

‘Eko; Eko; Azarak’: Witchcraft, medieval gibberish and queer untranslatability in *High Magic’s Aid*

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sex**Liam Lewis** 

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Abstract

The literature of neopaganism often evokes an indigenous medieval past to resist social and religious convention and assert a queer identity in the present. Using theories of untranslatability, this article shows how a medieval incantation mobilizes queer language and forms communities in the novel *High Magic’s Aid* by Gerald B. Gardner. This novel outlines the keys to the religion Gardner sought to promote in the 1940s: pagan witchcraft. It features an initiation incantation spoken by a High Priestess, beginning: ‘Eko; Eko; Azarak’, which is a cobbling together of a ‘sorcerer’s cry’ and a gibberish passage from a medieval French play. This chant, which is linguistically meaningless, nevertheless acts as a microcosm of modern witchcraft ideology, and enables practitioners of the Craft to establish a cultural contact with a transtemporal medieval past (identified by indigenous mythologising and the ability to summon demonic spirits), thus unsettling linguistic and temporal hegemony through untranslatability. In this way, *High Magic’s Aid* depicts a modern witchcraft continuously rediscovering itself as a queer religion resistant to cultural translation, even as its untranslatable aspects are adapted into mainstream contexts in ways that counter this agenda.

Keywords

Medieval, neopaganism, queer, untranslatability, witchcraft

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Would you know what they believed and attempted to achieve? Then come with me into the past.

High Magic's Aid, 'Introduction'

In 1949 Gerald B. Gardner published a novel under a penname, 'Scire', entitled *High Magic's Aid*. Gardner (1884–1964) was an English occultist and retired tea plantation manager who was to become a founding figure of modern Wicca, a religious movement and stream of Western esotericism.¹ The novel is a fictional hero's quest set in thirteenth-century England in which the protagonists seek out the infamous 'Witch of Wanda' to request her magical aid in overthrowing an Anglo-Norman Lord. It also outlines the keys to the religion Gardner sought to promote at that time—pagan witchcraft—by making the key protagonists perform Wicca's esoteric rituals and act according to its transcendental ideology. Gardner spent much of his later life promoting the series of rituals and beliefs he claimed had been transferred to him by the New Forest Coven in southern England. His claim was that this group had inherited their secret, initiatory fertility rituals and dances from an otherwise lost pagan religion, which venerated not only a God but also a Goddess; its initiates practiced naked ritual in a fashion called 'skyclad'; they believed in reincarnation; and they trained themselves to develop latent psychic powers with ritual tools and the celebration of seasonal festivals (Hutton, 1999: 205–16).

Since the release of Gardner's novel, and after the repeal in Britain of the 'Witchcraft and Vagrancy Acts' in 1951, witchcraft has evolved from witch-cult theories to become an international phenomenon as a blend of ritual magic, freemasonry, and nature worship (White, 2016: 13–23). In Victorian Britain witches had been 'fictional chimera' adapted to suit the purpose of writers and artists, but rarely in connection to the Christian Devil unless referring to historical beliefs (Phillips, 2022: 96 and 182). In the early twentieth century the theory of traditional Italian pagan witchcraft celebrating the goddess Aradia and penned by Charles Godfrey Leland in 1899 (Leland, 1996) circulated with the concept of a horned god proposed by Margaret Murray in her 1921 (Murray, 1921) *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*. Since that time, strands of pagan witchcraft have developed particular traits and names, such as 'the Craft' or 'Wicca', under the umbrella term of 'neopaganism'. The latter is a broad category including Wicca but also Druidry, Heathenry, Occultism, and the Goddess Movement, to take a few examples. Many of these traditions feature a noticeable shift away from traditional male-centred and patriarchal symbolism, which is encapsulated in *High Magic's Aid* through the sinister backdrop of a medieval Catholic Church intent on restricting 'mind-freedom' (76). In contrast, pagan witchcraft sought positive female archetypes, notably the Maiden, Mother, and Crone aspects of the triple Goddess (Tumminia and Kirkpatrick, 2004: 368–70). These female archetypes came hand-in-hand with a liberal and transformative relationship with sexuality, the male aspect of which is exemplified in the figure of the antlered or horned God (White, 2016: 23, 91). The archetypes offered a form of sexually charged transgression based on the male/female binary, yet in sharp opposition to cultural and religious norms of the mid-twentieth century.

