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Charms against the nightmare and the mythology of dreams

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## **THE TERRORS OF THE NIGHT: CHARMS AGAINST THE NIGHTMARE AND THE MYTHOLOGY OF DREAMS**

**Louise S. Milne**

*School of Art, University of Edinburgh*

*School of Arts and Creative Industries, Edinburgh Napier Universit*

*louise.milne@ed.ac.uk, l.milne@napier.ac.uk*

This article takes a semiotic and structuralist approach to understanding the characteristic nightmare package of imagery, or image-constellation, which appears also in charms, curses and lullabies to do with disturbed sleep. Elements of the nightmare package – its mythos – is related to a spectrum of charms and related belief-narratives. Charms against the nightmare are investigated, as are sleep charms as representative of the nightmare narrative of threat coming close to fruition. Detail is provided on spiritual beings believed to attack the sleeper, as well as on charms as methods to ward off such attacks. Psychological explanations are considered, such as the nightmare antagonist being a disguised avatar of the self.

Keywords: body, dreams, dream imagery, lullabies, *mara*, metaphor, nightmare, sleep, spells

### **INTRODUCTION: THE NIGHTMARE AND CHARMS**

“Let’s use a charm ... Quiet sleep, or thou shalt see / The horrid hags of Tartary ... And Cerberus shall bark at thee ... And all the Furies ... lash thee ... And therefore sleep thou peacefully”

Thomas Randolph, *The Jealous Lovers*, III. v (1632)

“No one hears the words spoken in dreams”

Dogon saying (Calame-Griaule 1965: 146)

The experience of nightmare has for centuries been mediated through and expressed by a characteristic package of imagery, which appears also in charms, curses and lullabies to do with disturbed sleep. This imagery constitutes a tenacious visual rhetoric, framing nightmare-related phenomena in terms of dream-demons, figures of impossibility, and nonsense; using the same figurative transformations (condensation and displacement) typical of dream imagery generally (Freud 1978 [1900]).<sup>1</sup> The imagery used in charms to repel or invoke invasive dreams also delineates the shapes and habits of the mythic agents believed to be responsible. The forms and actions attributed to these agents, and the rhetoric used to describe them, parallel in structure the psychological experience itself. As nightmares in real life are rooted in the dreaming self, certain kinds of strangeness and impossibility in their representation reflect the fragmentation and duplication of the ego in dreams.

The approach here is broadly structuralist and semiotic; we are looking for a distinctive set of elements, manifesting in variable patterns, across different media and contexts.<sup>2</sup> The methodology is qualitative rather than quantitative, reflecting the terrain of research on nightmare beliefs and imagery. Some groups of data have attracted generations of scholarly study, in depth and detail: the folklore of the Scandinavian *mara* (Sydow 1911; Tillhagen 1960; Raudvere 1995), or the corpus of Babylonian texts (cf. Foster 1995, 2005). Other kinds of material have much smaller literatures: such as lullaby imagery (e.g. Daiken 1959; Achté et al. 1990). Details of archives and collections are given in the notes. As agendas, classificatory schemes and theoretical frameworks vary across disciplines, the materials presented here are not usually interrogated primarily as dream-representations. My aim is, at least, to consider side-by-side imagery from a range of complex representations, all of which deal in some way with the nightmare.

The sections that follow explore evidence for a general tradition of nightmare representation as a consistent, adaptable package of elements – an image-constellation (cf. Milne 2016) – in charms, spells and lullabies. Examples are drawn from a wide chronological and geographical range – from ancient Mesopotamia to twentieth century Pennsylvania – the better to indicate both the longevity and ubiquity of the template, and its remarkable adaptability. Nightmare imagery appears in many guises, over a very long period of time, in otherwise very different regions and cultures.

## **WHAT IS A NIGHTMARE?**

In its oldest form, the nightmare is conceived of as an attack during sleep, by a supernatural being. The entity responsible is often characterised as a hybrid

being with animal extremities, such as teeth, claws, or horns. The nightmare is defined by the fear and terror which accompany this scenario of attack. It is thus a type of affect-laden dream: a dream carrying a strong, ego-shattering emotional charge (Milne 2010, 2011, 2014). The other main classes of this kind of dream are the erotic dream and the ecstatic dream-encounter with a god. The three may blur together. Cultural templates, context and expectation are used to fill in the contours of the dream figure. These determine whether the charge of desire (affect) is experienced as positive or negative. They also ascribe the source of the desire to a place or persona in the dream-text: relocating it, as it were, away from the dreamer herself. The affect thus may be attributed to the demon, to the dreamer, to a third party, or even outwith the dream-scenario itself.

For example, an Alexandrian text describes how the magician Nectanebo constructed a divine sexual dream for Queen Olympias:

‘Who is the god with whom you tell me to sleep?’ He said, ‘The horned, wealth-bringing Ammon’, She said, ‘...what type of man is he?’ He replied, ‘He is middle-aged, his hair is gray and he has a ram’s horns on his forehead. You will see the god making love to you ... this night in a dream’. [Then] Nectanebo left the palace ... [in] the wilderness [he] picked plants suitable for the sending of dreams [and] made a decoction. He modelled a female body out of wax and wrote Olympias’s name on [it and] made a little bed also from wax and laid the doll of Olympias on it. He kindled a lamp, threw the plant juice into it and invoked with oaths the demons [for] this purpose ... he bewitched Olympias’s sleep ... [so] Olympias ... saw Ammon embrace her and sleep with her in a dream. Then he [Ammon] rose up from the bed and said, ‘Woman, you have your avenger [in] your womb.’ (Pseudo-Callisthenes, *Alexander Romance*, 1–7, 12, early 3C; trans. Ogden 2009: 56–57).

Following Nectanebo’s charm, the god duly arrives and impregnates the Queen in her dream: the child is Alexander the Great. Now, this is not represented as a nightmare, though Ammon acts as an incubus, and has horns. It is not in fact represented as an affect-laden dream: the close encounter with the god is shorn of emotion, and the Queen’s feelings are not part of the text. But, read in any Christian context, the ingredients of this dream register immediately as diabolical. A suitable reaction of horror or terror would be evoked and folded in to the account, and the result would be recognisably nightmarish.

Depending on cultural expectation, then, the “same” dream text can be construed as negative or positive. In some cultures – even within the same dream text – the dream-demon may morph from negative to positive or vice versa.

The narrator of the Akkadian poem, “The Righteous Sufferer” (c. 1500–1000 BCE; Foster 2005: 392), describes his recovery from illness as the replacement in his dreams of an inimical god by a helpful one, who then dispels a whole group of disease spirits.<sup>3</sup>

Heavy was his hand upon me, I could not bear it!  
Dread of him was oppressive, it [--- me].  
His fierce [pun]ishment [---], the deluge,  
His stride was [---], it [---]  
[Ha]rsh, severe illness does not [---] my person,  
I lost sight of [aler]tness, [---] make my mind stray.  
I gro[an] day and night alike,  
Dreaming and waking [I am] equally wretched.  
A remarkable young man of extraordinary physique,  
Magnificent in body, clothed in new garments,  
Because I was only half awake, his features lacked form.  
He was clad in splendo[u]r, robed in dread ---  
He came in upon me, he stood over me.  
[When I saw him, my] flesh grew numb.  
[---] ‘The Lady(?) has sent [me]’,  
[---] A second time [I saw a dream].  
In the dream I saw [at night],  
A remarkable purifier [---],  
He pronounced the resuscitating incantation,  
he massaged [my] bo[dy].  
A third time I saw a dream.  
[---]  
[He applied] to me his spell  
which binds [debilitating disease],  
[He drove] back the evil vapo[u]r to the ends of the earth,  
He bore off [the head pain] to the breast of hell,  
[He sent] down the malignant spectre to its hidden depth,  
The relentless ghost he returned [to] its dwelling,  
He overthrew the she-demon, sending it off to a mountain,  
He replaced the ague in flood and sea,  
He eradicated debility like a plant,  
Uneasy sleep, excessive drowsiness,  
He dissipated like smoke filling the sky.  
(Foster 2005: 402–404).

We will encounter again this apotropaic pattern, wherein a third, benevolent figure is introduced, to intervene between the dreamer and the nightmare entity. Note also the multiplicity of the demons: another recurrent element.

