



# ORAL TRADITION

## Festschrift for John Miles Foley

**This article belongs to a special issue of *Oral Tradition* published in honor of John Miles Foley's 65<sup>th</sup> birthday and 2011 retirement. The surprise Festschrift, guest-edited by Lori and Scott Garner entirely without his knowledge, celebrates John's tremendous impact on studies in oral tradition through a series of essays contributed by his students from the University of Missouri-Columbia (1979-present) and from NEH Summer Seminars that he has directed (1987-1996).**

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## **“A Swarm in July”: Beekeeping Perspectives on the Old English *Wið Ymbe* Charm**

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with the assistance of Chuck Crimmins and Richard Underhill**

Inscribed in the margins of an eleventh-century manuscript<sup>1</sup> of Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* and crowded beneath a Latin prayer is a brief bit of advice for beekeepers in the event of a swarm (*ymbe*), a natural phenomenon in which a substantial portion of an older bee colony migrates en masse with a queen to establish a new colony. The following analysis of this enigmatic text has been inspired largely by three features central to John Miles Foley’s vast body of work: interdisciplinarity, collaboration, and comparative research. While the eight lines of alliterative verse that constitute the greater portion of this swarm charm have assured its standing within canonical Old English literature, its insights into traditional apiary practices of Anglo-Saxon England make it equally appropriate subject matter for studies in folklore or even animal science. It is precisely such unlikely intersections that have long served as foci for the transdisciplinary work of John Foley, and it is thus that we now choose it as the subject of analysis for a volume in his honor.<sup>2</sup>

John Foley’s work has also consistently embraced genuine collaboration—collaboration not only within the academic community but reaching outside scholarly circles to gain the fullest understanding possible of oral traditions worldwide. In keeping with this goal, we build upon

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<sup>1</sup> The swarm charm appears in the left-hand margin on p. 182 of Cambridge College, Corpus Christi MS 41 (hereafter, CCCC 41). A full description of this manuscript along with a link to images (searchable by manuscript page numbers) is publicly available online through the Parker Library: [http://parkerweb.stanford.edu/parker/actions/manuscript\\_description\\_long\\_display.do?ms\\_no=41](http://parkerweb.stanford.edu/parker/actions/manuscript_description_long_display.do?ms_no=41). The manuscript itself dates to the early eleventh century, and the marginalia including *wið ymbe* was likely added by an anonymous priest or monk in the mid-eleventh century.

<sup>2</sup> Funding for Kayla Miller’s research in the summer of 2010 was provided by the Fellowships Program at Rhodes College as part of a research mentorship. Lori Garner’s research during the summer of 2011 was supported by a Faculty Development Endowment grant, also generously provided by Rhodes College. Thanks also to Marijane Osborn, Rebecca Brackmann, Melissa Bridgman, Chris Peterson, Scott Garner, and Susan Niditch for helpful comments on earlier drafts and to Justin Arft and Peter Ramey for additional suggestions during copy-editing. Most of all, thanks to Richard Underhill and Chuck Crimmins for so generously sharing their time and expertise in the exploration of this subject.

work with this remedy<sup>3</sup> begun by James B. Spamer, who reminds us that “the original speakers of the charm were not Germanicists; they were beekeepers” (1978:280). Our work has also been heavily influenced by Marijane Osborn, who has thoroughly researched skep beekeeping practices as reflected across a broad range of medieval literatures and historical records in order “to open the way for further study” (2006:271, n.2). Our strategy here is to augment and complement such prior work by going a step further and bringing knowledgeable and experienced beekeepers directly into the discussion, sharing the text with them, inviting their reactions, and offering a more collaborative interpretation. That beekeeping (for purposes of honey and wax production) was an integral part of life in monasteries (Rust 1999) has been well-established and corroborates our view that the charm potentially had a vital practical role for those who had easiest access to the manuscript in which it survives.<sup>4</sup> Our ultimate goal is thus to shift our “default reading” of *Wið Ymbe* from its “artistic beauty of structure and treatment” (Storms 1974:132) to one that embraces the “myriad other aspects of the given poem’s reality” (Foley 2002:60), namely its value within beekeeping practice.

The two beekeepers participating in our project both have extensive experience in beekeeping. Chuck Crimmins, Gardening and Forest Coordinator at Heifer International in Perryville, Arkansas, has been educating visitors on bees and beekeeping since 1994. Richard Underhill, founding owner of Peace Bee Farm in Proctor, Arkansas, has served as president of both the Memphis Area Beekeepers Association and the Tennessee Beekeepers Association. We would like to establish from the outset that this comparative study presupposes neither that the practice of beekeeping is the same now as in Anglo-Saxon times nor that even the bees themselves would behave in exactly the same way. As Crimmins explains, bees in the United States have been bred for qualities that produce the best honey and present minimal threat to their handlers. Similarly, materials used to work with bees have changed radically over intervening centuries, and there is obviously “a considerable difference between the hives of the Anglo-Saxons and modern hives, which is not inconsequential in our understanding of the charm” (Spamer 1978:280-81), the now-familiar white boxes of the modern Langstroth hive differing markedly from the traditional skep or basketwork hive most likely used by Anglo-Saxons (cf. Osborn 2005:7-9).<sup>5</sup>

In his comparative approach, John Foley’s work has always been intensely sensitive to cultural and generic difference at the same time that it is ever-open to insightful and meaningful

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<sup>3</sup> Because medical texts and classifications differed radically in Anglo-Saxon times from modern, the terms used to discuss these works are inherently problematic. We use *remedy* here as a broad category to refer to any text intended to effect a cure or positive outcome. The designations of *charm* and the native *galdor* (or *gealdor*) are limited to those particular texts involving verbal incantations. In the case of *Wið Ymbe*, the usages here are thus largely interchangeable.

<sup>4</sup> On the richly powerful beekeeping metaphors employed in such religious writings as Aldhelm’s, see Casiday 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Most relevant for present purposes, the Langstroth hive reduces, even eliminates, the necessity for swarming in honey production, since the removable frames allow for collection of honey without destroying the hives, whereas in skep beekeeping the original hives must be destroyed to retrieve honey, and any new honey depends on the successful division and reproduction of the colonies and the establishment of new hives via swarming.

points of unexplored or unexpected similarities.<sup>6</sup> We here extend this model to the material world, limiting our comparisons to bee behaviors shared across various breeds and species and to problems confronting beekeepers of both medieval and modern times, most specifically those issues related to swarming. Crimmins and Underhill are especially sensitive to differences between modern and traditional beekeeping, and Heifer International and Peace Bee Farm are dedicated to replicating bees' natural environments to the extent possible (for instance, in not supplementing bees' honey stores with corn syrup), making their practices at least somewhat closer to that of pre-modern societies than those of many commercial beekeepers.