High Magic's Aid depicts rituals and chants alongside naked fertility dances and sabbats that underscore the beliefs and practices of modern pagan witchcraft, outlined by [Hutton \(1999: 391\)](#) as follows: (1) pagan witchcraft draws out the divine within human beings, (2) it abolishes the traditional Western distinction between religion and magic, (3) it lays out a set of mystery religions, (4) its essence lies in the creative performance of ritual, and (5) it is eclectic and protean. In the true spirit of these aspects of pagan witchcraft, *High Magic's Aid* features an initiation incantation spoken by a High Priestess of the old religion, beginning: 'Eko; Eko; Azarak', and continuing as follows:

Eko; Eko; Zomelak.
 Bagabi Lacha bachabe
 Lamac cahi achababe
 Karrellyos

Lamac lamac Bachalyas
 Cabahagy sabalyos
 Baryolos

Lagoz atha cabyolas
 Samahac atha famolas
 Hurrahya.

High Magic's Aid, Chapter XVII

The novel exploits these strange words as the opening chant for the first-degree initiation ceremony of witchcraft. This ceremony is one of three initiations that form the grades of modern Wicca, with the third degree generally conferring the status of either 'High Priestess' or 'High Priest' on the practitioner. These words are a powerful linguistic signal to readers familiar with neopagan ritual, especially the Wiccan 'liturgy', both as methods for spiritual transcendence and for summoning demonic spirits.² On closer inspection, however, the incantation is a cobbling together of a 'sorcerer's cry' and a gibberish passage from a medieval French play, two sources I explore below. Being the first sounds that a new initiate hears when entering the circle for initiation, the chant thus acts as a microcosm of witchcraft ideology, forging a connection between the present and a mystified medieval past.

By establishing a cultural contact with a transtemporal medieval past in which ancient gibberish words are carried forward into a new initiate's journey, *High Magic's Aid* mystifies the soundscapes of neopagan ritual, linking past and present through shared language, in turn unsettling linguistic and temporal hegemony by the chant's very untranslatability. This is a complex process familiar to practitioners of glossolalia (speaking in tongues), which holds the 'promise of divine denotation', for example in Christian worship, while it simultaneously 'undermines any conceit of linguistic purity' ([Harkness, 2021: 167](#)). Whereas glossolalia signals a direct relationship with divinely inspired sound, *High Magic's Aid* presents untranslatable chant as formative to the protagonists of the

novel, who receive the sounds of words from a mysterious medieval language in unpredictable ways that expose the queerness of their rituals. Using theories of untranslatability, I show how this incantation mobilizes the sounds of gibberish to evoke a British indigenous and transtemporal past and continually resist meaning-making in the present. Glossolalia and untranslatability presage ideas of the divine and of queer experiences of transcendence that defy the hierarchical principles underlining conventional networks of spiritual power, typically defined by patterns of patriarchal power and top-down instruction from a divinely inspired priest. This notion was already being challenged in the early twentieth century by writers such as Dion Fortune, another writer whose novels were packed with symbolism such as the mythology of Atlantis and the ‘Mystical Qabalah’ to stir up readers’ latent esoteric interests. Her novel, *The Sea Priestess*, describes ritual as an ungraspable and indescribable experience: ‘The vibrations of all the ancient rituals by which men have ever invoked the gods had awakened in that strange voice of [the priestess], and I knew that with the touch of her hands she had indeed brought something down from heaven that passed from her to me and so to earth’ (2003: 140). The protagonist who experiences this is described by the priestess as exuding ‘a very queer kind of magnetism’ (69). In this context, the word ‘queer’ refers to his eccentricity, which is what enables him to participate in ritual with the priestess without them becoming lovers.