Charms enter into nightmare discourse most straightforwardly as a means of protection, to fend off bad dreams, or dispel whatever threat such dreams might pose. Again, this tradition is very old. An Akkadian prayer deals with an ominous dream in this address to Nusku, courier of the gods:

O Nusku, you are companion to the sun,  
You are the judge, judge (my) case!  
This dream which was brought to me in the evening,  
midnight, or morning watch,  
Which you understand but I do not,  
If it is propitious,  
may the good (it portends) not pass me by,  
If it is evil, may the evil (it portends) not overtake me,  
It is not for me!  
Just as this pulled-up reed cannot return to its place,  
And (as) this hem cut from my garment,  
Being cut from it, cannot return to my garment,  
So may the evil (portended by) this dream,  
Which was brought to me in the evening, midnight,  
or morning watch,  
Not overtake me, it is not for me!  
(Foster 1995: 252).

The speaker is unsure about the portent of his dream, so his prayer covers both possibilities. If the dream brings luck, he wants it; if the opposite, he invokes a simple piece of sympathetic magic to avert evil consequences.

In the context of amulets and other apotropeic visual media, charms against dream-demons may take the form of an image of the demon itself, or imagery with similar demonic properties. In Mesopotamia, the grotesque head of Humbaba (Figure 1a) became a common apotropeic symbol. This monster first appeared to Gilgamesh in a dream, following which, Gilgamesh and Enkidu found and killed it (cf. Lambert 1987). The head of Humbaba is a prototype for the gorgon mask (*gorgoneia*; Figure 1b), which fulfilled the same functions in the Classical world (Hopkins 1934; cf. Vernant 1991). The gorgon, of course, was turned to stone on seeing its own reflection in Perseus's mirror-shield; it is an image of protective duplication.

In Ancient Egypt, the King's Scribe Qenherkhepshef (19th Dynasty, c. 1210 BCE) owned a dream book including spells against nightmares (Figure 2a;



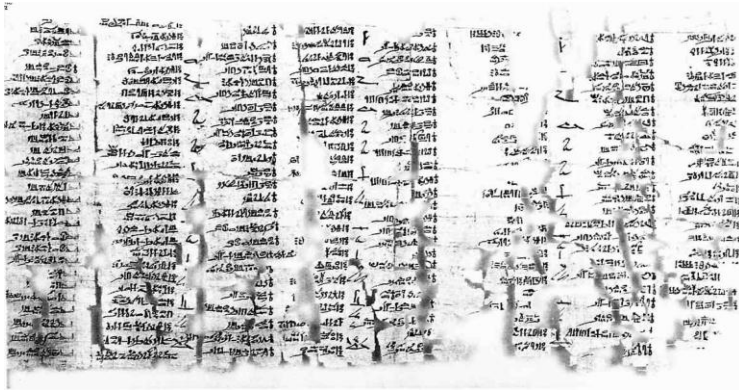


*Fig 1a: Humbaba, 1800BCE–1600BCE (Old Babylonian), Abu Habba, South Iraq. Fired clay mask. 8.3 x 8.4 cm. British Museum, London. Museum number: 116624. Photo: The Trustees of the British Museum.*



*Fig. 1b: Gorgoneion within arched frame, c. 500BC, Campania, Italy. Terracotta antefinial. H: 29 cm. British Museum, London. Museum number: 1877,0802.4. Photo: The Trustees of the British Museum.*





*Fig. 2a: Hieratic dream book, 1245–1190 BCE, Dynasty XIX. Papyrus, black & red ink, cursive hieratic. Chester Beatty III, sheet 3, recto, columns 8–11. British Museum, London. Museum number: EA10683.3. Photo: The Trustees of the British Museum.*



*Fig. 2b. Headrest of Qeniherkhepeshef, carved with protective figures of Bes, 1225 BC, 19th Dynasty, Deir el-Medina, Egypt. Limestone, 18.8 x 23 x 9.7cm. British Museum, London. Museum number: EA63783. Photo: The Trustees of the British Museum.*



*Fig. 2c. Headrest of Qeniherkhepeshef, carved with protective figures of Bes, 1225 BC, 19th Dynasty, Deir el-Medina, Egypt. Limestone, 18.8 x 23 x 9.7cm. British Museum, London. Museum number: EA63783. Photo: The Trustees of the British Museum.*

Chester Beatty III, sheet 3, recto, columns 8–11). His funerary head-rest depicts the grotesque dwarf-god Bes, waving snakes to fend off dreams (Figures 2b and c); the inscription reads: “a good sleep within the West, the necropolis of the righteous” (Pinch 1994: 43, 58–59; cf. Milne 2010: 178). Many such head-rests, used into the Roman era, have been found; some ceremonial and destined for tombs, others used in everyday life. An early and popular protection against nightmares was thus to repel the demon with a representation of itself.

## THE WORLD-VIEW OF HEALING CHARMS

The ancient world thus developed and bequeathed a rich culture of beliefs concerning demons, charms, curses, dreams, nightmares and disease. From the emic point of view, all such practices take the existence of spirits as a given. Spirits are endemic in the world. They present themselves in dreams, cause illness or bad luck. We can interface with them – to bind, repel or compel them to our desires – through charms. From the etic point of view, spirits are cultural constructions: it is the culture of charms which effectively conjures the spirits into being. In this perspective, measures against spirits are counter-representations which delineate the contours of the agencies addressed. Spirits achieve visibility – enter representation – at and through the interface whereby they are summoned or repelled. Similarly, in the belief-constellation of the nightmare, the shape and habits of the demon are represented in negative, as it were, through the measures used against it.

Supernatural bad dreams are located and defined in the discourse of spirits in various overlapping ways. Dreams may be perceived in terms of a demonic visitation with a personal, prophetic or emotional significance, as in the ancient examples above. Or nightmares may be seen as one among several symptoms, connected with afflictions involving insomnia, hallucinations or fever. For millennia, any kind of illness was commonly perceived as caused by supernatural agents. Any sick person was half in, half out of the shadow of death, and so in the power of those who ruled that domain. Charms against disease are a thus good place to look for demons associated with dreams and nightmares.

Healing charms may conceive of spirits either as sending illness, or as the illness personified. So, for example, for Siberian shamans, Smallpox is a spirit personage. Some medieval charms personify fever demons as Seven Sisters, and address them by name. For instance, the Blæsinge amulet (c. 1075–1300) from Zealand, Denmark (Simek 2011: 34; cf Bozóky 2013: 102–103) carries this injunction:<sup>4</sup>

+ I conjure you, seven sisters [---] Elffrica (?), Affricea, Soria, Affoca, Africala. I conjure you and invoke (you?) through the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, that you may not harm this servant of God, neither in the eyes nor in the limbs nor in the marrow nor in any joints of the limbs [---] agla.

From an earlier long incantation (c. 1000; Codex Vaticanus Latinus: 235), we learn that these sisters are “shivers and fevers”, with dominion over (among other things) different times of day:





Fig. 3: *Seven Sleepers of Ephesus*, detail, 1170–1200, *Passionary of Weissenau* (*Weissenauer Passionale*), 127, fol. 125v. *Fondation Bodmer*, Coligny, Switzerland Cod. Photo: Bodmer.

The midday ones, the nightly, the daily, the bi-daily, the three daily [---] or whatever sort you are: I conjure you [---] you may not have leave to harm this servant of God by day or night, neither waking or sleeping [---]. (trans. Simek 2011: 36).

A modern Udmart healing charm involves making the sign of the cross with scissors and needle over the hurt – understood as the site where part of a body or organ has been “pulled off” (i.e. magically dislodged from its proper position) – while addressing the powers by the times they rule:

The spirit of an open space,  
The spirit of the dusk,  
The spirit of the morning,  
The spirit of the night,  
The spirit of the afternoon,  
Take away all his/her diseases/illnesses.  
(collected 1975, Panina 2011: 148).<sup>5</sup>

The “spirit of the night” here is one among a host of temporal personifications.