At the same time, however, their differing responses to the remedy attest both to the variation of beekeeping practices and the multivalence of *Wið Ymbe* itself. The fact that two beekeepers interviewed within two days and two hundred miles of each other can respond differently to the charm's advice on swarms suggests that we reevaluate unilateral assertions regarding what the text might have meant across the hundreds of years that we now know as the Anglo-Saxon period. It seems only natural that beekeepers from Aldhelm's time to that of the Norman Conquest would have possessed even wider ranges of apicultural knowledge and that reading and listening audiences of *Wið Ymbe* would have had equally diverse responses to the advice rendered, if not more so.

Consistent with our goal of foregrounding the beekeeping perspective, our analysis is organized around those aspects of *Wið Ymbe* that were most salient and meaningful to Crimmins and Underhill—specifically the instructions for oral delivery, the opening preposition *wið* (typically understood as “against”), the directive to throw “earth” over the bees, the direct address to the bees as *sigewif* (victory-women), and the closing appeal to be mindful of the speaker's well-being. Our collective efforts suggest that in early medieval times, as in modern, successful swarm management involved practical knowledge obtained person-to-person through oral tradition, an acute awareness of bees' honey-producing cycles in relation to swarming patterns, a keen sensitivity to the uniqueness of each individual swarm, and proactive, creative solutions to questions of ownership with regard to creatures essentially wild.

### **. . . and *cweð*: Beekeeping as Oral Tradition**

The text in the margins of CCCC 41 itself is brief enough to cite here in full:<sup>7</sup>

Wið ymbe nim eorþan, oferweorp mid þinre swiþran  
handa under þinum swiþran fet, and cwet:

Fo ic under fot, funde ic hit.  
Hwæt, eorðe mæg wið ealra wihta gehwilce

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<sup>6</sup> See especially Foley's discussion of genre-dependence and the need for “legitimacy” of any proposed comparison (1990:3). For Foley's comparative work with healing traditions in particular, see 1980a, 1980b, and 1981, which offer productive and insightful comparative analyses of Serbian and Old English charm remedies.

<sup>7</sup> Edited text from Dobbie 1942. Translations, unless otherwise stated, are Lori Garner's.

and wið andan      and wið æminde  
and wið þa micelan      mannes tungan.

And wiððon<sup>8</sup> forweorp ofer gret, þonne hi swirman, and cweð:

Sitte ge, sigewif,      sigað to eorþan!  
Næfre ge wilde      to wuda fleogan.  
Beo ge swa gemindige      mines godes,  
swa bið manna gehwilc      metes and eþeles.

Against a swarm, take earth; throw it with your right hand under your right foot and say: “I seize it underfoot; I found it. Lo, earth is mighty against every being, and against hatred and against enmity and against the great tongue of man.” And against that, cast dust over [them] when they swarm and say, “Sit, victory-women, sink to earth. May you never fly wild to the woods. Be as mindful of my well-being as every man is of food and home.”

Clearly, the poetic portions embedded in this text were envisioned by its scribe as an “oral poem,” prefaced twice in its instructions by verbs denoting speech. Not only is this *galdor* (the native term typically rendered “charm”) oral in its performance, but it belongs to a tradition that is largely oral in its transmission and reception as well.<sup>9</sup> As Stephen Pollington explains, Anglo-Saxon healers working with a given remedy seem to have used “the documentary material as a basis for expanding its value and relevance to their contemporaries and fellow-countrymen” (2000:45). Lea Olsan’s research also indicates that “a much greater proportion of medieval charms were performed in the oral-aural environment of person-to-person contact than we find documented in writing” and that “the written evidence of charms . . . represents a fragment of the number of charms that circulated by word of mouth” (forthcoming).<sup>10</sup>

Anne Van Arsdall’s comparative work with medieval and modern traditional medicine reinforces the view that “texts are only a reminder” for practitioners of traditional medicine even today and “such must have been the case with medieval medical texts” (2002:84). Even in regions where literacy is pervasive and written manuals readily available, the dominant mode of transmission of knowledge is still “person-to-person.” In the *curandera* tradition in New Mexico, for instance, which Van Arsdall uses as her primary comparand, some written records explicitly assert their subordination to oral tradition. Michael Moore, for example, prefaces his survey of New Mexican *remedios* with the explanation that their “medicinal uses are known and

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<sup>8</sup> MS. *wið on*. Dobbie’s emendation to *wiððon* seems more likely than Grendon’s and Storm’s *siððon* both because it is closer to the original and because it is similar to the very common “wið ðon” phrase appearing in the charms, often beginning the second of two charms for the same purpose in the phrase “wið ðon ylcan,” “against the same.”

<sup>9</sup> Even the Old English *Herbarium*, translated and adapted from a Latin source and clearly tied to literate culture, appeals to oral tradition in validating numerous herbal remedies, frequently claiming an herb’s efficacy based on what “ys sæd” (“is said”; for example, entry for *dragonwort*, De Vriend 1984:60) or what “sume sæcgeað” (“some say”; for example, entry for *brownwort*, De Vriend 1984:102).

<sup>10</sup> Many thanks to Lea Olsan for sharing this manuscript prior to its publication.

systematized by hundreds and thousands of years of usage” and that his own compilation is “what I have learned, observed and used as of 1977, a frozen cross-section of a moving stream” (Van Arsdall 2002:83).

The implications of a medieval text as a “cross-section of a moving stream,” rather than a manual to be followed verbatim, are profound indeed. While *Wið Ymbe* is generally understood as belonging to the same genre as medical remedies, it differs in offering advice for an agricultural craft rather than a cure of a physical ailment.<sup>11</sup> This difference—which likely would not have been salient to Anglo-Saxons whose compilations do not sharply demarcate such categories<sup>12</sup>—makes the remedy for swarming bees an especially apt subject for comparative analysis. Medieval and modern beekeeping traditions arguably have greater affinities than medieval and modern medical practices. While numerous regions and groups, such as practitioners of the *curandera* traditions, certainly do embrace traditional and alternative medicine, most Americans today observe a fairly rigid distinction between folklore and what is understood as the science of medicine, expecting medical providers to have official academic degrees from sanctioned institutions of higher learning. Such is not the case for beekeeping. As Chuck Crimmins explains (2010):<sup>13</sup>

There’s no place you can go to learn about bees as far as a university setting. There are no beekeeping degrees.<sup>14</sup> . . . It’s all pick-it-up-as-you-can, mentoring, a few classes here and there, but nothing as far as a degree program, maybe in certain universities. . . . So I’ve been picking it up still for twenty years . . . and I still learn more every day.

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<sup>11</sup> The bee charm, however, is not alone in this regard. Even within the metrical charms, we see advice not specifically medical in such texts as the land-remedy charm (*Æcerbot*) and the two charms for theft of cattle, one of which appears in the margins of this same manuscript.

<sup>12</sup> The entry for *ueneria* in the Old English *Herbarium*, for instance, offers its remedy for swarming bees right alongside its cure for trouble urinating.