In using queer experience as a theoretical frame for reading untranslatable chant in *High Magic’s Aid*, I am not suggesting that Gerald Gardner and his contemporaries would have understood themselves to be participating in twenty-first century gender politics. Neither is this a historical or psychological analysis of Gardner’s sexual politics. Rather, I take my cue from Catherine Keller, who argues for ‘a political theology of entangled difference’ to ‘host the widest and wildest sorts of love’ through polytemporality: ‘among those who befriend “eros”, she writes, “there blows and breathes an integral energy—an incarnation—of wildly entangled difference’ (2017: 207-208). Queerness is a frame for understanding an experience of connection with something different or otherwise indescribable. In what follows, I demonstrate how the untranslatability of medieval gibberish in *High Magic’s Aid* enables witchcraft to continually rediscover itself as queer in this sense, as a spirituality resistant to cultural translation through its entanglements with shifting sexual dynamics and with a medieval past that is always out of reach. My methodology here follows that of Carolyn Dinshaw, who explores how the medieval plays a part in modern world-making through appropriation and ‘ancientness’, the latter of which opens a space for ‘resistance to dominant regimes’ (2017: 304). The literature of neopaganism thus draws attention to witchcraft as a vanguard of counter-cultural religious experience for initiatory seekers, but also for queer experiences of transcendence that are radically different from the norm.

The theoretical implications of this study are not divorced from the real experiences of neopagan practitioners today—far from it. In light of recent historical analyses of witchcraft’s origins, which have demystified the claims *High Magic’s Aid* makes regarding the nine million burnt alive for the faith of our forefathers and the authenticity of initiatory magical lineage (7–8, Hutton, 2017: 180–184), untranslatability offers a path for practitioners to a future that is nevertheless in constant dialogue with the past. In the twentieth century, North America saw the formation of distinct neopagan groups formed

on the basis of countercultural movements, often with a distinctly gendered bias, such as the Radical Faerie movement for gay men which generated a worldwide interest including for British subscribers (Hunt, 2013: 294–5; Pike, 2004), the Montreal Pagan community (Lepage, 2013, 2017) or the Wild Ginger Witchcamp in Canada (Jones, 2010). In the twenty-first century, Wicca is a religious movement that attracts many practitioners from groups that would recognize themselves as ‘queer’ in various ways. Christine Kraemer provides an overview of shifting attitudes towards gender, sexuality, and queer forms of expression in neopagan movements, suggesting that ‘paganism and Goddess spirituality have been significant dialogue partners for feminist movements within mainstream Christianity and Judaism (2012: 390). Neopaganism attracts a high number of practitioners who find within its rituals the means to express queer and non-conforming spiritual practices and desires, including environmentalism and ‘Nature Worship’ (White, 2016: 52–64). I think through some of the consequences of these overlapping meanings of ‘queer’ throughout this article and demonstrate why *High Magic’s Aid* is an important case study for tracing where such movements came from and the histories on which neopagan literature can draw.

Queer desires and ritual naming words

The plot of *High Magic’s Aid* is a bland one following the travels of three men—Jan Bonder, the lusty young man deprived of his inheritance by Norman invaders; Olaf Bonder, the romantic youth and Jan’s younger brother; and Thur, the old leech who trained in high magic ritual at the University of Cordoba in Spain. This trio set out to search for the ‘Witch of Wanda’, who we later find out is called Morven. They hope that she will help them consecrate their magical tools to make them effective in their struggle to recapture the Bonder lands now ruled by the Norman Fitz-Urse. Alongside the somewhat predictable plotline, the sexual and gendered politics of the narrative are conventional to those generally upheld during time of the novel’s creation. The male hero is the dominant character to whom the female witch defers, and Morven repeatedly takes her clothes off to work as a High Priestess for ritual and witches’ sabbats. Yet, despite the novel’s stereotypical characterization and titillation, it is Morven who initiates younger men into her religion, which is a form of ‘low’ folk magic posited as equally powerful as the ‘high’ ritual of the dominant male hero. The formulaic and clichéd aspects of the novel also conceal its purpose, which was in part to act as a disguised handbook for seekers of the old ways, despite being published before the repeal of the Witchcraft and Vagrancies Act. The novel participates in a tradition of fantasy writing in British contexts that uses the occult to symbolize ‘non-conformity’ to social and religious norms and yet, in doing so, normalizes and makes fashionable that very non-conforming behaviour (Macdonald, 2012).

In order to tackle the question of how untranslatability in this text reinforces witchcraft’s queer transcendental reference points, it is important to move beyond the superficial readings of desire that the text presents. Take sexuality as an example: while on the surface the nudity and sexualization of ritual in the text offer titillation for readers who may have been interested in heterosexual fertility rites, in fact pagan witchcraft is just as

much about the raising and control of willpower. As Hutton notes, ‘pagan witches hold that sexual acts are sacred, and this leads to a ‘spectrum of behaviour’, but in reality this is ‘no different from that found in society as a whole’ (1999: 406; Simes, 1995: 389–91, 424). When read closely, as I show below, the formation of non-normative community unsettles categories of male or female dominance, or indeed the binary patterns of desire associated with religion in Western Europe and North America. I argue that it is the capacity of language and sound to slip through the cracks of fixed interpretation that enables this process.

