

Zeitschrift: Basler Jahrbuch für historische Musikpraxis : eine Veröffentlichung der Schola Cantorum Basiliensis, Lehr- und Forschungsinstitut für Alte Musik an der Musik-Akademie der Stadt Basel

Herausgeber: Schola Cantorum Basiliensis

Band: 35-36 (2011-2012)

Artikel: On love charms and the neglect of medieval women's music

Autor: Haines, John

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-868860>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 05.02.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

ON LOVE CHARMS AND THE NEGLECT OF MEDIEVAL WOMEN'S MUSIC

by JOHN HAINES

History is shaped by the hazards of those written sources sturdy and protected enough to have survived fires and wars, sources that overwhelmingly favour men and the powerful institutions created for them. As a way out of antifeminist prejudices that typify the surviving record, and as a way into the routinely maligned world of women's song, this essay will focus on medieval love charms, sometimes called *carmina amatoria*. By contrast with the celebrated, male-dominated courtly love songs from the last few centuries of the Middle Ages, the infamous *carmina amatoria* were performed by women and condemned by churchmen throughout the Medieval Millennium. In considering the music of the medieval love charm, a topic completely ignored in scholarship until now, the courtly love song will briefly serve, in the second half of this essay, as a useful foil in teasing out medieval and modern antifeminist prejudices. For without a doubt, a fundamental and pervasive antifeminism is responsible for the neglect in medieval music historiography of love charms in particular and of women's song in general.

Throughout the copious and often entertaining ecclesiastical condemnations of music from the Middle Ages, the expression *carmina amatoria* seems to refer to love songs – literally, „amatorious song“. The word *carmen* can just as easily mean „charm“ as it can the more commonly assumed „song“. ¹ Indeed, it seems that the *carmina amatoria* frequently condemned by medieval churchmen were sometimes intended to mean „love charms“ as opposed to „love songs“. For example, in the early thirteenth century, Paris Bishop William of Auvergne writes: „You will notice that demons have deceived foolish women on account of love with *amatoria carmina* and other means.“ ² In addition to the plural noun *carmina*, the words *cantilenae* and (less often) *cantica* are also often used to denote condemned songs. They are often considered diabolical. Sixth-century Bishop Caesarius of Arles, for example, accuses „sensuous songs“ (*cantica luxuriosa*) of having „diabolical words“ (*verba diabolica*). ³ To be sure, labels such as *incantationes diabolicas* frequently found in penitentials leave no doubt as to their exclusively magi-

¹ Edna Bozoky, *Charmes et prières apotropaïques*, Turnhout: Brepols 2003 (Typologie des sources du Moyen Âge occidental 86), 34–35.

² John Haines, *Medieval Song in Romance Languages*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010, 67 (both Latin and English translation).

³ Haines, *Medieval Song* (see n. 2), 63; generally on medieval condemnations of singing, see Haines, *Medieval Song*, 38–39, 55–67 and 162–171.

cal context.⁴ Other less common expressions possess a semantic ambiguity similar to *carmina amatoria*. Such is the vague label *vana carmina* („vain songs“) found in a condemnation from the seventh-century Council of Narbonne that specifically mentions divination – „women and men diviners,“ the condemnation specifies.⁵

Table 1. List of magicians in Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies*

NAME	DEFINITION
<i>Magus</i>	General magician „who disturbs the minds of men“
<i>Necromantus</i>	Necromancer who communicates with the dead using <i>praecantationes</i>
<i>Hydromantus</i>	Diviner specializing in water
<i>Incantator</i>	Enchanter „who practices the art of words“
<i>(H)ariolus</i>	Soothsayer specializing in sacrifices and „nefarious prayers“
<i>Haruspex</i>	Soothsayer
<i>Augur (Auspex)</i>	Augur or soothsayer, reader of omens, especially bird flights
<i>Pythonissa</i>	General woman magician (sorceress)
<i>Astrologus</i>	General astrologer
<i>Genethliacus (Mathematicus)</i>	Calculator of nativities
<i>Horoscopus</i>	Astrologer specializing in nativities
<i>Sortilegus</i>	Soothsayer specializing in writing, especially the <i>Sortes sanctorum</i>
<i>Salisator</i>	Soothsayer specializing in jumping over body parts