<sup>13</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from Crimmins refer to a personal interview with Kayla Miller at Heifer Ranch in Perryville, Arkansas, on July 15, 2010. Miller herself grew up near Heifer Ranch, where she served as a volunteer assisting Crimmins with care of the bees.

<sup>14</sup> There are exceptions, to be sure. The University of Tennessee, for instance, offers a Master Beekeeper certification through its Extension program and classes can count toward advanced degrees in Agriculture. Similarly, the Ohio State University’s Agricultural Technical Institute has offered a two-year program in beekeeping since 1977. The difference is that such degrees and certifications are neither required nor expected for most working in apiculture. For instance, Richard Underhill’s expertise—which was acquired primarily through unofficial and personal mentoring rather than through formal or institutionalized education—has been publicly and widely recognized by beekeeping communities throughout the region, where he has served as president of the Memphis Area Beekeepers Association and even the Tennessee Beekeepers Association. Underhill himself, who began keeping bees after retiring from a career in electronics, explains that many beekeepers go into beekeeping precisely because the practice is still very traditional in nature and “low-technology.” He values and is eager to share stories and traditions surrounding beekeeping worldwide: “we enjoy the tradition.”

Crimmins himself began beekeeping when, he explains, “an older beekeeper, he kind of took me under his wing and mentored me.” While Richard Underhill<sup>15</sup> and his wife first became interested after a one-day introductory class, much of his knowledge was acquired person-to-person from an experienced beekeeper who had been practicing for sixty-four years.

The role of texts in the transmission of this dynamic tradition provides a productive model for understanding how the marginalia of CCCC 41 might have functioned in the context of an ambient oral tradition. When asked about beekeeping books, Crimmins explains that he does read beekeeping books and regularly reads emails from beekeeping groups. Similarly, Underhill states that “I read quite a bit”; however, he goes on to clarify that texts alone provide far from sufficient training: “Beekeeping I consider both an art and a science. The science you can get from the literature,” but equally necessary is what Underhill calls “art,” “the craft that’s passed on from experience” (2010a). Crimmins, too, speaks explicitly of a balance between “art” and “science.” Their elaboration of this relationship reflects what Barre Toelken refers to as the “twin laws of folklore process,” “conservatism and dynamism” (1996:39) or the “variation within limits” that John Miles Foley attributes to traditional verbal art.<sup>16</sup> For Underhill and Crimmins, the “science” consists of more or less static facts where the “art” involves constant innovation and variation to meet situation-specific needs. Speaking of swarms specifically, Underhill explains that every swarm is different. It “depends on where it’s located, how high it is, what they’re hanging on,” and there are “numerous tricks that people have devised over time, and each occurrence involves you having to devise a plan to how you are going to capture this [swarm].” While much has of course changed with regard to beekeeping practices, the inherent variability of swarms is a phenomenon of nature connecting medieval and modern beekeepers and necessitating constant innovation within traditional practices during both time periods.

Beekeepers’ use of the Internet when handling this infinite variety of swarms is in some ways parallel to the role of oral-derived texts in Anglo Saxon times. Much more so than books, the Internet today provides a dynamic forum for exchange, through emails from beekeeping groups and electronic newsletters, as Crimmins explains. Oral tradition and Internet technology, as Foley argues, are “surprisingly similar in their structure and dynamics,” both media depending “not on static products but on continuous processes” (2011-:“Getting Started: How to Surf The Pathways Project”). Both media “invite and require active participation and support a rich diversity of individual, one-time-only experiences” (*ibid.*). It is thus quite natural that beekeepers already embracing oral traditional modes of communication would gravitate toward online media for transmission of shared and knowledge and experience. This connection between Internet technology and oral tradition offers a productive way to recontextualize the poetry in *Wið Ymbe*, as a starting point for necessary innovation rather than a fixed and final solution in itself.

Like Anglo-Saxon beekeeping, at least as attested in the margins of CCCC 41, modern American beekeeping has at times also relied on the mnemonics of poetry in its transmission of practical knowledge. Comparison of *Wið Ymbe*’s incantation with a modern Internet parallel can

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<sup>15</sup> Except where otherwise noted, quotations from Richard Underhill refer to a personal interview conducted by Kayla Miller on July 14, 2010, at Peace Bee Farm in Proctor, Arkansas.

<sup>16</sup> Oral tradition “thrives on its ability to vary within limits. Every context is unprecedented as well as generic; each poet and poem and performance is in some fashion unique” (Foley 2002:140).



help demystify perceptions of the Old English *galdor* as purely “pagan” and “magical” (Storms 1974:133-34). To cite an example relating to swarms in particular, the following rhyme is referenced with a high degree of frequency on academic, professional, and hobbyist sites alike:

A swarm in May is worth a load of hay;  
 A swarm in June is worth a silver spoon;  
 A swarm in July isn't worth a fly.

As will be discussed in more depth below, this seemingly ubiquitous<sup>17</sup> rhyme manifests all the variations and multiforms that one would expect of a living oral tradition but consistently serves as a shared reference point for those seeking or giving advice on swarm management. Just as *Wið Ymbe* employs the alliterative meter characteristic of Old English verse and even the metonymic *hwæt* that activates that register of heroic poetry,<sup>18</sup> “Swarm in May” provides a memorable point of reference for those teaching and learning beekeeping wisdom through its repetitive structure and end-line rhyme. The wisdom of living oral traditions practiced today “lends credibility to the argument that by considering the presence of a common, largely unwritten, and constantly evolving tradition of healing during the late classical and early medieval periods of Europe, the medical tradition of those times can be better understood” (Van Arsdall 2002:81-82). If we view the *Wið Ymbe* charm in its single manuscript attestation as merely a fossilized remnant of a larger living and dynamic tradition, we stand to learn a great deal more. Once again, a beekeeping perspective puts us in a much better position to understand precisely what the text might be teaching us.

### *Wið ymbe*. . . : The Value of a Swarm

A fundamental question when addressing this charm is whether the *ymbe* is a phenomenon to be embraced or avoided, a crux largely dependent on the polysemous preposition *wið*. The dominant meaning with a dative, as is reflected in most translations of the remedies, certainly has a sense of confrontation, “against” (cf. Bosworth and Toller, s.v. “wip”). However, then, as now, “with” had multiple senses depending on context and could also be understood as “marking association,” translated as “with” (Bosworth and Toller). The word’s semantic range is ultimately unsurprising, since even today one can fight “with an opponent” in an oppositional relationship or work together “with a colleague.” Nonetheless, the potential ambiguity created by the lack of additional verbal cues has led to multiple, sometimes contradictory, renderings.<sup>19</sup>

The traditional and generic contexts of similar formulaic language throughout the Old English remedies argue strongly for the dominant sense of “against.” Contexts of the formulaic

<sup>17</sup> A search via Google for the poem’s most stable phrases (“swarm in May,” “swarm in June,” “swarm in July,” and “silver spoon”) produces upwards of 36,500 hits (as of March 14, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> On the “hwæt paradigm” and its idiomatic force in Old English poetry, see Foley 1991:218-23.