Two interlinked themes of *High Magic's Aid* reveal how the text performs such queer work. Firstly, the ways that untranslatable language establishes connections with a bygone era renders the soundscapes of neopagan ritual mysterious and loosely connected to the language of our ‘forefathers’ (7). Secondly, the sounds of unknown languages forge links between an indistinct community of like-minded people with a set of shared, if undefined interests, despite cultural or linguistic differences. I will treat the themes of time and community as inseparably connected to better understand the novel’s adaptation of the past and to show how the chant, ‘Eko; Eko; Azarak’, queers the process by which practitioners of the Craft achieve transcendental states.

At the very beginning of *High Magic's Aid* the novel contextualizes Gardner’s initiatory tradition by evoking a quasi-medieval past in which the ‘forefathers had faith’ when being persecuted by the Church. The text states: ‘At least about nine millions [sic] of them suffered a cruel death, mainly by being burnt alive, because of this belief [in witchcraft]’ (7). This claim is not substantiated by historical record (Hutton, 1999: 362–3), but the novel expresses a nostalgia for the same past tradition later when a key protagonist, Morven (the so called ‘Witch of Wanda’), stokes support among those who continue to practice witchcraft in secret. Morven calls to these mysterious practitioners, igniting their imaginations for a utopian future in which witchcraft can again be freely practiced by all: ‘Once more would we have freedom to worship as we will. Once more could we make the earth fruitful and plenty would fill the land. Once more would pleasure be ours, dancing and feasting, security and the joy of the old days would come again’ (186). Phrased in quasi-biblical language this intense nostalgia for a time when everyone worshipped the old gods and celebrated the seasonal rites reinforces the ancient roots of modern pagan witchcraft in *High Magic's Aid*, shoring it up with an air of historical and mythological authenticity. It also expresses a deep interest in the lineage of initiatory religion, and the description of ‘fruitful’ possibilities for future practitioners links the continuation of the Craft to reproduction in nature, emphasizing the heterosexual union necessary for such reproduction.

In the context of heterosexual union and reproduction, *High Magic's Aid* uses language in such a way as to amplify the disrupted (and disruptive) lineage of the novel’s proposed initiatory tradition. Gibberish words bring to the fore a type of transcendental untranslatability often found in fictional depictions of esoteric spirituality drawing on a now-lost medieval past, as in Fortune’s novel above. In *High Magic's Aid*, it is Thur, the old leech, who first reveals witchcraft’s use of ancient languages when he describes a visit to Spain that he made in his youth. There he attended a witches’ sabbat, a festival of feasting and dancing with roots in fertility rites. Thur reminisces that, as a non-initiate, he was both

visually and aurally distanced from the rites, but nevertheless was left with a lasting impression that he recounts to Jan and Olaf:

“Then followed some rites which we could not see, since they love not strangers who are not initiated, and kept us at a distance. [...] Much wine was passed around and there was great talk and a singing of songs in a strange tongue of whose origin we knew not... the ancient tongue of the witches.” (34)

Could this ‘ancient tongue of the witches’ be the same that Gardner puts into Morven’s mouth when she initiates the young men as High Priestess later in the novel? And why does the novel reinforce a state of unknowing when its purpose was to ignite an interest in Wicca, as expressed in the epigraph to this article? A clue as to the links between language and witchcraft occurs when Thur, Jan, and Olaf meet Morven for the first time. Morven is cautiously afraid to reveal her identity as a witch to these three strangers. Only once Thur has spoken words of power that communicate to her his status as a fellow initiate does she respond:

Thur pursued: “*Ab Hur, Ab Hus.*”

“Oh, what do you speak?” she gasped, drawing back a step and looking huntedly over her shoulder. “I have no knowledge of foreign tongues.”

“Yet I think you *have* knowledge. *Emen Hetem.*” (original emphasis, 45).