The topic of love charms that is the subject of this essay falls under the broader topic of incantations which we should briefly consider. As with love charms,

⁴ E.g., Arthur W. Haddan, William Stubbs and David Wilkins, *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents Relating to Great Britain and Ireland*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1964, 424 (from the early eighth-century Penitential of Egbert): „Mulier si divinationes fecerit vel incantationes diabolicas ...“

⁵ The Council of Narbonne is attributed to Isidore of Seville in *Patrologia latina*, vol. 84, col. 612D: „viri ac mulieres divinatores ... in eorum vana carmina...“

studies devoted to the musical performance of incantations are non-existent.⁶ This is all the more surprising given that the performance of incantations is attested all throughout the Middle Ages, by writers ranging from Saint Augustine in the fifth century to Thomas Chobham in the thirteenth century, following a well-known categorization.⁷ The classic list of „enchanters“ and related individuals is provided by Isidore of Seville in his widely read *Etymologies* (table 1). Of the thirteen types of magicians (*magii*) that Isidore lists, the majority predict the future in one way or the other, from the *haruspicii* who read entrails to the *salisatores* who jump over body parts. At several points in his definition, Isidore highlights the use of the incantations (*praecantationes*) intrinsic to the rituals of certain *magii*. It cannot be overstated at present that incantations or sung charms pervaded daily life in the Middle Ages. The charms that do survive in written form – unfortunately mostly from the last two centuries of the Medieval Millennium and, equally unfortunately, all lacking musical notation – address problems ranging from curing toothaches to planning pregnancies. One of the most famous is the „Flum Jordan“ formula used for blood-staunching.⁸ In sum, although the word „enchanter“ today may conjure up an almost comical stereotype, perhaps by association with Disney movies such as *Fantasia* (1940), enchanters or incanting magicians were taken as seriously in the Middle Ages as are today physicians or scientists, in fact the descendants of the medieval *magii*.

It is important to note that the healing roles predominantly associated with incantations, from dentist to midwife, were traditionally performed by women in the Middle Ages, and not men. Frequently, therefore, enchanters were women, so „enchantresses“ – a word with even more problematic modern connotations

⁶ I have attempted to redress this in a few recent publications. See John Haines, „Incantations: Singing off the Page“, in: *Avista Forum Journal* 19 (2009), 127; John Haines, „On *ligaturæ* and their Properties: Medieval Music Notation as Esoteric Writing“, in: John Haines (ed.), *The Calligraphy of Medieval Music*, Turnhout: Brepols 2011, 203–222; John Haines, „Performance before c. 1430: an Overview“, in: Colin Lawson and Robin Stowell (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Musical Performance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012, 236–237 and 242; John Haines, „Case Study: Guillaume de Machaut: ballade 34“, in: *Cambridge History of Musical Performance*, 283–284.

⁷ See, for example, the list in Thomas of Chobham's *Summa confessorum*, Frederick Broomfield (ed.), Louvain: Éditions Nauwelaerts 1968, 469–474, which draws on Augustine and Isidore, among others. Table 1 is drawn from *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Etymologiarum sive Originum libri XX*, Wallace M. Lindsay (ed.), Oxford: Clarendon Press 1911, vol. 1, 324–326, now in English translation, Stephan A. Barney et al., *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006. A longer list taking into account earlier medieval authors is given by Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press 1972, 15–16.