<sup>19</sup> In this particular charm (though not in all charms), Grendon (1909) translates “against”; Gordon (1926), Storms (1974), and Barber (2011) as “for”; and Spamer (1978) “in the case of.”

“wiþ [X]” so common in Old English remedies most definitely imply an oppositional relationship, since the object of the preposition “wið” is virtually always undesirable, as even a few brief examples from the Lacnunga manuscript’s introductory pages (Harley 585) attest—*wið færstice* (“against a sudden pain”), *wið heafodwræce* (“against a headache”), *wið hwoſtan* (“against a cough”), *wið adle* (“against illness”), and *wið fleogendum attre* (“against flying venom”). The swarm referenced in this particular remedy, which is syntactically parallel to countless ailments in this formulaic opening, appears to be a phenomenon to be avoided or quelled—the proverbial “swarm in July.”

It is important to be aware, however, that the existence of advice against swarms need not suggest that swarming in general was viewed negatively in Anglo-Saxon England. A beekeeper’s perspective suggests that, even for beekeepers who depend on swarms for ongoing honey-production, certain kinds of swarms are to be assiduously avoided: most specifically, swarms late in summer after honey production has commenced, swarms that evidence overly-aggressive behaviors, secondary (or tertiary) swarms that threaten the stability of the original colony and are themselves unlikely to survive, and swarms for which a beekeeper has insufficient space for a colony to thrive.

Given that swarms are a natural part of a colony’s cycle and an essential event for honeybee production—especially in premodern contexts—some have argued vehemently against “against.” Spamer explains that “while swarming is not necessary for a modern beekeeper with the removable frames of the Langstroth hive, it was not only desirable but absolutely necessary for the Anglo-Saxon beekeeper with his skep” (1978:281). With this necessity in mind, Spamer suggests rendering *wið ymbe* as “in the case of a swarm” (281) and understands the prescribed remedy not as action against a swarm but rather as an attempt “to forestall the threat of the bees being stolen, being lured away by a rival beekeeper using a magical spell” (1978:290). Following a similar logic, Storms, even though he translates “wið” as “against” in virtually all other such headings, here translates it as “for”: the “supposition that it was used to prevent their swarming at all is wrong, as the swarming of bees is a good thing in itself and is necessary to increase the number of hives and the productive of honey” (1974:133).

More recently, Frederick S. Holton has reverted to the argument for “against,” but with a different logic. He accepts the “obvious desirability of swarming” but urges us to “leave open the possibility, at least, that the charm really is, as stated in the text, ‘against a swarm’” (1993:42) on the grounds that “we do not, in fact, know to what degree the Anglo-Saxon beekeeper would have understood the importance or significance of swarming.”<sup>20</sup> For Holton, the poem is most likely “against” a swarm, but the phrasing for him implies ignorance on the part of the beekeeper, the swarm perhaps being “an awesome and inauspicious event, to be combated by whatever means possible” (1993:42).

Such interpretations do shed important light but also risk polarizing the issue unnecessarily, operating from the premise that all swarms are either good or bad, that Anglo-Saxons either recognized the value of a swarm or they didn’t. Perspectives of beekeepers suggest

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<sup>20</sup> Thanks largely to Marijane Osborn’s more recent publications on Germanic beekeeping (2005; 2006), especially with regard to literature, Holton’s claim that “we know virtually nothing about the practice of Anglo-Saxon beekeeping” (1993:42) is less true today than it was in 1993.

that the issue is far more complex, having much to do with the nature and circumstances of a particular swarm rather than with the inherent desirability (or lack thereof) of the abstract phenomenon of swarming. The reality is that not all swarms are the same. Because swarms themselves exist in multiforms, there exists the possibility—even likelihood—of an inherent polysemy in *Wið Ymbe* itself.

While a swarm is most certainly a necessary and natural part of a colony's life cycle, a swarm during harvest is devastating, as Underhill explains during an interview conducted in July, when the threat of detrimental swarms was most fully present:

If the bees swarm and leave, we've lost a year's efforts. We've lost the crop for the year. . . . The remnant that's left behind is not large enough to produce a surplus of honey in harvest. We must leave the bees 70 pounds of honey to survive over winter. . . .<sup>21</sup> The remnant left behind may be a good colony the following year. . . . We work our bees, tend to the bees, for 49 weeks of the year and then for three weeks they're making their harvest. Right now [mid-July], they are making the honey that will reward us for the year's work. But if the bees swarm, we will not make anything at all this year.

Eva Crane's research suggests that the situation would have been similar with skep beekeeping—the type of beekeeping practiced in medieval England and throughout most of northwest Europe. Then as now, “the main honey flows tended to occur in mid to late summer, after flowering in deciduous forests had finished” (1999:239). Traditional beekeeping thus “depended on the production and hiving of swarms *in early summer*” (239, emphasis added).

The previously discussed “Swarm in May” rhyme itself points toward the widespread questions among beekeepers regarding when a swarm is desirable and the ongoing use of traditional wisdom as expressed through poetry to help answer. The rhyme states that a swarm's value is directly tied to when it occurs, with early spring swarms leaving time for the new colonies to produce a sufficient crop of honey (May and June) and later swarms (July) being essentially worthless. Closer examination of the contexts in which this rhyme is employed and its variation within them, however, suggests that even seemingly straightforward traditional wisdom is seldom simple.<sup>22</sup>

The wisdom underlying “A Swarm in May” is no exception to the dynamic nature of oral and—taking into account the parallels previously noted by Foley—electronic traditions. In its

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<sup>21</sup> This is less the case in some commercial beekeeping practices, which feed the bees corn syrup substitutes rather than allowing the bees to rely on their own production during wintering months.

<sup>22</sup> Wolfgang Mieder reminds us that “only a specific context will reveal what a proverb really wants to say” (2008:13) and urges us to move beyond notions of traditional wisdom as “fixed.” “Folklore at its best,” he says, “addresses both tradition and innovation and shows how constancy and change are interlinked in the dynamic process of civilization” (1987:xii).

composition, the rhyme exhibits substantial variation, “ain’t worth a fly”<sup>23</sup> alternating with “isn’t worth a fly”<sup>24</sup> or, in a smaller number of instances, “let them fly.”<sup>25</sup> In her comparison of multiforms of Old English theft charms, Lea Olsan convincingly argues that a “less scripted” version may “imply a reader who does not need every word and action exactly scripted,” intended for a knowledgeable “reader-performer” who can readily fill in gaps (1999:407). In this same fashion, numerous websites will quote only the opening line or two of “Swarm in May,” metonymically invoking the rest.<sup>26</sup> While alternate versions of *Wið Ymbe* do not survive in extant manuscripts, our understanding of the text can nonetheless be enhanced by viewing it within a context of dynamic and ever-evolving verbal art.

