

REFLECTIONS

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LEECHDOMS, WORTCUNNING, STARCRAFT

Long ago, in what is starting to seem like a galaxy far, far away, I wrote all sorts of things besides science fiction. Among those all sorts of things were books on a highly various assortment of scientific and historical subjects. I wrote one on circumnavigating the globe, one on the quest for the mythical El Dorado, one on the quest for the equally mythical Prester John, etc., etc. There were also several on the history of medicine—one on the great doctors of medieval times, one on the medical theories of the ancient world, and others. (Some of these books are still in print, forty and fifty years later, or available in electronic format.)

Because I lived then in a gigantic house with what felt like infinite storage space for books, and books themselves, even rare ones, were fairly cheap then, I built my own vast working reference library so that I would not need to expend time doing my research away from home. I amassed thousands of books on any subject that interested me or that was likely to interest me in the future: archaeology, geography, history, anthropology, medicine—you name the area of knowledge, and important texts in it are likely to be somewhere on my shelves.

It's a long time, now, since I have written books of the sort I once did, and over the decades I've let some regions of my library go unused, to the point where as I wander the shelves nowadays I am often surprised to rediscover some of the things I own. A few weeks ago, for example, while looking for something else entirely, I was pleasantly startled to stumble across a fascinating and exceedingly obscure tome called *Leechdoms, Wortcunning, and Starcraft in Early England*, which I would like to share with you now.

It's an imposing three-volume set, and an old notation tells me that I bought it in 1968 for what was then the not inconsiderable sum of \$44.65. It was published in 1864 by the house of Longman, Green, on behalf of the British government, which was then issuing hundreds of volumes of documents of British history going back deep into Anglo-Saxon times, and my copy bears a bookplate declaring that it was presented by the Lords Commissioners of Her Majesty's Treasury to the Dominican Priory, Manchester. ("In the event of the Library being broken up, it is to be returned to the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office, Westminster," the bookplate says, but evidently that stern instruction was disobeyed, for here is the book on my desk in California this very morning of the year 2014.)

A leech is a nasty bloodsucking worm, but leeches were used in olden days for medicinal purposes, and in Middle English the word "leechdom" meant the art of healing. So the "leechdom" section of the book is a collection of remedies for a vast number of maladies—at random, I note one for poisonous spider bite, one for gout, one for "the evil blotch," and so forth. "Wort" was the Old English term for any plant used for food or medicine, and therefore the "wortcunning" section of the book is a great botanical compendium, describing a myriad medicinal plants and their uses. ("Sea Holly: This wort is born in secret places, and in wet ones. Of this wort, it is said that its root is compared to the head of the monster which men name the Gorgon, and the twigs have, as is also said, both eyes and nose, and color of serpents. . . . Carve it off then with a crooked and very hard iron, and he who will carve it, then let him be averted, for it is not permitted that man may see this root unharmed. . . .") As for starcraft, the third section, that refers to astronomy and its ancient sister, astrology. ("If it thunders

on a Monday, then that betokens much bloodshed in some nation. If it thunders on a Tuesday, that betokens failure of crops. . . .") The source of all this medieval wisdom is a manuscript written somewhere between A.D. 1000 and the Norman conquest of England in 1066. The text is in the Anglo-Saxon alphabet, which I am unable to reproduce here because I don't have an Anglo-Saxon font on my computer. (Such a font is available, but I'm afraid to install it for fear that it will take over the computer and I will have to compose my e-mails in Anglo-Saxon to the end of my days.) The manuscript, says its translator, the Rev. Oswald Cockayne of Cambridge, "must have been a regally magnificent book, executed at enormous expense. It suffered from the fire at Ashburnham House, 1731, and . . . was taken out of the ashes a shriveled blackened lump of leaves." An elaborate restoration process followed, by which Cockayne was able to reconstruct nearly all of the text.

It's an extraordinary book. The basis for most medieval medical knowledge was Greek and Roman, derived from the teachings of Hippocrates and Galen and other doctors of the classical era, but the Anglo-Saxons, off by themselves on their remote northwestern island, developed their own set of surgical and pharmaceutical skills as though Greece and Rome had never existed, and *Leechdoms* is a wondrous conglomeration of medical knowledge that seems to come from some parallel universe. Most of the Greco-Roman pharmacopeia was nonsense, of course, based mostly on magical thinking and wishful thinking, with a smattering of trial-and-error pragmatism mixed in. *Leechdoms* does draw on such Greek and Roman authorities as Dioscorides and Sextus Placidus, but mainly it offers us an entirely different set of prescriptions, incantations, and technical suggestions, one that demonstrates for us the intellectual richness of the Anglo-Saxon culture that the Norman conquerors virtually wiped out, and the ingenuity of the scientists of that pre-scientific age.