⁸ On the „Flum Jordan“ charm motif, see TM Smallwood, „The Transmission of Charms in English, Medieval and Modern“, in: Jonathan Roper (ed.), *Charms and Charming in Europe*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2004, 11–31. Generally on surviving charms, see Lea Olsan, „Charms and Prayers in Medieval Medical Theory and Practice“, in: Roper (ed.), *Social History of Medicine* 16 (2003), 343–366; Lea Olsan, „Charms in Medieval Memory“, in: Roper (ed.), *Charms and Charming*, 59–88; Lea Olsan, „The Corpus of Charms in the Middle English Leechcraft Remedy Books“, in: Roper (ed.), *Charms, Charmers and Charming*, 214–237.

than „enchanter“. The enchantress or female *incantator* was usually called *incantatrix* in the Middle Ages. Unfortunately, our view of female enchanters is coloured by the anti-feminism of late medieval witch hunts that regularly haunts the historiography of magic, a point to which I shall return at the end of this essay.⁹ Therefore it should be emphasized that the *incantatrix* played a positive role in society throughout the Middle Ages. Women incanted often, because women dominated everyday life: from giving birth, through healing all manner of sicknesses, to assisting with death and communing with the departed.¹⁰ Ecclesiastical writers, with their customary misogyny, attest to the ever-present *incantatrix*; „the vanities of women,“ writes Burchard of Worms in the early eleventh century, who spin „webs ... with incantations“. ¹¹

Because histories of medieval music do not mention incantations, and because researchers on medieval magic seldom if ever mention music, the subject of the music of incantations has been ignored in modern scholarship, as already stated. So it is important to make at the start a somewhat obvious statement: incantations were often sung, or at least chanted, as the name implies. Both *praecantatio* and *incantatio*, the two most common medieval nouns for „incantation“, have as their root the verb *cantare*, „to sing“.

An elemental question follows from the fact that incantations were sung, namely: what did the musical performance of incantations sound like? Given the complete musicological disinterest in this topic, and more generally in magic¹², the question is difficult to answer. But at least a few preliminary observations can be made, pending future research. Generally speaking, the sound of incantations appears to have had some affinity with that of liturgical chant.¹³ Sources frequently mention certain chants such as the „Pater noster“ or the „Kyrie“ being used in incantations. And, evidently, as with chant, some melodies resembled simple recitations (e.g., „Pater noster“), while others were like melismatic songs (e.g., „Kyrie“). At times, polyphony even appears to have been used.

Beyond these general observations, it is clear that incantations often involved a very physical and dramatic performance, as attested in an exceptional report by fourteenth-century scholar Nicole Oresme. He describes an astounding performance: the singer grows black around the eyes; he appears mentally disturbed; his face and countenance change beyond recognisability; his voice sounds alternately like that of an animal and a soft trumpet, with sounds

⁹ Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (see n. 7), chapter 8, devoted to the „beginning of the witch craze, 1360–1427“.

¹⁰ See the relevant remarks in Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (see n. 7), 280.

¹¹ Translated in John McNeill and Helena Gamer, *Medieval Handbooks of Penance: A Translation of the Principal Libri Poenitentiales and Selections from Related Documents*, New York: Columbia University Press 1938, 330.

¹² On which, see John Haines, „Why Music and Magic in the Middle Ages?“, in: *Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft* 5 (2010), 149–172.

¹³ See Haines, „Performance before c. 1430“ (see n. 6), 237.

formed internally.¹⁴ Another less detailed albeit equally interesting reference to the performance of incantations comes from the sixteenth chapter of Gerald of Wales's *Description of Wales*. Gerald likens the performance of Welsh soothsayers („awenyddion“) during trance to demonic possession. „Words stream from their mouths,“ he writes, „incoherently and apparently meaningless“. ¹⁵ The use in medieval incantations of what we might consider outlandish vocal effects is confirmed in a late medieval peroration on the strange voice of demons, from the infamous *Hammer of Witches* (*Malleus maleficarum*), recently translated by Christopher Mackay. When demons make a sound, states the *Hammer*, „it is not vocal expressions but sounds with a certain similarity to vocal expressions that they use“. ¹⁶ From this it follows that, medieval enchanters, those presumed minions of demons, imitated demonic vocalizations in their incantations.