Not only does the language of “Swarm in May” vary from user to user, but so too does its purpose, sometimes providing advice, other times challenging it. One Yahoo group member, for instance, quotes the rhyme only to contradict it with his personal experience of producing a “very strong colony” from a swarm as late as November. Another asks “but what about a swarm in August,”<sup>27</sup> and an advocate of April swarms explains that “there is an old saying around here: ‘A swarm in MAY is not worth a bale of hay.’”<sup>28</sup> In a June 2011 Facebook post, the Bee Folks business in Maryland creatively invokes the rhyme in hoping for a “swarm of customers.”<sup>29</sup> Writing for the UK *Daily Mail* online, Valentine Warner puts the rhyme to use in fighting against the environmental threat of bee collapse: “Considering the plight of bees today, let us hope we don’t have a year full of Julys.”<sup>30</sup> Such evidence from this modern-day swarm poem cautions against assuming that there would ever have been a single, monolithic understanding of *Wið Ymbe* in Anglo-Saxon times.

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<sup>23</sup> See “The Bee Journal,” <http://thebeejournal.blogspot.com/2010/05/swarm-in-may.html>. Because of the dynamic nature of online discussion forums, URLs here and throughout this essay, where appropriate, are provided for home pages and discussion groups generally rather than for individual threads and isolated responses, which tend to be rather ephemeral. In general, homepage URLs are more stable than lengthy URLs pointing to specific posts. This issue of stability in online conversations is actually an aspect of the Internet’s affinity with oral tradition, both forms of communication being, in John Foley’s words, “more process than product, more open pathway than closed canon” (Foley 2011-: “Call Numbers versus e-Addresses”).

<sup>24</sup> See <http://entomology.unl.edu/beekpg/beeswarm.shtml> (University of Nebraska) and <http://pets.groups.yahoo.com/group/northwestnewjerseybeekeepers/message/438>.

<sup>25</sup> See <http://forum.beemaster.com/index.php/topic,5355.0.html> and <http://www.sembabees.org/toplevelpages/swarm.html>.

<sup>26</sup> See <http://pets.groups.yahoo.com/group/northwestnewjerseybeekeepers> (search terms: “a swarm in May”).

<sup>27</sup> See <http://pets.groups.yahoo.com/group/northwestnewjerseybeekeepers> (search terms: “a swarm in August”).

<sup>28</sup> See <http://www.beesource.com/forums/archive/index.php/t-253035.html?s=bf0ac92b65ccd0fd9aff6af26ac3e03d>.

<sup>29</sup> See “The Bee Folks,” <http://www.facebook.com/beefolks>, posted June 5, 2011.

<sup>30</sup> See Valentine Warner’s “Save the Great British Bee! Why the Mysterious Disappearance of Billions of Bees Could Mean Us Losing a Third of the Food We Eat,” <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1356391/The-mysterious-disappearance-billions-bees-mean-losing-food-eat.html>.

To further complicate the matter, not all who use the saying claim to understand its full implications. One thread on a beekeeping forum using the rhyme elicits a question about the relative worth of a May or June swarm: “Is a silver spoon worth more than a load of hay? I always thought a May swarm was best.”<sup>31</sup> The intended recipients of the poem’s proverbial advice also vary. While it is often given to new beekeepers, it is also provided to homeowners wondering how to handle a swarm on their property. One site advises a resident to contact a local beekeeper to collect the swarm but also warns that the beekeeper’s response will likely vary depending on the time of year, since “[a] swarm in May. . . .”<sup>32</sup> Far from conveying static, monolithic wisdom, the rhyme, widely known in the beekeeping community, serves as a starting point for many different kinds of discussions on how to handle swarms. Resituating *Wið Ymbe* within the context of a living tradition—with similarly diverse processes of composition, transmission, and reception—frees it from implications of rigid assumptions about what “the Anglo-Saxon beekeeper would have understood” (Holton 1993:42).

Working from the premise that, like the *curandera* remedies recorded by Michael Moore, the advice recorded in the margins of CCC 41 represents a “frozen cross-section in a moving stream,” we can imagine an Anglo-Saxon world where the surviving text, much like “Swarm in May,” provided advice for only certain of many types of swarms and represented only a starting point for audiences to adapt to their own specific beekeeping needs.

### *nim eorþan . . . : Practical Ritual*

As our fieldwork on this “voiced text,” to use Foley’s term, continues, we now turn our attention to what the margins of CCC 41 suggest one should actually do in the event of an undesirable swarm. The potential efficacy of *Wið Ymbe*’s physical actions in settling a swarm has long been recognized: “throwing grit into a swarm as soon as it takes flight, does induce it to settle very quickly. It distracts the bees, and they will land in the nearest possible place. Even for a modern, scientific age, the cast of earth is of immediate practical value” (Spamer 1978:290). However, by taking into account additional aspects of swarming patterns and cycles of honey-production, we can develop a more thorough understanding of why—and, more precisely, when—it would be to the beekeeper’s advantage to avoid or control a swarm.

The bees’ instinct to swarm is a natural response to such factors as overcrowding or congestion. An old queen or an especially mild winter could also predispose a colony to swarm. As Crimmins explains, “swarming is a natural way of colonizing, redividing.” Swarming provides the mechanism for a colony to reproduce itself and is part of the natural cycle of a honeybee colony. In late spring and early summer, when bees increase their populations most rapidly, the tendency to swarm is greatest. This period also marks the time when drones (male) begin to populate the hive, to be killed off in late fall so that winter food stores are reserved for fully functioning (female) members of the hive. After weeks of preparation in the hive, a little

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<sup>31</sup> See [http://forum.downsizer.net/archive/swarm\\_o\\_t\\_t\\_22122.html](http://forum.downsizer.net/archive/swarm_o_t_t_22122.html).

<sup>32</sup> See [http://www.tidewaterbeekeepers.net/bee\\_removal.html](http://www.tidewaterbeekeepers.net/bee_removal.html).

over half of the colony flies out with the old queen, leaving the new queen and the remainder of the colony behind. Initially, they typically swarm briefly, settling in a tightly compacted ball only a few feet away. After bee “scouts” locate a more ideal location for the hive, the entire colony moves. The goal of the beekeeper is to encourage the bees to settle in the site of the beekeeper’s choice. The moments during and following the swarm are crucial since “as soon as they reach it [the location chosen by the scouts] they own it and they will defend it” (Underhill 2010a). Even though the sight of hundreds of swarming bees, which Underhill likens to the motion of a tornado, might be terrifying to surprised observers, the bees are actually at their least aggressive during and immediately following the swarm. In her brief but insightful discussion of parallels between Anglo-Saxon and modern beekeeping, Osborn recounts witnessing her father “move a swarm in his bare hands and settle it in another hive” (2006:281). If the swarm occurs early enough in the season, the beekeeper’s goal is to capture the swarm so as to have two productive colonies. If the swarm is too late in the year, or if the beekeeper does not have ample space to maintain the new colony, an entire year’s work can be lost.

