition that has been passed orally, and for the most part in the secrecy that the tradition enjoins, across several centuries.