Future research on the music of medieval incantations will hopefully locate more such descriptions of singing, in order to provide a more complete musical ethnography than is currently available. On the one hand, we should be careful to not take such performance descriptions literally, since medieval writers sometimes resort to hyperbole when describing song, as in condemnations that compare singers to „farm carts clumsily creaking up a rutted hill“. ¹⁷ On the other hand, it seems safe to assume that the *incantatrix* often engaged in some kind of musical performance involving histrionics and vocal alterations. In his work on synonyms, the thirteenth-century scholar John of Garland puts the *incantatrix* in the same category as male actors or performers variously called *histrion*, *mimus* and *gesticulator*. ¹⁸

As part of their dramatic vocal performance, medieval enchanters used artefacts known as *ligaturae* or „ligatures“ – from the verb „ligare“, to bind. ¹⁹ They were called „ligatures“ because different elements, ranging from organic matter such as herbs and bones to bits of parchment with writing, were bound together (*ligata*). These elements were then attached („ligated“) – often with a string – to the sick person, either on the afflicted body part or suspended like a necklace. So common were these that the witch-hunters of the 1400s „habitually searched the armpits and other secret places of the body for ... amulets

¹⁴ This important passage is discussed in Haines, „Case Study“ (see n. 6), 283–284.

¹⁵ Gerald of Wales, *The Journey through Wales and The Description of Wales*, Lewis Thorpe (trans.), London: Penguin 1978, 246.

¹⁶ Christopher Mackay, *The Hammer of Witches: a complete translation of the Malleus maleficarum*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2009, 305.

¹⁷ John the Deacon translated in Timothy McGee, *The Sound of Medieval Song*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1998, 17.

¹⁸ Johannes de Garlandia's „Opus synonorum“ in *Patrologia latina*, vol. 150, col. 1586A: „hinc incantatrix, sagana, praestitigatrix, histrion vel palpo, mimus vel gesticulator ...“. On the attribution of this work to Johannes, see Louis John Paetow, *Morale Sclorum of John of Garland (Johannes de Garlandia), a Professor in the Universities of Paris and Toulouse in the Thirteenth Century*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1927, 133–134.

¹⁹ For more detail on the topic of this paragraph, with illustrations, see Haines, „On *ligaturae* and their properties“ (see n. 6).

having the supernatural virtue of preserving the wearers from punishment."²⁰

How closely ligatures and their contents were allied to the eccentric performance practice of incantations, can be seen in an illuminating passage from the already mentioned *Hammer of Witches* written in the late fifteenth century. It comes from a section in the work's first part devoted to the influence of heavenly bodies on sorcery, and specifically on magic's „co-operation with the power of the stars“.²¹ In his lengthy wringing of hands over the extent to which evil women (*malefica*) abuse the forces of nature, the writer²² sums up the power of sorceresses in the co-opting of demons as consisting of two main weapons: plants (*herbas*) and harmonies (*harmonias*). Into the category of plants fall the various ingredients of ligatures such as stones and plants, and their secret powers, or „hidden causes“ (*occultas causas*).²³ Regarding the second weapon of witches, harmonies, the author has in mind a musical performance that is informed by the music of the spheres. To illustrate the power of music in sorcery, he cites the hackneyed anecdote of David – the Psalmist „learned in musical chants“, he hastens to add – and his healing of Saul's affliction through the music of the lyre. The „reasoned and modulated harmony“ of David's music, he points out, owes to the greater music of the spheres, whereupon he cites the well-known passage from Boethius.²⁴ This explicit testimony on plants (meaning ligatures) and harmonies (meaning song in the broadest sense) as the two main weapons of the *incantatrix* may come late in the Middle Ages; but it speaks to a mentality going back hundreds of years to Antiquity.²⁵ Ligatures as artefacts of performance were indispensable to incantations and to their effectiveness.