With such high stakes, it seems likely that the poetic and cryptic remedy written in the margin does convey practical value, even at the same time that it serves other ritual, social, or psychological functions for the beekeeper or larger community. As Osborn astutely observes, “like many a practice that may be perceived as magic even by the practitioner, this traditional gesture has a practical value as well” (2006:280). While throwing dirt over the swarm serves a clear ritual function and “binds the bees with sympathetic magic to the beekeeper who has just thrown dirt over his head” (Osborn 2006:280), the action can also be very effective in inhibiting flight, thus encouraging the swarm of bees to settle nearby, in a location more easily accessible to the beekeeper, rather than departing entirely from the beekeeper’s domain.

The extent of the ritual’s practical value, however, is determined in large part by how one renders “groot,” which the *Dictionary of Old English* defines as “grit, gravel, sand, shingle (of the seashore); dirt, dust” (*DOE*, s.v. “groot”). Gordon translates as “gravel” (1926:88) as does Grendon (1909:169). Osborn translates as “dirt” (2006:279). Kevin Crossley-Holland (1999:271) and Marie Nelson (1984:58) both translate as “earth,” emphasizing the parallel between *groot* and *eorð* in the original, and, more recently, David Barber renders *groot* as “sand” (2011:489). While all are, from a safe academic distance, equally viable renderings of “groot,” from the perspective of a creature as small as a honeybee, the difference is one of utmost significance. For Crimmins, the logic of covering the swarm with light dust makes perfect sense:

I know when we catch them in a swarm, to keep them from flying away when we put them in the box—it’s not dirt—but we will spray them with sugar water, and it somewhat seals the wings, you know, makes it sticky. They’ll eat it off, or clean each other off, and get it as food. But when you catch a swarm on a tree branch, you’ll pop it into the hive and you’ll spray it with the sugar water first. Perhaps, the dust . . . does the same, in that they cannot fly. Because I’m assuming that what they’re talking about with the swarm is putting something—dust or dirt, earth—over it, dusting it, coating it and not throwing clods of dirt at it, you know, but fine dust particles and keeping them from being able to fly so that when you put them in the beehive—or bee skep back when, [or] in a hollow log—they will settle in, and then they would call it home. . . . So that might be the principle behind dust or earth, . . . anything just to keep them from moving.

Such evidence indicates that the value of “earth” as a combatant against a swarm extends well beyond the metaphorical realm and most likely was actually a valuable technique for Anglo-Saxon beekeepers in controlling undesirable swarms.

Parallels between the verbal and physical aspects of *Wið Ymbe* provide the remedy with additional practical value as a teaching aid and mnemonic device, the instructions to throw earth “under your right foot” paralleling the verse incantation’s half-line “I seize it underfoot” and the verbal command to “sink to earth” paralleling the desired result of the bees’ descent to the ground. Nelson has convincingly argued that *Wið Ymbe*, with its verbal reinforcement of a practical physical action, served to give “its performer confidence in his own capabilities” which in turn would doubtless have “helped him accomplish his specific objective” in quelling the swarm (1984:58). The lines of verse also surely served an educational role, enabling transmission of effective practices via poetry, much like the modern-day “Swarm in May.” This practical value does not in any way, however, diminish the remedy’s value as ritual for its performer. Shifting our perspective to that of the beekeeper, there are in fact numerous social and personal functions potentially served for the beekeeper and his or her larger community by the seemingly tangential verbal incantations.

### ***Sitte ge sigewif: On Speaking to the Bees***

It is largely *Wið Ymbe*’s verse incantation that has led to assumptions that Anglo-Saxon beekeeping relied more heavily on “magical enchantment” (Storms 1974:137) than science and that cryptic elements reflect ignorance on the part of Anglo-Saxons regarding bees and best beekeeping practices. Not only is the performer required to speak to the swarm of bees, but the bees are to be addressed in mythic, heroic terms, as *sigewif*, or “victory women.” Given that bees are ultimately responsible for the physical and societal structures that—at least in name—depend upon honey mead (for example, *medudream* [“mead-joy”], *medubenc* [“mead-bench”], *meduheall* [“mead-hall”], *meduburg* [“mead-city”], just to name a few), the casting of bees in heroic terms seems like a natural extension of the “mead-hall” culture so prominent in heroic poetry.<sup>33</sup>

Before addressing the incantation as a speech act more broadly, let us first take up the question of swarming bees as *sigewif*, or “victory women.” This appellation has been seen by many as a metaphorical depiction of flying, stinging insects as powerful (often magical) female warriors in Germanic myth and legend known as valkyries. However, even though this reading can and has been supported with ample evidence from surviving literature, we needn’t stop there in explaining the choice. Feminine plural forms of address for bees are actually quite frequent even in modern practice, which is not surprising, since the worker bees, after all, are incomplete females. On a public beekeeping forum, one beekeeper describes venting frustration by threatening the bees, using the feminine plural: “If you girls don’t calm down, I’ll requeen

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<sup>33</sup> This connection between heroic culture and honey produced by bees is reinforced by Patrick Murphy’s argument that honey is referenced as *dryhtgestreona* (lordly treasure) in Riddle 17 (Murphy 2011:167-68).

you!”<sup>34</sup> On this same forum, another beekeeper, convinced by the merits of speaking to bees, says he will “for sure . . . be talking to *the girls*” (emphasis added).

Where most editors and translators interpret *sigewif* as a plural noun, based on the usage of plural verbs and pronouns, Marie Nelson renders *sigewif* as singular (1984:58).<sup>35</sup> The logic is that the *sigewif*, the truly victorious woman, refers not to all of the swarming female worker bees, but rather the queen bee in particular (1990:27, n.11). But even if we accept the premise that the term would be reserved specifically for queens, nature provides a logical explanation for the plural usage. Competing queens are in fact a natural aspect of new queen selection, as Underhill explains (2010c):

Once the queen bee emerges, she begins searching for other queens in the hive. There may be other queens developing in the hive, and queen bees simply don't allow competing queens to live in their hive. The first queen to emerge starts piping. Piping involves making a series of chirping and quacking sounds to call out to any other developing queens. Queen bees, still held in their own queen cells, respond to the piping. The emerged queen kills each of these potential competitors with her sting.