Morven finds it all but impossible to refuse Thur once he has spoken these words, suggesting not only an obligation on the part of initiates to recognize and aid each other in their time of need, but also highlighting the queer power of words themselves, which function beyond the boundaries of standard linguistic denotation. At this point in the novel the reader is not privy to the meaning of these words, and they are never fully explained. Queer words such as these—those which defy attempts to conform to standard patterns of meaning-making—therefore have the effect of locking in interpersonal relationships and binding characters together as shared initiates of the Craft, even if their linguistic meaning remains allusive. They are a deliberate, eccentric defiance of language as a route to religious meaning.

As the examples above suggest, words express emotive but also metaphysical powers in *High Magic's Aid*. Strange or unknown words highlight language’s potency and its ability to form communities by taking characters backwards in time to the roots of a tradition. Another central concept for understanding the metaphysical qualities of words in the novel is that names of power control demonic spirits, a familiar concept to occultists and practitioners of the Western Mystery Tradition. This concept clearly has an influence on the presentation of language in the novel, which begins in Chapter I with names for God, some of which are recognizably from Hebrew: ‘Orphial, Anial, Oramageon, Adonai, etc.’ (9). Thur explains naming as a principle of high magic, stating that ‘if the student knows the word of power that controls each spirit, *he may call him up*’ (original emphasis, 73).³ Later in the novel Thur remarks that one might control a spirit with a sacred word in

more complex ways. Musing on the effects of untranslatable words used during rituals, he ponders whether forms of communal desire arise when using words of power from unknown languages:

“All we know for certain is that they are words of power. I have pondered upon their meaning for years, and sometimes I am tempted to believe they have no meaning, but, because they are resounding, like beaten gongs, they serve the purpose of binding us all together, so that all who hear are caught as in a great net, all feeling alike, all thinking alike, all desiring alike.” (130).

This explanation of the words used for ritual magic suggests that, alongside binding practitioners of witchcraft together and being used for controlling spirits, words themselves are crucial for magical practice, in the sense that they align the thoughts of ritualists and unite their desires. This theory is put to test later in the novel. Having summoned the demon Bartzabal for the purposes of seeking his guidance for how to recapture Jan’s family lands, Jan becomes distracted by a bodily form of desire during the ritual. Instead of focusing his attention on imagining his quest, his thoughts turn to his own need for ‘human contact’—a euphemism for his emerging sexual desire for Morven. When questioned by Bartzabal on what Jan desires, he asks to do the will of God and claim back his inheritance, but he adds an additional desire: ‘I want Morven’ (234). The implication of this is that sexual desire proves dangerous when not controlled during ritual.

Hidden underneath the veneer of a quest for heterosexual union there are multiple queer forms of desire at work at this point in the novel. The protagonists in the magical circle are working counter to the established theological system of medieval England—Catholic Christianity. Jan’s inner monologue expresses this directly as he considers how the Church ‘denounced what Thur was doing’ (231), that is, summoning demonic spirits. Witchcraft thus takes on a queer, antinormative facet through its expression as a counterculture. What makes this counterculture queer is not only the elusivity of language but the ways that the novel links the ritual to the slippage of Jan’s desire from his inheritance to his sexual desire for Morven. The magical act reveals Jan’s intrusive sexual desire and positions him as a disbeliever as he finds himself surrounded by demonic names and ancient words that he does not understand and participating in a tradition in which it is only a woman who can initiate him into the religion, a reversal of his patriarchal instinct. The experience of not believing in magic and not understanding the words or power that characters like Thur and Morven use around him makes Jan, somewhat surprisingly, the queerest character of the group, not dissimilar to Wilfred in Fortune’s *The Sea Priestess*. *High Magic’s Aid* posits this state of queer unknowing as an integral facet of pagan witchcraft, generating space for practitioners like Jan to express their most intimate desires. The only problem for Jan is that his sexual desire clouds his judgment for his broader quest to recapture his inheritance.

Despite Thur’s insistence on some ritual words in the text potentially having no linguistic meaning, it is nevertheless the case that many of the words used by Thur and Morven bear resemblances to other languages, perhaps in a purposeful attempt to connect them to the past in variable ways. The witches inscribe Kabalistic characters onto the

ritual floor (129), and just before Thur confesses his ignorance of the meaning of many of the words he intones, he notes that their origin is shrouded in mystery: ‘Some are Egyptian, others go farther back in antiquity to Chaldea and Phoenicia, others again are Hebrew’ (129). These hints at suggested origins firmly root the practice of magic in a past tradition stretching down the ages, but the words are generally untranslatable in the present. In this way the text links nostalgia for the medieval past to the types of community formation and queer desire that occur inside the magic circle, highlighting the queerness of this type of ritual work in comparison to the standard liturgy of the medieval Catholic Church and everyday processes of linguistic denotation. Gibberish thus becomes essential to showing readers that witchcraft’s transcendental reference points are not a strictly defined liturgy. Instead, a process of continually reassessing the purpose and power of magical practice as one point in a long line of initiatory tradition reveals neopagan transcendence.