A common type of incantation in the Middle Ages was the love charm, the main topic of this essay. In his interesting survey of medieval love charms, medieval historian Richard Kieckhefer has distinguished between charms for „a lasting amorous relationship“ and charms for sex, further distinguishing sex-inducing from sex-enhancing charms.²⁶ Here again, it cannot be overstated for the time being just how widespread were such charms and the music associated with them. One need only stop at the most famous love story of the Middle

²⁰ Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (see n. 7), 120.

²¹ Mackay, *Hammer of Witches* (see n. 16), 139 and 154. In his translation, Mackay renders „virtus“ as „virtue“, but it can also be rendered as „strength“ or „power“ in this context; cf. Henricus Institoris and Jacobus Sprenger, *Malleus maleficarum*, Christopher Mackay (ed. and trans.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006, vol. 1, 276 (*virtute stellarum*).

²² The *Hammer of Witches* was actually written by two authors writing at different times (see preceding note).

²³ Mackay, *Hammer of Witches* (see n. 16), 157; see the Latin text in *Malleus maleficorum*, vol. 1, 279.

²⁴ Mackay, *Hammer of Witches* (see n. 16), 158–159 and 441.

²⁵ This point is made in Haines, „On *ligaturæ* and their properties“ (see n. 6), 205–213.

²⁶ Richard Kieckhefer, „Erotic magic in medieval Europe“, in: Joyce Salisbury (ed.), *Sex in the Middle Ages: A book of essays*, New York: Garland 1991, 31–36. See also Richard Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites: A Necromancer's Manual of the Fifteenth Century*, University Park (Pennsylvania, PA): Penn State University Press 2003, 79.

Ages, and possibly of all time, to find an example of Kieckhefer's first category of amorous charms: the „marvellous ... love beverage“ of Tristan and Isolde.²⁷ The Tristan story does not relate the exact ingredients of the love beverage, but contents of love charms ranged widely. They included the standard ingredients of ligatures, such as the already mentioned herbs and stones, but also the secretions of sexually aroused humans and animals most conducive to arousing passion; in addition to human semen, Kieckhefer mentions the semen of a stag and the vaginal secretions of a sow.²⁸ Literary evidence briefly discussed by Kieckhefer makes clear that, as in the Tristan anecdote, women often administered these charms.²⁹ So does the literature of confessionals and condemnations; one early eleventh-century Confessional, for example, condemns women working „magical art and incantation“ and names the practice of mixing a man's semen in with his drink, the result being intended as an aphrodisiac.³⁰

Ironically, although it was often men who sought out women for such love charms, ecclesiastical condemnations usually blame women for corrupting presumably hapless men. One often cited canonic passage urges church officials to seek out „any woman who through certain evil deeds (*maleficia*) and incantations can change or disturb (*immutare*) the minds of men either from hate to love or from love to hate, and can either damn or snatch away the good things (*bona*) of men“. The earliest version of this passage that I have been able to find comes from Regino of Prüm's *Ecclesiastical Discipline* from around 900 AD.³¹ It is famously given by Burchard of Worms' corrector in the early eleventh century.³² In the surge of canon law compilation during the twelfth century, writers citing this same passage include Ivo of Chartres,³³ Bartholomew Iscanus³⁴ and Bartholomew of Exeter.³⁵ It is also found in Thomas of Chobham's encyclopaedic summa for confessors in the early thirteenth century.³⁶ Interestingly, at least one medieval variation of this condemnation about women turning love into hate and hate into love has the incantation taking away not just „good things“, as above, but specifically the „hearts“ of men.³⁷

This popular condemnation, and thus by implication the activity condemned

²⁷ The Old French Prose Tristan calls it „boivre amorous ... mout merveillex“. See *Le Roman de Tristan en Prose*, Renée Curtis (ed.), Munich: M. Hueber 1963, vol. 1, 218.

²⁸ Kieckhefer, „Erotic magic“ (see n. 26), 36–37.