Such battles between and among potential new queens can extend into swarm stage, offering even further correspondences with the implied narrative underlying the incantation of *Wið Ymbe*. A phenomenon of swarming that can simultaneously explain the plural feminine pronoun applied in the incantation, the warlike imagery, and the negativity toward the swarm implied by *wið* occurs at times in afterswarming, an event that not only severely threatens the parent hive but also results in the swarm traveling further before alighting. In a swarm, it is the old queen who departs, leaving “a few thousand worker bees, a dozen or more queen cells” (Seeley 2010:41). On occasions when the first virgin queen to emerge feels threatened by other virgin queens, she might “leave in a secondary swarm, what beekeepers call an ‘afterswarm’” (41). “This process is repeated with each emerging queen until the colony is weakened to the point where it cannot support further swarming. At this point if there are still multiple virgin queens in the nest, the workers will allow them to emerge freely” (42), and if

two or more virgin queens emerge together, they will fight to the death, seizing each other and attempting to sting. The battling queen bees grapple and twist, each one struggling fiercely to implant her venom-laden sting in her sister's abdomen (42).

This undesirable kind of swarm has long been observed, as M. Quinby explained as early as 1866 that “after-swarms sometimes have as many as six queens” (179). Even if the dueling

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<sup>34</sup> See <http://forum.beemaster.com/index.php?topic=28742.0;wap2>. Crimmins explains that “requeening,” or replacing a queen with one of known genetic background, can be a way of addressing the problem of an overly aggressive hive.

<sup>35</sup> The singular rendering represents a minority view in scholarship on this charm. *Wif* itself is an uninflected plural, but the plural imperative verbs and plural pronoun *ge* all suggest a plural sense. Those asserting a singular sense attribute the usage to scribal error or read it as a very early instance of the plural with a singular sense in cases of formal address (such as a “queen” bee).



queens aren't observed in action, the aftermath is readily visible, as one confused beekeeper asks on a forum what to do after finding "two dead queens at the same hive's entrance."<sup>36</sup>

As these various explanations suggest, allowing for a diversity of reception similar to that seen in modern beekeeping removes the obligation to ascertain "the exact extent to which the term *sigewif* is descriptive of the beekeeper's conceptualization of the bees or is merely metaphorical or cajoling" (Spamer 1978:290). Spamer's question invites us to consider more directly why the performer would be talking to the bees at all. The practice of talking to bees is actually quite common, even for beekeepers who do not necessarily believe that bees can hear. Evidence from modern swarm management suggests that literal and figurative, even "cajoling," uses of the feminine plural are not mutually exclusive categories. For Chuck Crimmins, speaking to his bees is vital to his relationship with them, in part because of his role teaching classes, where he speaks while working with the bees:

I believe someone had said or I have read, your breath, your . . . exhaling—bees can sense that, or smell that, or feel that . . . so they get to know you. . . . Every human has a scent and bees can tell that too. . . . They can tell you're the beekeeper after a while. . . . I'm talking so much during class that the bees know my voice and sense me.<sup>37</sup>

Sometimes even those who don't believe that bees can hear still speak to them. "You get very attached to your bees," one such beekeeper explains, "I even sing to them."<sup>38</sup>

Returning to Spamer's question of whether *Wið Ymbe*'s incantation reflects "the beekeeper's conceptualization of the bees or is merely metaphorical or cajoling," we do well to consider the enormous complexity of "belief" and to be ever-mindful of the distinction between "belief" and what folklorists have referred to as "belief behavior" (Sims and Stephens 2005:56). The following discussion of belief in practice serves as a powerful reminder that not all performers of *Wið Ymbe* would necessarily have held the same levels of belief, even if the ritual were to have been practiced in exactly the same way (which is itself unlikely)(57):

Performers or creators of texts may express complete belief ("this is true; this really happened"), some doubt or skepticism ("well, I don't know for sure, but they say this really happened; now take this with a grain of salt") or outright dismissal ("this is just an old story; everyone knows this is all made up"). They may experience these feelings even if they don't state them explicitly. Listeners or audience members—even scholars such as anthropologists and folklorists—may also hold varying degrees of belief in the expressions they observe and take part in.

Such belief behavior as distinct from unquestioned belief is readily apparent in modern beekeepers' tendency to speak to bees. Talking to bees is an issue addressed on numerous

<sup>36</sup> See <http://forum.beemaster.com/index.php?topic=21044.0>.

<sup>37</sup> Crimmins' explanation of the effects in terms of smell or feel rather than sound is due to the likelihood that bees do not possess the sense of hearing, though this question continues to be debated. For more extended discussion on this topic, see Dreller and Kirchner 1995.

<sup>38</sup> See [http://www.urbanbees.co.uk/blog\\_1/?p=438](http://www.urbanbees.co.uk/blog_1/?p=438).

beekeeping forums, the question always eliciting lively discussion and varying levels of belief in the power of such speech. Reflecting the conflicted awareness of many who speak to bees, one woman apologetically writes on such a forum, “I admit it, I talk to the bees” but quickly qualifies, “I really don’t think they listen. . . . Really. . . !”<sup>39</sup> This aspect of belief behavior is important not only for the previous analysis of speech acts in this charm but also for any speculation regarding the charm’s intended or desired outcome, whether related to the beekeeper’s social community or concerned with the swarm itself.

### **. . . *gemindige mines godes: Social Functions of *Wið Ymbe****

Devoting a full chapter to the subject of ownership in her world history of beekeeping, Eva Crane observes that the need to establish a recognized claim is imperative among all beekeepers and that this was especially the case prior to moveable hive frames, since bees could swarm onto a neighbor’s property quite easily: “an important factor conducive to the ownership of bees’ nests or nest sites in a certain region was probably the substantial growth of a settled human population, which led to a need for more honey” (1999:107).<sup>40</sup>

Based on the words of the incantation and on his knowledge of bee lore, Richard Underhill immediately saw the dominant issue of the charm as having less to do with the swarm itself than with claims of ownership as witnessed by the larger community. Beginning with the words “funde ic hit” (“I found it”) but even more explicitly in the performer’s final solicitation that the bees be mindful of “metes and epeles” (“food and home”) (2010a), Underhill sees reflected a universal concern of beekeepers: “Every beekeeper that has gathered swarms knows the disappointment of having a swarm take flight and fly to the woods. The last sentence of the charm speaks of the value of the honeybee as food and property.” Further corroborating this understanding of bees as property, Lea Olsan has demonstrated patterns linking *Wið Ymbe* with other charms and prayers inscribed in the margins of the same manuscript, many of which “are meant for tending to people and property.” Such texts would thus have been of great value to readers concerned with pastoral care. *Wið Ymbe*’s particular placement within the manuscript reveals an even more direct connection to issues related to ownership in the taming of wild creatures (Olsan, forthcoming):

The bee charm, which provides a way of taming wild bees, is placed in the margin at the story of how St. Cedd tamed the wilderness where he decided to build his monastery. In particular, the word ‘beasts’ (*wildeor*) in the Old English translation on this page anticipates the animal subject matter of the bee charm. Moreover, the bee formula was a means of taming the wild to men’s civilized purposes as did Cedd’s prayers. In a sense, it parallels Cedd’s actions with a contemporary practical instance.

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<sup>39</sup> See <http://forum.beemaster.com/index.php?topic=28742.0>.