The opposite of troubled sleep is untroubled sleep. When the “mini-myth” of a charm conjures up spirit entities as mediators or protectors, these may specifically relate to sleep. A common convention in medieval healing charms was to invoke the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus against illness implicitly caused by demonic agencies. The Seven Sleepers legend – derived from a Greek original, and transmitted by Gregory of Tours (c. 538–594), among others – circulated widely in manuscripts from the 9C on (cf. Figure 3). The oldest extant vernacular version is in Old English (BL MS Cotton Julius E vii; Magennis 1991). The Anglo-Saxon *Wið dweorh* (*Against a dwarf*, c. 1000; BL MS. Harley 585) charm begins by ritually naming the Sleepers:

Wið dweorh man sceal niman VII lytle ofloetan, swylce man mid ofrað, and writtan þas naman on celcre ofloetan: Maximianus, Malchus, Iohannes, Martimianus, Dionisius, Constantinus, Serafion.

*Against a dwarf one must take seven small holy wafers, such as one makes holy communion with, and write these names on each wafer: Maximian, Malchus, John, Martimian, Dionysius, Constantine, Serafion* [i.e. the names of the sleepers] (Griffiths 1996: 188).

As well as invoking the Sleepers, this charm names the genus of the attacking spirit: a dwarf. Anglo-Saxons attributed various types of pains and wounds to the actions of malevolent spirits and their weapons.<sup>6</sup> We will return to the dwarf of this charm, and the peculiar illness he causes. But let us first consider some common characteristics in the framing rhetoric of charms generally, and their links to the conventions of dream representation.

## THE RHETORIC OF IMPOSSIBILITY

In the prayer to Nusku, just as the pulled-up reed and the cut-off hem cannot return to their places, so may the evil pass by the supplicant. This rhetoric of impossibility is a standard feature both of charms (Bozóky 2013: 101–17; Pócs 2013: 165–198) and oneiric imagery (cf. Milne 2013, 2018: Chapters 1 and 3). *Adynata*, or *impossibilia*, are figures of speech which denote the end of the world and/or the suspension of natural law: so the lion will lie down with the lamb, or the seas run dry before such-and-such an event can come to pass. In myth and folklore, *adynata* are also used as liminal signs, denoting magical space and time. Nonsense shares terrain with *impossibilia* in proverbial speech and certain folk narrative genres, such as tall travellers’ tales (cf. e.g. Haavio 1959: 210; Milne 2018: Chapter 3). Dream imagery too is characteristically distorted – made nonsensical, mysterious, surreal – through the twin



processes of condensation and displacement, acting on the matter of personal memory through cultural templates, such as folk-tales (Freud 1900: 381–419; 1913). Visualisations of demons and other spirits in apotropeic art and imagery are produced through comparable condensations and displacements: thus Bes is a bestial figure with no neck, Humbaba and the *gorgoneia* are grotesque, exaggerated and disembodied faces (Figures 1a and b), the young man in the Righteous Sufferer’s dream is impossibly “clad in splendo[u]r, robed in dread”. And the effect of nonsensical figuration in charm imagery is also oneiric (cf. Stewart 1989).

Nonsense in verbal charms – strings of syllables, garbled words – is similarly generated by condensing and displacing normative language, as in *abracadabra*, *abraxis* etc.<sup>7</sup> Charm formulae may be written backwards or bucephalus fashion; letters may be shuffled or transposed.<sup>8</sup> In the Vatican MS charm quoted above, the names of the Fever Sisters are coded in this way: “klkb, rfstklkb, fbgblkb, sxbfpgllkb, frkcb, kxlkcb, kgnbwe...” (Simek 2011: 37). We see all these figurations – nonsense, impossibilities, oneiric imagery, and the dream-demon among them – together in the next set of examples, drawn from the genre of the lullaby, which itself can be regarded as a kind of sleep charm.

## LULLABIES AS SLEEP CHARMS

Oneiric transformations operate in the lullaby genre<sup>9</sup> on several levels. Lullabies resemble magical incantations in that they often open with a rhythmic nonsensical or “meaningless refrain” (Rogers 2008; Wilce 2006); as does the oldest lullaby in English, based on a Latin ancestor:<sup>10</sup>

Lollai • lollai • litil child whi wepistou so sore.  
nedis mostou wepe • hit was iSarkid þe Sore.  
euer to lib in sorow • and sich and mourne euer •  
as þin eldren did er þis • whil hi aliues were.  
Lollai lollai litil child • child lolai lullow •  
into uncuþ world icommen so ertow

*Lollai, lollai, little child, why do you weep so bitterly?  
Necessarily you must weep, it was prepared long ago for you  
ever to live in sorrow, and sigh and ever mourn,  
as your elders did before this, while they were alive.  
Lollai, Lollai, little child, child lollai, lullow,  
into an unknown world so you have come.* (Rogers 2008: 89–97).

There are lullabies with no dark imagery, which present what we might call wish-fulfilment or daydream scenarios. There are lullabies which envisage the death of the baby, or liken sleep to death (Achté & Fagerström et al. 1990: 193–204); these might be regarded as nightmarish in a mantic or apotropeic sense. A subgenre expresses the idea of an attack in sleep, and/or evokes the presence of a supernatural bogeyman figure. This group manifests components of the traditional nightmare in a genre whose ostensible goal is to produce untroubled sleep. The object of the charm is the baby, who is – paradoxically – threatened with impossible nightmare imagery as a punishment for not sleeping. Daiken (1959: 21) refers to this subgenre as “the lullaby of threat”. Such lullabies embed the nightmare package in a structure resembling a charm, framing and arranging the elements of the mythos anew, for a different purpose.

The oldest I have found is a Babylonian charm to calm a baby, invoking Kusarikkum, a household god with the head of a bison:

e rum wāšib bīt ekletim  
lū tatta âm tātamar nūr šamšim  
ammīn tabakki ammīn tuggag  
ullikīa ammīn lā tabki  
ili bītim tedki kusarikkum iggeltēm  
mannum idkīanni mannum ugallitanni  
e rum idkīka e rum ugallitka  
kīma šātū karānim kīma mār sābītim  
limqutaššum šittum

*Little one who dwelt in the dark chamber [i.e. the womb],  
You really did come out here, you have seen the [sunlig]ht.  
Why are you crying? Why are you [fretting]?  
Why did you not cry in there?  
You have disturbed the household god,  
the bison(-monster) has woken, (saying),  
‘Who disturbed me? Who startled me?’  
The little one disturbed you, the little one startled you.  
‘As onto drinkers of wine, as onto tipplers,  
Let sleep fall upon him.’*

(trans. Foster 2005: 172; Farber 1990: 140).

In modern European languages, the threat takes various forms: French lullabies name *Le Loup Garon* (werewolf); the Bretons, *Le Grand Lustucru* (ogre); the Russians have the Little Grey Wolf.<sup>11</sup> This Italian *ninna-nanna* (lullaby), recorded in Tuscany in 1965, contains the wolf, a plague, the three Fates and a historical battle:

Ninna nanna il mio ciocione... Il mugnaio non è venuto lo potesse mangiare il lupo e il lupo e la lupaia li venisse l'anguinaia. L'anguinaia l'è mala cosa e più su ci sta una sposa e più giù ce ne sta un'altra una fi la e una l'annaspa. Una fa il cappellino di paglia per portarlo alla battaglia la battaglia e 'l battaglino dettero foco a Barberino. Barberino corri corri dette foco a quelle torri una torre la si spezzò il bambino s'addormentò (collected from Caterina Bueno, 1976; Giudice 1988: 271–272).	<i>Rock-a-bye, my suckling The miller has not come may he be eaten by a wolf and the wolf and the wolf's lair may he be struck by the plague. The plague is a terrible thing and up above there is a bride and down below there is another one weaves and the other winds. One makes a little hat of straw to take to battle the battle and the small battalion set fire to Barberino. Barberino, run, run! did set fire to those towers, a tower fell asunder and the baby fell asleep</i>
--	---

The lullaby of threat can also transform historical human enemies<sup>12</sup> into supernatural agents, as in this early 19C British example:

Baby, baby, naughty baby,  
Hush you squalling thing, I say.  
Peace this moment, peace, or maybe  
Bonaparte will pass this way.  
Baby, baby, he's a giant,  
Tall and black as Rouen steeple,  
And he breakfasts, dines, rely on't,  
Every day on naughty people  
Baby, baby, if he hears you  
As he gallops past the house  
Limb from limb at once he'll tear you  
Just as pussy tears a mouse  
And he'll beat you, beat you, beat you  
And he'll beat you all to pap  
And he'll eat you, eat you, eat you  
Every morsel, snap, snap, snap  
(Opie and Opie 1951: 59).