²⁹ Kieckhefer, „Erotic magic“ (see n. 26), 45–47.

³⁰ *Patrologia latina*, vol. 89, col. 408D: „Mulier si semen viri cum cibo suo miscet“. This is the Confessional of Egbert from around 1000.

³¹ Regino of Prüm, „De ecclesiasticis disciplinis“, in: *Patrologia latina*, vol. 132, col. 284B: „si aliqua femina sit quae per quaedam maleficia et incantationes mentes hominum se immutare posse dicat, id est, ut de odio in amorem, aut de amore in odium convertat, aut bona hominum aut damnet aut subripiat“.

³² Kieckhefer, „Erotic magic“ (see n. 26), 31.

³³ Cited in Haines, *Medieval Song* (see n. 2), 47.

³⁴ McNeill and Gamer, *Medieval Handbooks of Penance* (see n. 11), 349.

³⁵ Adrian Morey, *Bartholomew of Exeter, Bishop and Canonist: A Study in the Twelfth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1937, 273.

³⁶ Broomfield (ed.), *Thomae de Chobham Summa confessorum* (see n. 7), 473.

³⁷ McNeill and Gamer, *Medieval Handbooks of Penance* (see n. 11), 421.

by it, would persist into the late Middle Ages and beyond. In the *Hammer of Witches*, the idea of sorceresses stealing things from men, including their penises, becomes a major obsession.³⁸ In one lengthy chapter, the author shudders at the thought that „sorceresses“ who aim poor penises with their incantations are able to make it look „as if these limbs were completely pulled out of the body“ – all of this seriously framed as an academic disputation or *quaestio*.³⁹ As the histrionic and scholastic culmination of a long antifeminist ecclesiastical tradition, the *Hammer of Witches* serves as a reminder of how much the late medieval witch hunt has coloured our understanding of women's music, a point to which I will return in my conclusion.

As I argued above for the incantation, sound or song was often equally indispensable to the effectiveness of a love charm. Kieckhefer mentions an informative anecdote taken from John of Alta Silva's Latin romance *Dolopathos* from around 1200. In this lengthy story about a king and seven wise men, we find a story reminiscent of Joseph's rejection of Potiphar's wife in the Bible (Genesis 39).⁴⁰ Here, a righteous man named Lucinus is forced to ward off the sexual advances of a powerful queen. In preparation for her final sexual attack on the young Lucinus, the queen turns to incantations and magic potions (*veneficia*), and prepares from special plants a love potion for Lucinus to drink.⁴¹ But the brave Lucinus refuses the potion, „shielding his ears against her poisonous incantations“, states the romance, comparing Lucinus to the asp that shields its ears.⁴²

The latter mention of the asp snake resisting incantations apparently references the medieval caricature of the sorceress (*pythonissa*) as a snake charmer. Given the universality of the snake charmer outside medieval culture, I would like to briefly raise the question – which deserves a separate study of its own – of how the *pythonissa* got her name. In his *Etymologies* mentioned earlier, Isidore of Seville asserts in his usual cryptic manner that the word *pythonissa* „comes from Pythian Apollo because he was the inventor of divination“. ⁴³ More

³⁸ Mackay, *Hammer of Witches* (see n. 16), 13 („they seemingly remove penises“), 173 („question of whether sorceresses can turn the minds of men to love or hatred“), 194–201 („... work on male members ... as if these limbs were completely pulled out“), and 431. On stealing penises in the *Hammer*, see Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex and the Crisis of Belief*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2002, 300–321.

³⁹ Mackay, *Hammer of Witches* (see n. 16), 194.

⁴⁰ Kieckhefer, „Erotic magic“, 46–47 and 55, citing from an English translation.