<sup>40</sup> Crane’s discussion of ownership in medieval England focuses primarily on post-Conquest laws and practices but still has significant implications for earlier periods of beekeeping in England (1999:112-13).

Just as Cedd was claiming space and taming the animals under his control, the performer of *Wið Ymbe* appeals to the bees by evoking his own *epel*, or homeland.

Modern-day parallels can help us better understand precisely what such connections might have meant in practical terms for the charm's earliest audiences. Underhill compares the rituals in *Wið Ymbe* to a traditional belief still held and practiced in parts of both England and the United States that banging pots and pans in a practice known as "tanging" would help calm a swarm. Underhill believes that such practices are "coincidental to what actually occurs with the bees." What we call a "swarm" is "the culmination of a whole series of events that have occurred in the hive and take about a month of preparation, but the actual swarm is short," usually about five minutes, or, the length of time to gather and bang the pots and pans. Underhill believes that "the communication was not actually banging the pots and pans to tell the bees to settle the swarm down but the banging of the pots and pans was to declare to your neighbor that you were claiming that swarm—because a swarm is valuable" (2010a). In an online discussion forum, Grant Jackson of Missouri further explains the practice as a way to alleviate concerns of trespassing:

"Tanging," or banging those pots, was the way you could legally hop a fence and chase the swarm, basically communicating to everyone within earshot that this was your swarm . . . and further, you were trespassing in a non-offensive way in hopes of retrieving your swarm.<sup>41</sup>

The theory that audible rituals involved in such practices as tanging or the incantation in *Wið Ymbe* are more effective as announcements of ownership than swarm control is especially logical when one considers the inevitability of swarming at this stage of a colony's cycle. As Crimmins explains, after the preparation is underway, the swarm is unavoidable: "you can't stop it. . . . That queen's gonna swarm." However, as early as 1866 even Quinby, who staunchly defended his book against oral tradition as an "investigation of apiarian science" (147), recognized that bees preparing to swarm wait for good weather, and unexpected inclement weather occasionally causes a swarm to retreat back into the parent hive (173). A thread on the question of "tanging" applies this awareness of behavior to explain the apparent success of tanging beyond mere coincidence, suggesting that "the sound vibrations may mimic thunder."<sup>42</sup>

Jackson's discussion of tanging, however, elucidates the complex relationship between belief and ritual, demonstrating that the former need not precede the latter. Jackson believes, as Underhill does, that the bees will settle regardless after a few minutes and that the relationship is not one of cause and effect. Still, he "openly admit[s] that I bang pots," once again demonstrating the subtle but crucial distinction between *belief* and *belief behavior*: "Lots of swarm chasers try it and the swarms settle." A "query and reply" column of the *British Bee Journal* (*Queries* 1890) reflects that, at least for some, the practice of "tanging" was seen as potentially binding legally even in the relatively recent past. The writer asks "your much esteemed Journal" to determine whether a neighbor into whose yard a swarm landed "has a claim on the swarm as he 'tanged'

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<sup>41</sup> See <http://www.beesource.com/forums/archive/index.php/t-187229.html>.

<sup>42</sup> If this kind of disturbance does in fact encourage retreat, it seems equally plausible that bees might be similarly swayed by the combination of sand being thrown on them and the vibrations of a loud voice.

them” (1890:392). For Underhill, the incantation would have had much the same binding effect, provided the incantation were recited loudly enough. If a runaway swarm of bees appeared to settle in response to the performer’s words, the apparent success could indicate ownership. Further, if we leave open the possibility that certain aspects of human nature are shared by medieval and modern beekeepers, an Anglo-Saxon beekeeper reciting the *Wið Ymbe* incantation might have done so without necessarily believing its efficacy at a literal level, just as Grant Jackson continues to “tang” bees even at the same time that he provides reasons for why it doesn’t actually “work.”

Concerns of ownership were arguably even more an issue in medieval times than modern. “Bee-theft” (“beoþeof”) was considered a serious enough crime in the laws of Alfred (Attenborough 1922:68-69) to be included alongside theft of gold and horses (“goldþeof” and the “stodþeof” [*ibid.*, section 9, 2]). Bees were precious as a source of honey, used for mead and sweetening, and also wax, a by-product of honey-production that could be used for candles and sealant. For these and other reasons, Spamer logically asserts “that a beekeeper would have been very concerned about someone stealing his bees” (1978:282) and that “the best opportunity for stealing bees is precisely when they swarm” (283), since they are at their calmest during this period, their stomachs full of honey and their full efforts focused on protecting their queen and locating a new home. One of a beekeeper’s first concerns would thus “naturally be to insure that it would not be stolen” (283). Spamer’s suggestion that the incantation serves as a “counter-charm” against “any possible spell drawing the swarm away” (283) does not preclude the incantation’s effect on anyone within earshot of the recitation or the effect of the performer’s voice on the bees’ themselves. As with the other aspects of the remedy, a modern beekeepers’ perspective here serves to complement prior interpretations and provide additional levels at which *Wið Ymbe* seems to have been operating.

## Conclusion

While certainly many aspects of beekeeping have changed between medieval and modern times, the potential desirability of a swarm has been maintained. Discussions with beekeepers and examination of modern manuals all suggest that the questions of whether a swarm is good or bad, or whether the Anglo-Saxons knew a swarm was good or bad, are unnecessarily reductive. Discussions with beekeepers indicate that the issues are much more complex and that whether or not a swarm is desirable depends on numerous factors, such as what space the beekeeper has to accommodate a new swarm, the level of aggressiveness in the new swarming colony, and, perhaps most importantly, at what time of year the swarm occurs.

As Underhill explains in a blog post after being introduced to the charm during his interview with Kayla Miller, “the language of English-speaking people has changed considerably . . . ; however, I recognize some issues with dealing with honey bees . . . persist over hundreds of years” (2010b). As has been amply demonstrated in prior scholarship, the Old English *Wið Ymbe* includes elements that had already persisted in Germanic traditions for hundreds of years, even at the time it was inscribed in the margins of CCCC 41. It was only “one

of many ‘swarm charms’ that exist throughout Europe” (Osborn 2006:278), and the remedy “including the full earth-casting sequence, is one of great antiquity” (Hamp 1981:340).

Indeed, what Halpern and Foley’s own collaborative work with Desanka, a Serbian healer (or *bajalica*) demonstrated with regard to Serbian charms is equally applicable to modern and Anglo-Saxon beekeeping rituals (1978:924):

Each performance, each act of recollection, results in a new composition. The fundamental truth of the charm, and the source of its phenomenological power, lies in the ritual act of making the collective wisdom of the past the living inheritance of the present.

In short, not only can the swarm charm be read as a polysemous text; its layers of verbal and physical rituals demand that it be read so. We come much closer to understanding the text as it might have been experienced by its earliest audiences when we view the charm not as a stable text, but rather like the swarm of bees itself—untamed, ever-changing, and richly rewarding in its inherent diversity.

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