Napoleon Bonaparte, popularly (though erroneously) known as a short man, is represented as black and gigantic; he is a beater and devourer. The change in scale is a standard oneiric device, the beating and devouring elements are typical of the emotion-laden action central to nightmare fantasy (Milne 2010, 2014, 2018). Bonaparte thus underwent assimilation into the folk template of legendary creatures identified as nightmares. The details of his guise as bogeyman and dream-monster – and the ease with which an otherwise visually dissimilar real-life figure could be recuperated in this way – lead us back to some curious features of the nightmare demon template itself.

### **THE NIGHTMARE CREATURE**

Consider the characterisation given to the forces of the night in this Old English *Journey Charm*:

Ic me on þisse gyrde beluce and on godes helde bebeode  
wið þane sara stice, wið þane sara slege,  
wið þane grymma gryre,  
wið ðane micela egða þe bið eghwam lað,  
and wið eal þæt lað þe in to land fare.  
Sygegealdor ic begale, sigegyrd ic me wege [---]  
ne me mere ne gemyrre ne me maga ne geswence,  
ne me næfre minum feore forht ne gewurþe [---]

*I lock unto me this stave and entrust*

*[myself] in God's protection;*

*Against the stab of the pains, against the blow of the pains,*

*Against the terror of the grim ones,*

*Against the great horror that is hateful to everyone,*

*And against all loath [things] that fare in upon the land.*

*I sing a victory chant, I bear a victory-stave [---]*

*May the mare [night-mare] not mar me [---]*

*Or ever be fearful against my life [---]*

(Mid-11C, Corpus Christi College MS 41, 350–353; trans. Hill 2012: 148).

The key elements here include stabs and blows (the attack), plus terror and horror (the ‘affect’ experienced by the subject). The responsible otherworldly agencies are vague in form but clearly demonic in nature: the grim ones, the horror, the loath things, the *mare*. In fact, this vagueness is an endemic characteristic of such demons, for the body of the archaic nightmare creature is peculiarly malleable in shape. The fixed element of its template is that it has

teeth and claws: extendable points at which, and through which, it threatens its victim with penetration (cf. Milne 2010).<sup>13</sup> One variant of this is the sexual attack, which also, of course, involves the idea of breaching the sleeper's body (recall here the tale of Alexander's conception). Apart from the points of attack, it seems that – as for Napoleon – the figure of any suitable supernatural entity – werewolf, siren, faun, devil – may be cast as a nightmare, and its known form used to fill in the contours of the attacking entity.

Or the central part of the entity may be left blank and mysterious, as in the *Journey Charm*, and this emptiness is part of the mythos too. The thirteenth century demonologist, Caesarius of Heisterbach, described the incubus as hollow, with only one surface, which faced the dreamer:

Demons, as I have understood from another vision, have no hinder parts... [when] a woman asked a demon why he always walked backwards when he went away, [he] replied: 'We are allowed to take the human form, but nevertheless we have no backs' (Caesarius of Heisterbach, ch. VI, 132).

Issobel Goudie, a Highlander on trial for witchcraft in Scotland in 1662, testified that, while she travelled at night with the spirits (cf. Milne 2013, 2014), she saw:

In the *Elfes howsiss* [in the Elf's house] [---] little ones, hollow, and boss-backed [i.e. with concave or hollow backs]. They speak *gowstie lyk* [gruesomely] (Hall 2004: 182–183; Pitcairn 1833: III, 607).

These backless small spirits, with their “gruesome” speech, supplied Issobel and her companions with magic darts, or elf-shot, capable of wounding or killing humans and beasts. Ascribing hollowness to the creature, or an amorphous form, or the capacity to shapeshift, or to radically change size and enter through keyholes or chinks; all such traditions characterise the dream demon in terms of its interface, and concentrate its identity at, or on, the surface it presents to the dreamer.

## CURSES

Looking again at the *Journey Charm*, notice the resonance between the image of the staff, with which the speaker girds himself (figuratively and materially; cf. Hill 2012: 153–154; Milne 2014: 158), and the acts of stabbing and beating – the “marring” – threatened by the “grim ones”. The staff is borne by the speaker, yet the feared stabs or blows come from the other direction. This conflation of external and internal, subjective and objective attributes is an important aspect of nightmare representation, with parallels in charm imagery, especially (and unsurprisingly) in curse imagery. For example, an Aramaic curse written on an





*Fig 4: Incantation bowl, 6–8C, Iraq. Ceramic, with Aramaic inscription. 15cm diameter. British Museum, London. Museum number: 91771. Photo: The Trustees of the British Museum.*



Fig. 5a and Fig. b: Lead curse tablet (*defixio*), c. 1–4C, discovered on Telegraph Street, Moorgate, London. British Museum, London. Museum number: 1934,1105.1. Photo and drawing: The Trustees of the British Museum.

incantation bowl (Figure 4) instructs a deity to unleash a horde of supernatural agents – including fever-spirits and wild animals – to torment the speaker’s enemy in dreams:

[I pray] that you send against him fever and shivering, male and female, and headache and groaning, against Mar Zutra son of Ukkamay and against his male heirs and female heirs, and [send] impious amulet spirits, male and female, and demons and devils and liliths, male and female... and idol spirits, male and female. And send... hoofed animals and... release dogs from bushes and cubs from (their) chains. They will heat him and inflame him and set him on fire and affright him – and they will subdue him. *They will not give him sleep for his eyes and they will not give him rest in his body in his dreams and in his visions.* (Emphasis added. Late Sasanian, 6–8C, BM 91771; trans. Segal 2000: 039A.)

Across the Roman empire, we find the widespread practice of inscribing curses on small tablets, which were then offered at shrines, thrown into rivers or buried. Here is a *defixio* (Figures 5a and b) – a curse on a lead tablet – buried in the late Roman era and discovered under Telegraph St. in London:

I curse Tretia Maria and her life and mind and memory and liver and lungs mixed up together, and her words, thoughts and memory; thus may she be unable to speak what things are concealed, nor be able [---]. (BM 1934, 1105.1).

Typical of the *defixio* genre is the mix of immaterial (mind, memory) with physical body parts (liver, lungs): the victim is gagged with the threat of a chaotic scrambling together of all her parts (cf. Versnel 1998).

Among the formulae commonly used in Romano-British *defixio* texts, there are references to sleep as a part of health and life,<sup>14</sup> as in this tablet found at the sanctuary of Uley, Gloucestershire, England:

To the god Mercury (from) Docilinus [---] Varianus and Peregrina and Sabinianus who have brought evil harm on my beast and are [---] I ask you that you drive them to the greatest death, and *do not allow them health or sleep* unless they redeem from you what they have administered to me [---]. (Emphasis added. Uley 43; Hassall & Tomlin & Frere 1989: 329–331, no. 3).

In another example from the same site, a man called Biccus goes further, declaring that:

[The thief] may not urinate nor defecate nor speak *nor sleep nor stay awake* nor [have] well-being or health, unless he bring (it) in the temple

of Mercury; nor gain consciousness (sic) of (it) [---]. (Uley 4; Tomlin 1988: no. 2).

Such texts set up a kind of contract with the deity, wherein the thief's life and bodily functions – including sleep, consciousness and mind – are delivered into the hands of the god until restitution is made. This late fourth century example wishes loss of mind, among other things, on the victim:

Lord Neptune, I give you the man who has stolen the solidus and six argentioli of Muconius. So I give the names who took them away, whether male or female, whether boy or girl. So I give you, Niskus, and to Neptune the life, health, blood of him who has been privy to that taking-away. *The mind which stole this and which has been privy to it, may you take it away.* The thief who stole this, may you consume his blood and take it away, Lord Neptune. (Emphasis added. Found on the shores of the river Hamble estuary, Hampshire, England; Burnham & Keppie et al. 1997; Tomlin 1999).