Here is an overwhelming abundance of charms and spells and instructions for preparing useful medicinal potions: many to heal wounds and defend against poison, to prevent sterility and aid in childbirth, to ward off wild beasts, savage dogs, goblins, witches, and demons, to increase the fertility of the soil, and ever so much else. We are told how to transport a swarm of bees, how to calm a storm and fend off hail, how to control the winds. One section that must have been consulted often in that credulous age provides a remedy for "elf-disease"—"Take bishopwort, fennel, lupin, the lower part of enchanter's nightshade, and moss or lichen from the hallowed sign of Christ. . . bind all the worts in a cloth, dip it thrice in hallowed font water, have sung over it three masses. . . . Go on Thursday evening at sunset to the place where you know the herb helenium grows. Then sing Benedicite and Pater Noster and a litany; and stick your knife into the plant; let it stick therein. Go away. Return when day and night are just dividing; in the same morning hour go first to church and cross yourself and commit yourself to God. Then go in silence, and *though anything soever of an awful sort should come to meet you*, or a man, say no word to it or him until you come to the wort that you marked the evening before. Take up the wort, let the knife stick in it, go again as quick as thou art able to church, and lay it under the altar with the knife. . . ."

And so on for several pages, with much detail about holy water, singing of hymns, three heads of cropleek and the netherward part of enchanter's nightshade, all for nine mornings and nine nights, and at last all will be well with the sufferer from elf-disease. I wish I could quote it all. You might find the salve "against the elfin race and nocturnal goblin visitors, and for the women with whom the devil hath carnal commerce" useful—it involves henbane, harewort, garlic, bugloss, wormwood, and much more—or the instructions for making an amulet to guard against nightmares, using certain small stones found in the bellies of young swallows that also are good "for headache and eye-trouble and the assault of a fiend and a night-walker and tertian ague and eye-trouble. . . ."

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There are handy hints for the interpretation of dreams, too: “To see oxen sleeping, betokens bad luck in trade. To see himself bearded, betokens splendor. To have a white overcoat, betokens bliss. To have a particolored overcoat, betokens an unpleasant message. To see oneself eating hot coals shows that one’s enemies will speak evil of one. To talk with dead men, betokens profit.” And on in like manner for many a page.

I never did write the book about Anglo-Saxon medicine and astronomy that I probably could have carved out of this wondrous mass of splendid pseudo-scientific fantasia. But I see from a note inserted in one of the volumes that I did, at least, make use of the book in my own fiction: a story called “The Fascination of the Abomination,” published in the June 1987 issue of *Asimov’s* and later incorporated into my novel *To the Land of the Living*. It takes place in a shadowy netherworld where Gilgamesh, H.P. Lovecraft, Picasso, pithecanthropoids, Kublai Khan, and just about everyone else who ever existed or might have existed wander around together. Midway through, Gilgamesh takes refuge from pursuers in a warehouse where three Anglo-Saxon wizards are peddling remedies and spells straight out of the *Leechdoms* collection: “I am Eadfrith. Here we have rue, hyssop, fennel, mustard, elelcampane. . . .” “. . . and smear therewith the head, right on top. Delve up waybroad without iron, ere the rising of the sun, bind the roots about the head, with crosswort, by a red fillet. . . .” “The ash of dead bees, and linseed oil. Cammock and thung, wenwort and elder root. . . .”

So the book was professionally useful after all, and I got my \$44.65 worth out of it, and then some. Today, a first edition of *Leechdoms, Wortcunning, and Starcraft* is sold for anywhere up to eleven hundred dollars by rare-book dealers, but I’m happy to say that the text is available for \$0.00, courtesy of www.archive.org and several other internet sites. Or, if you care to splurge, there’s a handsome Cambridge University Press paperback at \$136 for the three-volume set.

Go thou, then, collect thy worts by the light of the crescent moon, cast thou thy spells—