⁴¹ Jean de Haute-Seille, *Dolopathos, ou le roi et les sept sages*, Yasmina Foehr-Janssens and Emmanuelle Métry (trans.), Turnhout: Brepols 2000, 110: „ad fortiori item incantationum veneficiorumque recurrit auxilia, consulit herbarum sucos et ex hiis potum confectum ad bibendum illi propinat“. See English translation in Johannes de Alta Silva, *Dolopathos, or The King and the Seven Wise Men*, Brady Gilleland (trans.), Binghamton, NY: Center for Medieval & Early Renaissance Studies 1981, 33.

⁴² Jean de Haute-Seille, *Dolopathos* (see n. 41), 110: „Sed Lucinius omnia precognoscens more aspidis surde et obturantibus aures suas incantantibus veneficia non exaudit nec potum admittit amatorium.“

⁴³ Lindsay, *Etymologiarum* (see n. 7), 325: „a Pythio Apolline dictae, quod is auctor fuerit divinandis.“ See English translation in Barney et al., *Etymologies* (see n. 7), 182.

than likely, however, the medieval concept originates in the well known Biblical passage from Deuteronomy 18:11 identifying an *incantator* with someone who consults „pythonic spirits“. This passage is mentioned, for example, by Carolingian scholar Rabanus Maurus and by John of Salisbury in his *Policraticus*.⁴⁴ Rabanus also cites Leviticus 20:27 where it is advised to stone men and women „in whom there is a pythonical or divining spirit“. Isidore himself mentions a relevant passage, the „pythoiness“ who consults the spirit of the prophet Samuel in I Kings 28.⁴⁵ If the large python was vulnerable to incantations, such was apparently not the case for the smaller asp or viper. Writing less than a century before John of Alta Silva's *Dolopathos*, Honorius of Autun says that „the asp is a kind of snake that flees the songs of the *incantator*. For we read that when an incantation is sung, he presses one ear to the ground and blocks off the other with his tail, so that he can neither hear the song of the enchanter nor obey his words“.⁴⁶

The question of the asp and the *pythonissa* aside, the above mentioned anecdote from the *Dolopathos* confirms the importance of musical performance in the medieval usage of love charms. The love charm's sound (the incantation) and its material artefact (the potion) were the inseparable weapons of the *incantatrix*: plants and harmonies, to cite the *Hammer of Witches* once again.

The love charm of the *incantatrix* offers us a signal opportunity to think outside of the usual narrow historiography – that takes medieval music as an evolutionary progression of artful chants, courtly songs and learned polyphony collected in parchment anthologies – and to consider music making in the Middle Ages as broadly as possible. On the one hand, the names of the many women who performed love charms all throughout the Middle Ages are unfortunately lost to us, since, rather than recording the names of at least a few outstanding performers, medieval condemnations lump them all together into one heinous bunch. On the other hand, this potential historical handicap is compensated for by two main advantages over the favoured repertoires just mentioned. Firstly, charms and incantations had a more sensational performance practice. By contrast to the staid performance of courtly love songs and other learned repertoires, the electric performance art of the *incantatrix* made quite an impression on medieval writers. As we have seen, there were histrionics such as dramatic gestures and outlandish facial expressions, as well as special vocal effects ranging from loud animal-like cries to strange, muffled sounds; so overwhelming at times was such music that one needed to block one's ears like the Biblical asp to prevent the incantation from working its wonder. Secondly, in contrast to the staid monophonic repertoires codified

⁴⁴ Rabanus Maurus, „De universo“, in: *Patrologia latina*, vol. 111, col. 424C-D; John of Salisbury, „Policraticus“, in: *Patrologia latina*, vol. 199, col. 475B.

⁴⁵ Barney et al, *Etymologies* (see n. 7), 182.

⁴⁶ Honorius of Autun, „Speculum ecclesiae“, in: *Patrologia latina*, vol. 172, col. 914D-915A: „Aspis est genus serpentis, carmina incantantis fugientis. Dum enim incantatur, unam aurem ad terram deprimere, cum cauda alteram obdurare narratur, ne vocem se incantantis audiat et verbis ejus obediat.“

in deluxe notated collections, the love charm and its musical accompaniment the incantation represents the music of many more people than the elite by and for whom the extant manuscripts were usually made.