Many Classical spells express the desire to deprive the victim of sleep. This is so common in sex spells that a subcategory, *agrypnetika* (sleeplessness), has been created for them (Versnel 1998). Such curse-like spells are of interest here because they combine violent desire, demonic agency and sleep. Thus, one Theodoros, lusting for the woman Matrona, first provides a demon of the dead with pieces of her hair and nails, and then instructs it to:

Go to her and seize her sleep, her drink, her food [---] Drag her by her hair, by her guts, by her soul, by her heart until she comes to Theodoros and make her inseparable from me until death, night and day, for every hour of time. Now, now, quickly quickly, at once, at once (Jordan 156; Versnel 1998: 24).

Norse texts are particularly rich in dreams of violence and desire (Kelchner 1935; Milne 2011). In the ninth century, a Sami ritual specialist is described committing magical murder as the victim sleeps, using a dream-demon. To strangle the Norwegian King Vanlandi in his bed, in revenge for his affair with her daughter, the sorcerer sends a curse in the form of a *mara* (nightmare):

[---] to visit the brother of Vili [=Oðinn], the creature of magic arranged for Vanlandi, when the troll-related night Hildir [=witch] was to tread underfoot the enemy of the band of men; and that necklace-destroyer [=king], whom the nightmare strangled, [was] burned [i.e. his funeral was held] on the bank of the Skúta [---]. (*Ynglingatal* 3 (9C), in *Heimskringla* (13C); Finnur Jónsson 1912: I, 7; Lindow 1995: 10).



The *Journey Charm* (*Íc gyrd me...*) also refers directly to the *mara* in this sense, as a personification of nightmare.

So far, we have considered a spectrum of spirits related to disturbed sleep: spirits of fever and disease, demons of place and time, agencies of desire. The *mara* and its kindred have more specialised roles in nightmare traditions and belief-narratives. The *mara* may be spoken of as a bringer of bad dreams, or as a bad dream incarnate, or as a malevolent nocturnal *doppelganger* of a human, or simply listed generally among the terrors of the night.

## THE MARA

What is a *mara*? The word is Old High German and Old Norse, related distantly to Old Norse *mǫra* (giantess). Its Indo-European root (Mallory & Adams 2006: 372–373) is *\*mer-* (crush, pulverise, smash). It thus carries the sense of a blow from outside, whose outcomes range from distortion of form (crush), to disintegration (smash). From this we have Anglo-Saxon *maran*, Old English *mære* (Hall 2007b: 299), and, in modern languages, *nightmare*, *cauchemar* etc.

In Scandinavian folklore, the *mara* is the supernatural double of a human: one who can externalise malevolent desires (*starka tankar* – strong thoughts) in tangible forms (Raudvere 1995: 47). This kind of *mara* is a double entity: wounds inflicted on a *mara* body are seen on the human counterpart body immediately or the following day, proving they are the same creature. This is ATU motif H56 (recognition by wound), found also in Norse saga stories about shapeshifters (cf. Milne 2011: 91–92).

A *mara* may take the shape of an animal (cat, mouse, magpie) or an object (pitchfork, needle).<sup>15</sup> The most common forms are cat and pitchfork; note that both of these have tooth-and-claw elements. Among the ‘formless’ types, the most common is ‘something hairy’ (i.e. bestial). In its human form, the *mara* is far more likely to be a woman than a man. Subcategories include wicked, erotic, hairy or red-haired women; also women with intergrown eyebrows (Tillhagen 1960: 319–321). The term for the *mara*’s assault on human victims is *maritt* (= to be ridden by the *mara*); since it rode or pressed down upon its human prey, causing feelings of suffocation and anxiety.<sup>16</sup>

The main body of lore about the *mara* is composed into analogy legends: so, a *mara* “attacked the neighbour’s horse in the form of a pitchfork” (Raudvere 1995: 51; SKS Rajajärvi 114; Tavastland 1936); or, a hunter shot a magpie and an old woman fell from the tree in its place, revealed as a *mara* (Raudvere 1995: 49; Sydow 1911: 601). Raudvere noted the “remarkable violence” exhibited in these stories: “deep wounds, cut limbs” (1995: 49). The direct, penetrative violence turned on the *mara* in the legends is differentiated from the nature of



its attacks on people (suffocating anxiety). Evidence comes also from material culture. Tillhagen (1960: 322–325) collected 2,406 items dealing with protective measures against the *mara* in Sweden and Swedish Finland. The most popular charms involved the use of steel, especially edged steel – often a scythe – hung above the victim. The *mar-besom*, or nightmare-bush (= witch-besom, mar-sheaf) – a spiky, twiggy growth on tree branches – was thought to mark places where a *mara* had perched, and could be used to fend off attacks. Again, the visual shape of the cure mimicks the shape of the threat. Birds of prey and magpies could be nailed up as protection (beaks and claws once more). A mirror could be used against an animal suspected of being a *mara* (Tillhagen 1960: 324–325); so, like the gorgon, it would be repelled by its own image.

Naming the *mara* – in other words, correctly identifying the human who was sending the double – was thought to have great power. A hair plucked from the head of a *maritt* sufferer, placed in a fence-post, would act as a decoy and trap the *mara* at that spot; note here the shift of scale. And there were also verbal charms, such as this one from South-Central Sweden, designed to deflect the creature into an infinite task:

Mara, mara, minne!	<i>Mara, mara, mind!</i>
Du får ej bli härinne	<i>Thou may'st not enter here,</i>
förr än du räknat	<i>Until thou counted hast</i>
fåglar i skog,	<i>Birds in wood,</i>
fiskar i flod	<i>Fishes in river,</i>
alla eketrär	<i>All the oak trees,</i>
och Guds ord!	<i>And the words of God!</i>

(From the province of Nerike (Nörke), Archives of the Nordic Museum, No. E. U. 786; Tillhagen 1960: 323; cf. Forsblom 611ff.).

Let us keep in mind the structure of this formula (and indeed the detail of the hair), for it recurs in our evidence.

There are other names for the *mara* further south and east. In Northern Croatia, the spirit which attacks in the night is called *truta*. According to an informant in the Lepoglava region, to defend against the *truta*:

Take a board and drive several nails into it so that the points stick out on the other side. They must stick out. And put that board on yourself. And somebody [who did this] said that he felt something on his back, but it went away immediately. And she [the *truta*] no longer came [---]. (Dronjic 2014: 199).

The *trute* are related both to the spirits of the dead and to unrequited sexuality (cf. Milne 2008; Barber 1997): “Our dad told us that *trute* were bachelors

and spinsters. [And] that is their task since they did not have anybody in this world, they seek other people to plague [now] they're dead" (Dronjic 2014: 199). This back-story recognises the element of negative (or unfulfilled) desire in the nightmare complex, and locates this in the attacking entity.

The modern belief-complex of *mara*, or *trute*, thus configures the elements of the nightmare mythos into a protective pattern. Sharp extremities (teeth and claws = pitchfork, beak, nails in a plank) are retained as defining characteristics, but displaced or reattributed. The agency of penetration is switched, so it is the *truta* or the *mara*'s uncanny double which suffers the attack. The "strong thoughts" (i.e. the affect) are ascribed to the *mara* rather than the dreamer. The scope, nature and direction of the attack are rearranged; a subjective, internal threat (the nightmare) becomes an objective, external fulfilment (the *mara* experiences the harm).

In both its negative and positive shapes – as attacking spirit and as the representation of that spirit in apotropeic lore and legend – the nightmare mythos in all its manifestations thus conserves a package of elements, whose elements can be variously arranged (Milne 2010, 2013, 2016) depending on genre and context: in spell, healing charm, lullaby, curse or analogy legend. Of course, this capacity for rearrangement within a constellation or belief-structure is not unique to the nightmare. But there are certain semiotic oddities in the structure of charms and beliefs about nightmares which seem to stem from, and give shape to, the umbilical relationship between the terror-filled dream and its dreamer.

Bear in mind that the nightmare is essentially a phenomenon of the split self. The dream-attacker is an alienated and disguised avatar of the self. From this etic viewpoint, it must be the dreamer who invests the latter with agency and (negative) desire. In actual nightmares, tension is focused at the interface between two main avatars: the one which the dreamer identifies as him/herself, and the attacking avatar, which he/she cannot identify. The attacker may come very close to breaking, but not actually break, the distance or interface between the two,<sup>17</sup> for, were it to do so, the two would become one, in a burst of released affect (fear), and the dreamer would awake (cf. Milne 2010: 198–199).

Real-life nightmare narratives are rarely extrapolated beyond this point, to the rending of the subject. It is the focus and location of this potential rending which cultural re-writes of the nightmare displace or postpone. Lullabies supply details of coming destruction; folded alongside, rather than inside, sleep; couched as threat, not present action. In *mara* analogy legends, decisive rending is an obligatory feature; applied, of course, to the dream-creature, not the dreamer. In beliefs concerning the *mara* or the *truta*, the protective action of charm, analogy legend, or both, reverses the direction of the attack, dispelling and dispersing its violence onto other elements of the constellation.

## CHARMS AGAINST NIGHTMARES

Something of the kind seems to be happening in *Wið dweorh* (*Against a dwarf*). After the passage quoted earlier (concerning the wafers with the names of the Seven Sleepers), the prose instructions continue. The user must sing the charm:

œrest on þæt wynstre eare, þœnne on þæt swiðre eare, þœnne [b]ufan þæs mannes moldan. And ga þœnne an mœdenman to and ho hit on his sweoran, and do man swa þry dagas; him bið sona sel.

*First in the left ear, then in the right ear, then upon the top of the [patient's] head. And then go to a maiden and (let her) hang it [presumably, the packet of wafers plus verse] around his neck, and do so for three days; it will speedily be better for the patient* (Griffiths 1996: 188).

Then comes the charm itself:

Her com in gangan, in spiderwiht,  
hæfde him his haman on handa, cwæð þæt þu his hæncgest wære,  
legde þe his teage an sweoran. Ongunnan him of þæm lande liþan;  
sona swa hy of þæm lande coman, þa ongunnan him þa liþu colian.  
þa com in gangan dweores sweostar;  
þa geændade heo and aðas swor  
ðæt næfre þis ðæm adlegan derian ne moste,  
ne þæm þe þis galdor begytan mihte,  
oððe þe þis galdor ongalan cuþe. Amen. Fiað.

*Here came walking in, in here, a spider-creature [?] –  
he had his coat in his hand, said that you were his horse,  
laid his reins on your neck. They began to travel away from the land;  
once they came from the land, then the limbs began to feel cold.  
Then came walking in the dwarf's sister;  
she made an end to it and swore oaths  
That this [riding] would never be permitted to harm the sick one,  
or one who could obtain this charm, or know how to chant this charm.  
Amen. Let it be so.*

(Glosecki 1952: 186–187; Dobbie 1942: 121–122; Grattan and Singer 1952: 160–162).

Though there is little consensus about the opening line – Griffiths (1996: 188 n.47) considers it garbled beyond recovery – some of its difficulties become clearer in the light of the contexts we have been discussing. The *dweorh* is a nightmare creature, whether he comes in spider form (Nelson 1982; Glosecki 1952), or dressed in a winding sheet (Grattan 1927), or is merely qualified as

“powerful” (Griffiths 1996). He has with him a *haman* (coat, skin; cf. *hamr* = shapeshifting power); either he is wearing this guise, or he uses it to turn the victim into an animal. The next phrases are unambiguous: the *dweorh* puts reins on the victim, who is now his steed. The *dweorh* is therefore a kind of *mara*. If we identify him as such, what follows is a dream-ride; the two “move away from the land” – that is, the creature rides off with the soul of the victim – and the comatose body left behind becomes cold. That the soul is detachable in this way, and capable of journeys during sleep, is another ancient and widespread motif (ATU E72i.1), central to beliefs in night travels (cf. Milne 2013, 2014).

The third figure, the “dwarf’s sister” (*deores* or *dweores sweostar*; Gay 1988: 175; Dobbie 1942), or possibly Earth’s sister (*Eares sweostar*, i.e. *Eostre*, goddess of the dawn; Grattan 1927: 5–6; Bonser 1963: 166 ff.; Nelson 1982: 17), is harder to account for. She is a helper, certainly, but, if she is the dwarf’s sister, why does she come to assist his victim? It has even been suggested (Gay 1988) that she comes rather to help the *dweorh*. I suggest that “sister” here may carry a more general connotation of kin; so this new actor is simply characterised as a being equal in supernatural rank to the dwarf. There is an action of doubling in her entrance, a turning point; reminiscent, in concentrated form, of the turn from negative to positive in the dream encounters of the Righteous Sufferer. She swears oaths to protect the victim (details are not given), and she underwrites the power of the charm to protect anyone, as long as it is correctly voiced.

By the later middle ages, in Germanic Europe generally, a great many creatures of the night could be mentioned as connected with bad dreams. A thirteenth century Middle Dutch encyclopaedic poem places *nacht merien* (nightmares) and *haghetissen* (witches) in a list of nocturnal phenomena, together with stars and fires in the sky:

Vanden nacht riddersen, ende van anderen  
duuelen, die in die lucht maken vier [---]  
Nacht ridders, so heten si [---]  
Haghetissen, ende varende vrouwen Godelinge [wichte] oec, en trouwen  
Cobboude, nickers, aluen, maren [nacht merien]  
Die hem tsmorghens openbaren  
Ende connen wel halen vier  
Nacht merien heten wise hier  
Minne, dit sien duuelen alle [---]  
*About the night-riders, and about other  
devils, which make fire in the sky [---]  
Night riders, they are called [---]*

hagetissen, *and wandering women*,  
*goodlings* [protective spirits] [-beings] *also*,  
*indeed, cobalds, water-monsters, aluen*,  
*maren* [night-maren] *who make themselves known in*  
*the morning, and know well how to get fire.*

*We call them night-maren here,*

*indeed, these are devils all* [---]

(Anon., *De natuurkunde van het geheelal* (The Nature of the Cosmos),  
lines 707–730; trans. Hall 2004: 177–178; for the whole poem see, Jansen-  
Sieben 1968: II, 274–433).

The text of the Middle High German charm, known as the *Munich Nachtsegen*  
(14C MS, Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 615, 127r.), though garbled,  
clearly also presents such spirits as multiple, listing them *en masse*:

Ir sult won hinnen gangen,	<i>Alb, and Elbelin</i> [little Alb],
Alb vnde elbelin	<i>you shall go away and</i>
Ir sult nich leng bliiben hin	<i>stay no longer.</i>
Albes svestir vn(d) vatir	<i>Alb's sister and father,</i>
Ir sult uz varen obir de(m) gatir	<i>you shall go out over the gate;</i>
Albes mutir trute vn(d) mar	<i>Alb's mother, trute and mar,</i>
Ir sult uz zu de virste vare	<i>you shall go out by the roof-ridge!</i>
Noc mich dy mare druch	<i>Let the mar not oppress me,</i>
Noc mich dy trute zriche	<i>let the trute not pull me,</i>
Noc mich dy mare rite	<i>let the mar not ride me,</i>
Noc mich dy mare bescribe	<i>let the mar not mount me!</i>
Alb mit diner crummen nasen	<i>Alb with your crooked nose,</i>
Ich vorbihte dir aneblasen	<i>I forbid you to blow on [people],</i>
Ich vorbite dir alb ruche	<i>I forbid you Alb to deal with me,</i>
Cruchen vn(de) anehucchen	<i>to croak and blow [at someone].</i>
Albes kind ir wihtelin sin	<i>Alb's children, you, his gnomes</i>

(Simek 2011: 44).

The *alb* (elf) here has not just a sister but a whole family; *mar* is lumped together  
among the *trute* and *alb* (elf). Both these texts share a sense of multiplicity, the  
idea of a buzzing flock of nocturnal creatures. This multiplication, too, could be  
regarded as a kind of deflection, dissipating the impact of the dreamer/ avatar  
encounter.

A fifteenth century English charm (MS Bodleian Rawlinson C506f., 297), with  
many extant variants throughout the British Isles (Simpson 2009: 100–107),



invokes St. George as a champion against a nightmare: here seen as a single entity (like the *dweorh*), and female (like the typical *mara*). The saint pursues the creature:

[He] walkt by daie, so did he by night  
Until such time as he hir found  
He hir beat and he hir bound  
Untill her troth she to him plight  
She would not come to hir that night  
(name of St. George three times)  
(Scot 1930 [1584]: 49; Simpson 2009: 102).