The historically favoured written-out repertoires of chant, lyric song and polyphony share a common ground with charms and their incantations, namely, that that our knowledge of all this medieval music is limited by surviving sources and what they choose to tell us. As detailed above, charms and incantations have been the victims of a pernicious prejudice, both medieval and modern. The deliberate vagueness of such labels as *carmina amatoria* and *carmina diabolica* reflects the bias of churchmen against songs outside of church, on the one hand, and against women on the other. Contrast the marginalized diabolical love songs with the chants of mass and office precisely categorized by liturgical commentators, or with the vernacular art songs of noblemen finely parsed by poetic theorists.⁴⁷ Predictably, the medieval condemnations of *carmina amatoria* are infectious. Modern narratives have implicitly adopted the negative or even dismissive attitude of churchmen towards women's songs by lumping them all together, as in the case of the *carole*, or ignoring them completely, as with the lament or the lullaby.⁴⁸

Fundamentally, the anti-feminism behind a label like *carmina amatoria* is not innocent. As mentioned earlier, male writers frequently raise the misogynistic fear of women corrupting men's minds or taking away their „good things“ with such songs. Such delusional statements obscure the daily hardships of the medieval *incantatrix* that culminated in the late medieval witch hunt. Fully one third of the *Hammer of Witches* is devoted to the interrogation and torture of women considered sorceresses (Part III). One shudders to think about the reality behind references to „judgment by touching glowing iron or by drinking boiling water“,⁴⁹ or such statements as, „her sensitivity is so dulled in the midst of her pain that she will be torn apart limb by limb before she is able to confess anything of the truth“⁵⁰, or warnings like, „she will emit plaintive sounds and attempt to dab her cheeks and eyes with spit as if she were crying“.⁵¹

⁴⁷ On the latter, see Elizabeth Aubrey, „Genre as a Determinant of Melody in the Songs of the Troubadours and the Trouvères“, in: *Medieval Lyric: Genres in Historical Context*, William Paden (ed.), Urbana: University of Illinois Press 2000, 273–296; on the former, see Amalarius of Metz, *Amalarii episcopi, opera liturgica omnia*, J.-M. Hanssens (ed.), Vatican: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana 1948–50, vol. 2, 168 (on the chants of mass), among many.

⁴⁸ On the latter, see Haines *Medieval Song* (see no. 2), 156–161.

⁴⁹ Mackay, *Hammer* (see n. 16), 561.

⁵⁰ Mackay, *Hammer* (see n. 16), 542.

⁵¹ Mackay, *Hammer* (see n. 16), 549.

All of this raises an important thought on the reasons for the neglect of women's music in the Middle Ages, which I offer in conclusion. Yes, the evidence for love charms and incantations lies, not in the usual places like notated song anthologies; rather, it must be extrapolated from brief references in sources ranging from penitentials to historical chronicles. And, yes, the penchant in modern historiography for all things notated, including courtly songs, reflects a bias towards books and the Great Men who commissioned them. Nevertheless, it seems to me that a much more fundamental obstacle, and a prejudice that is rarely spoken out loud or mentioned in writing, has prevented more research on music like the incantations of love charms and its sister performances. In his book entitled *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, now some forty years old, the prolific Jeffrey Burton Russell writes that the late medieval „ravings against women“ go back to „a tradition that is as old, indeed far older, than Christianity“. His next words have relevance for music history: „The fear of women lies deep in the mythic consciousness of men. The assorted concepts behind this fear are commonly recognized ... the hag, the phallic mother, or the fertile killer that populate the mythologies of the world“.⁵² Russell is right, of course. We can confirm from our own daily experience that these prejudices are alive and well today. Only by first admitting to such misogynistic fears and by then discussing them openly can we move forward to grasp the full extent of women's musical performances in the Middle Ages.

⁵² Russell, *Witchcraft* (see n. 7), 283.