In Northern British and Shetland versions, St. George is replaced by Arthur, or simply by a “man of might”. Northern charms provide this knight with a naked sword and a candle, and have him bind the “mare” with his own hair; the Shetland charm is performed by the charmer pulling out her own longest hair (Simpson 2009: 103). Recall in this context the use of hair as a decoy for the *mara* in the Swedish material. As well as the relation of contagion, or metonymic magic, the oneiric change of scale is part of the trap. The motif of impossible binding with a hair is a found elsewhere in Gaelic folklore.<sup>18</sup> Note here again the imagery of beating (explicit), and penetration (implicit, in the presence of the knight’s sword); both switched to a protective function. The charm works by assigning these violent elements to the supernatural protector rather than the attacking spirit. Note also the spatial element: the knight protector seeks the (female) creature “by day and night”; temporal terms used to imply spatial distance. The encounter takes place in what seems to be a kind of no man’s land. There he does to her what the *mara* is supposed to do to its victim. After this transposed violence, he either binds her with an oath (magic words), or more literally and analogically, with the hair (magic material).

Taken together, these details recall the structure of *Wið dweorh*: the journey away from the land, the magical bridle, the intercessory third entity. The latter in both cases speaks binding words, a charm within the body of the charm – a kind of meta-charm – the content of which is not given. The charm narrative points inwards to this hidden core, affirming the action and power of magical speech, while cordoning it off. Many protective charms and curses, of course, use the figurative trope of great or impossible distances, the better to dispatch a supernatural enemy. But, in charms specifically aimed at the nightmare creature, we can perhaps discern an extra semiotic layer or turn, a further warping of space and time.

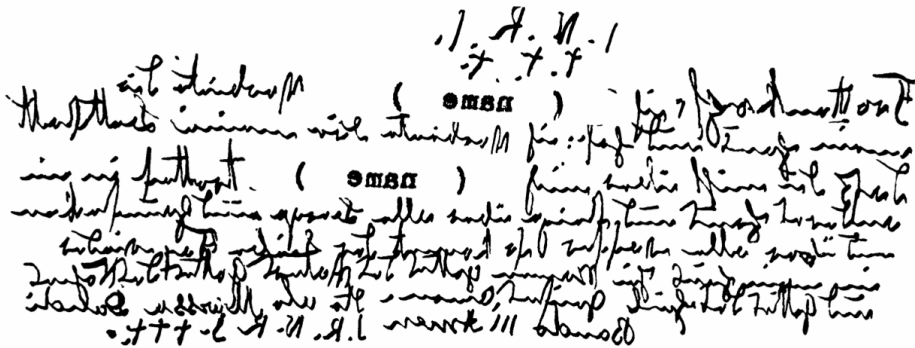


Fig. 6: Hexzettel charm, late 19C-early 20C, Berks. County, Pennsylvania. After Mahr (1935).

### THE TROTTEKOPF

In my final example, it was exactly this kind of detail – a specific type of *adynaton* – which enabled the American folklorist August Mahr to identify a somewhat garbled charm as originally directed against the nightmare. In the 1930s, copies of a *hexzettel* (anti-witchcraft) charm were found in an old sofa by an antique dealer in Berkshire County, Pennsylvania (Figure 6). Dealers found such charms regularly in the couches, beds and sofas of the Dutch (i.e. *Deutsche*; German-speaking) Pennsylvanians. The charm was in mirror-writing, starting with INRI and the nonsense formula *Ito alo Massa Dandi Bando*. The text reads as follows:

I.N.R.I + + + Trottenkopf, ich (name) Verbiete dir mein Haus und Hof: ich Verbiete dir meine Bettstatt daß du nicht über mich (name) trottest in ein anderes Haus und steige über alle Berge und Zaunstecken und über alle Wasser so kommt der liebe Tag wieder in mein Haus. Im Namen Gottes des Vaters Gottes des Sohnes und Gottes des Heil(igen) Geistes. Amen. Ito alo Massa Dandi Bando /// Amen I. R. N. R. I.

*Trottenkopf, I, (name), forbid thee my house and my courtyard; I forbid thee my bedstead so that thou wilt not ‘trot’ over me, (name), into another house: and climb over all mountains and fenceposts and over all waters. Then the good day will come back into my house. In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen. (Mahr 1935: 215–216).*

Mahr traced the origins of the charm first to a slightly less confused version, in a German book published in 1820 in Pennsylvania, intended for the use of local hex-doctors (popular magicians). In this book, the charm was already misunderstood, and advertised as a protection against witchcraft. The 1820 text reads:

Trottenkopf, ich verbiete dir mein Haus und meinen Hof; ich verbiete dir meinen Pferde- und Kuhstall; ich verbiete dir meine Bettstatt, daß du nicht über mich trotttest; trotte in ein anderes Haus. Bis du alle Berge steigest, alle Zaunstecken zählst und über alle Wasser steigest, kommt der liebe Tag wieder in mein Haus. Im Namen des Vaters, des Sohnes und des heiligen Geistes. Amen.

*Trottenkopf, I forbid thee my house and my court-yard; I forbid thee my horse and cow stable; I forbid thee my bed-stead so that thou wilt not trot over me; trot into another house. Until thou climbest over all mountains, countest all sticks in the fences, and walkest across all waters, the good day(light) will be back in my house. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen. (Mahr 1935: 217–218).*

The different key detail here is the requirement to “count all sticks in the fences”, not simply climb over them. The same charm turns up in a German almanac from 1839, where the wording specifically addresses the demon *Drudenkopf*; presumably a being with the head of a *Drude*. The *Drude* is a woman who can leave her body and sexually assault men in the night; in other words, she is a type of *mara*. The derivation *Drudenkopf* was used as another synonym for *alp* (elf) which, as we saw in the Munich charm, was in use as a synonym for nightmare-bringer by the fourteenth century. The Pennsylvania form of the name, *Trottenkopf*, probably originated in Württemberg or Switzerland. In 1864, Kuhn published a sheaf of variants – from the Netherlands, Henneberg, Bohemia and Westphalia – of this charm. All include the counting prescription; for instance, to count all the stars in the sky. We previously encountered a Swedish version. Here is another from the Harz Mountains:

Mahrte, ehr de mick wutt berien,  
saste erst alle barge un dälér owerstrien,  
alle grasspiere inknicken,  
alle loofbläre afficken,  
alle steern am himmel tellen,  
iindess werd wol dag sien  
Mahrte [night-mare], *before thou ridest on me,*  
*thou shalt first stride across all mountains and valleys,*  
*break all awns of the grasses,*

*lick all leaves of all trees,  
count all stars in the skies;  
in the meanwhile day will have come.*  
(Mahr 1935: 222–223).

As Mahr (1935: 225) comments: “the outstanding characteristic of all charms against nightmares is the assigning [of] tasks which assure the absence of the demon until daybreak [---] [so] applied to any other type of witch-craft than night-mare, it naturally becomes nonsensical [---]”. And so it does. The recursive nature of the crucial counting device appears to be specific to the nightmare. British children used to be told to count sheep in order to go to sleep. Anyone who has tried this knows that the number of the sheep becomes impossible to visualise after the first dozen or so; though one may carry on counting above that for some time, the numbers become abstract. The point of the counting prescription is that it is open ended and potentially endless.

## CONCLUSION

We have seen the elements of the nightmare package – its mythos – disposed in a spectrum of charms and related belief-narratives. The *dweorh* reins and rides the dreamer, then is blocked and parried by the “sister”. The *mara* of analogy legends presents the classic case of a safe (re)distribution of nightmare parts. Lullabies situate nightmare imagery in fully oneiric terms, culminating in the fantasy of being devoured or torn apart. As sleep charms, they represent the only genre discussed here where the nightmare narrative of threat comes close to fruition. But of course it is not actually realised; rather, it is distanced by the use of fantastic markers (such as change of scale), and split off from actual sleep. The baby who wakes the bison-headed god, whose life is to be full of sorrow, or who will be eaten by Napoleon, is, in a sense, confronted with nightmarish imagery as a kind of prophylactic, before he or she enters sleep. Often explicitly safeguarded by future tense, or conditional mode – an (absent) miller may be eaten, Napoleon may pass this way – gory consummation in the lullaby is thus abstracted from the frame of a sleep which has not happened yet. In the St. George charms, the *mara* is pursued beyond the realm of day and night, and bound (in the Northern variants) again with an oneiric trick, another change of scale. In the Scandinavian and Germanic charms, the *mara* is diverted into an infinite counting task.

Beyond the normal rhetoric of impossibility common in charms, there is a specific flavour in the *adynata* of charms against the nightmare, involving spatial and temporal displacements, whose folding character corresponds to

the peculiar *dédoublement* of the split or disguised self central to the nightmare experience. In all of this material, there is a kind of Möbius twist in narrative and imagery. The dream threat must be turned outwards, away from the subject; the semiotic labyrinth of endless counting, or multiple dimensional framing, works to do this. Yet the threat cannot be completely closed down, or sealed up, as the nightmare antagonist is, in fact, a disguised avatar of the self; it draws its power, its affect, from the subject's own desire. This is why, perhaps, we are not given the words spoken by the "sister" of the *dweorh*, or the oath the *mara* swears to the knight. These enigmatic *lacunae* are a way of marking what Freud (1900: 186 n. 2) called the navel of the dream: the inadmissible point of touch, where the nightmare, releasing its load of affect, climaxes and dissolves at the point of touch, back into the mind and body of the dreamer.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ricoeur (88–89) explains Freud's insight in terms of the semiotic nature of dreams: "to say that dreams have meaning is to assert that they are an intelligible, and even intellectual, operation of man; to understand them is to experience their intelligibility ... [Freud's] thesis signifies that one can always substitute for the dream account another account, with a semantics and a syntax, and that these two accounts are as comparable to one another as two texts". I follow this line of analysis by treating manifestations of nightmare belief-structures as texts. This paper forms part of an ongoing study of the cultural history of the nightmare, presented to date in a series of papers: Milne 2008, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> For methodology and definitions, see e.g. Sperber (1975) on symbolism in ritual, Frog (2014) on the nature of mythic culture.

<sup>3</sup> Dating from the Babylonian mature period, between 1500–1000 BCE, possibly early 13C BCE (Foster 2005: 392).

<sup>4</sup> Full Latin text:

+ Coniuro vos, septem sorores ...  
Elffrica (?), Affricea, Soria, Affoca, Affricala. Coniuro vos et contestor per Patrem et Filium et Spiritum Sanctum, ut non noceatis [i]stam famulum Dei, neque in oculis, neque in membris, neque in medullis, nec in ullo comp[ag]line membrorum eius, ut inhabitat in te virtus Christi altissimi. Ecce crucem Domini, fugite partes adversae, vicit l eo de tribu Juda, radix David. In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti, amen. ++  
Christus vincit, Christus regnat, Christus imperat, Christus liberat +,  
Christus te (et?) benedicat, ab omni malo defendat. agla. Pater noster +  
(Simek 2011: 34).

See also: <http://runer.ku.dk/VisGenstand.aspx?Titel=Bl%C3%A6singe-blyamulet>

<sup>5</sup> Folklore Archives of the Faculty of Udmurt Philology (Udmurt State University, Izhevsk, Russia), Folklore Expedition 1975, copybook 5, sheet 17.



<sup>6</sup> The complex question of elves and elfshot is dealt with in detail in a series of publications by Hall (2004, 2005, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Bozóky 2003, and synopsis in Klaniczay 2013: 285–286.

<sup>8</sup> Or arranged as images, like the medieval SARTOR AREPO magic box (Simek 2011: 26–28); cf. MacLeod & Mees 2006: Chapter 6 for a sample of possible derivations of garbled formulae.

<sup>9</sup> The literature on lullabies mainly consists of edited anthologies (e.g. Daiken 1959); studies from the perspectives of education, psychology or educational psychology (e.g. Weisner 2000), music practice (Kimball 2012; ECA-EC 2013), or ethnomusicology (e.g. Fukudo 1960); folkloric and ethnographic studies, generally focussing on specific regions (e.g. Giudice 1988), or periods (e.g. Farber 1990; Rogers 2008), or dealing with lullabies as part of a wider ethnic corpus (e.g. Vahman & Asatrian 1995). The dissertation of Fukudo (1960), for example, presents New World materials, analysed musicologically. There is no comprehensive international index of lullaby motifs comparable with the ATU system. The European Choral Association-Eua Cantat (ECA-EC 2013) project, *Lullabies of the World*, offers a selection from 41 countries.

<sup>10</sup> Latin as follows:

Lolla / lolla paruule • cur fles tam amare •  
Oportet te plangere • necnon suspirare  
Te dolere grauitur • decet uegetare,  
Vt parentes exules : nexerant ignare  
Lolla, lolla paruule • natus mundo tristi:  
Ignotum cum maximo • dolore uenisti •

<sup>11</sup> Russian transliteration:

Bayu-bayushki-bayu	<i>Baby, baby, rock-a-bye</i>
Ne lozhisya na krayu	<i>On the edge you mustn't lie</i>
Pridyot serenkiy volchok	<i>Or the little grey wolf will come</i>
On ukhvatit za bochok	<i>And will nip you on the tum</i>
I utashchit vo lesok	<i>Tug you off into the wood</i>
Pod rakitovy kustok	<i>Underneath the willow-root</i>

<sup>12</sup> In the British Isles, examples include Oliver Cromwell and Judge Jeffreys, in France, Bismarck, the Dukes of Marlborough and Wellington at various periods (Daiken 1959: 25; Opie 1992).

<sup>13</sup> From the twentieth century on, these dream weapons are often modernised as knives, spikes etc. (Milne 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Out of the 27 British curse tablets (some largely illegible) published by the Centre for the Study of Ancient Documents, Oxford University, five mention sleep: a) Uley 4 (Biccus; Tomlin 1993: no. 4); b) Uley 43 (Docilinus; Hassall & Tomlin & Frere 1989: 329–331, no. 3); c) Marlborough Down (Anon; Hassall & Tomlin et al. 1998: 378 no. 3); d) Pagans Hill A, no. 7 (Anon; Hassall & Tomlin & Frere 1984: 339); e) Wanborough (Rea et al 1972: 363–367). These find sites are all in south-west England. See: <http://curses.csad.ox.ac.uk/sites/>

- <sup>15</sup> These categories are drawn from Tillhagen's study of 5,000 recordings – mainly made before 1942 and containing data from the second half of the nineteenth century – held in Swedish archives of popular tradition. See his statistical tables (Tillhagen 1960: 317).
- <sup>16</sup> Since Hufford 1982, the medical syndrome of 'night-terrors' or sleep-paralysis is often cited in reference to suffocation, pressure, paralysis etc. in nightmares; cf. e.g. Davies 2003. However: a) *mara* traditions are not universal, b) in the West, the ways in which nightmare demons and their actions are envisaged demonstrably change over time, c) for people born into cultures with a *mara* tradition, belief may generate syndrome, rather than vice versa, d) methodologically, we should not identify deeply acculturated processes such as the waking recuperation of terrifying dream-imagery as explicable in terms of a physiological condition assumed to be universal.
- <sup>17</sup> The exception is ecstatic initiation, wherein the supernatural avatar may well actually penetrate, and even dismember, the dreamer's body (i.e. his/her body image in the dream), as in the case of shamanic initiation visions. But this takes us beyond the scope of the present discussion; see n.1 above.
- <sup>18</sup> A hag, a hunter, his dog and her hair form the central motif in a group of tales (*Sealgair Shraith Eirinn is a' Chailleach* [The Strath Dearn Hunter and the Witch]; *Cailleach Beinne Bhrìc* [The Carlin of the Spotted Hill]), where the *cailleach* (= supernatural hag, or witch) tries to trick the hunter into binding his dog with a hair of her head. This tale is apparently known in the Caucasus as well as Gaelic Scotland (Campbell 1900–1902 [2005]: 207–210).

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Vanemuise 42, Tartu 51003, Estonia

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