Medieval gibberish: adaptation and untranslatability

The 1999 edition of *High Magic’s Aid* opens with an introduction written by Patricia Crowther, one of Gardner’s initiates and a self-confessed Wiccan High Priestess. According to Crowther, Gardner had insisted that the words spoken by Morven in the novel were authentic, that is, passed down through his initiatory tradition (in comparison to Thur, whose ritual words Gardner took from the *Key of Solomon*). She suggests that Gardner instructed her to pay particular attention to Morven’s language (which includes the ‘Eko; Eko; Azarak’ chant she intoned during an initiation ritual): ‘Darling, take notice of Morven’s words, they will teach you much’. It seems that she did so. In her preface to *High Magic’s Aid*, Crowther reflects on the nature of words in the novel as having come down through time: ‘Gerald has confounded Time and substantiated his own words and actions from across the gulf of the years. [...] Followers of esoteric paths often encounter the unexpected in their pursuit of Truth’ (8). At least one reader of *High Magic’s Aid*, therefore, deliberately read the ritual words in the novel to learn the theory of pagan witchcraft, even if the exact meaning of the words Morven uses are not always linguistically evident. Gardner instructed Crowther to ‘take notice’, but he did not tell her to *understand*. Crowther’s preface is an important statement on how to read the novel, by demonstrating that witchcraft’s transcendental reference points are not immediately accessible through linguistic and cultural knowledge. Instead, accepting the unknown is essential to witchcraft’s communal form of spiritual transcendence, which in the novel becomes available to all initiated practitioners (called priests or priestesses) regardless of sex or gender.

In *High Magic’s Aid* the ‘Eko; Eko; Azarak’ chant is intoned to pivot away from questions of linguistic loss or gain, and instead to the formation of community. Whereas the act of translation is often framed in terms of loss or gain in theories of translation that analyze the production of linguistic meaning (Bassnett, 2014: 39–40), the novel in question here demonstrates why untranslatability is such a powerful concept for religious experience. The magical practitioners do not lose anything but stand only to gain by the untranslatability of this chant, which evokes a sense of connection to the past and the

divine, and creates a stronger sense of community that averts traditional patriarchal hegemony through a collective form of unknowing. In neopagan literature, taking on the qualities of the old gods requires a continual transtemporal state in which protagonists must interpret their own experiences, rather than being told what to think or feel. *High Magic's Aid* demonstrates to practitioners of witchcraft how to dwell in the queer state of unknowing. The 'Eko; Eko; Azarak' chant epitomizes this principle, but there is more to the chant than meets the eye. The second part of the chant exposes the complexity of the novel's connection to the medieval past.

Morven initiates Jan and Olaf into the 'Witch-Cult' in Chapter XVII. She uses the refrain, 'Eko; Eko; Azarak. Eko; Eko; Zomelak', at the beginning of the ceremony, but as I have demonstrated above, none of the protagonists know the meaning of the words and the novel does not provide a translation. It is likely that Gardner took these words from an article published in 1926 by Aleister Crowley's friend, J. F. C. Fuller, in which Fuller describes the chant as 'a sorcerer's cry in the Middle Ages' (1926: 303). Fuller does not give a source for this 'cry' and none has been discovered since. We have more information on the following section of Morven's chant, beginning 'Bagabi Lacha bachabe', and ending 'Hurrahya', which is almost certainly lifted from Grillot de Givry's *Witchcraft, Magic and Alchemy* (1931). De Givry notes that the words derive from a thirteenth-century medieval French play called *Le Miracle de Théophile* by the clerical author Rutebeuf (109) (Rutebeuf, 1987). This vernacular drama was commissioned by the bishop of Paris and is believed to have been performed in 1263 as part of festivities for the Nativity of the Virgin (Campbell, 2012:107).⁴

The *Miracle de Théophile* is an adaptation of the Theophilus legend, the earliest versions of which were written in Greek in the fifth and sixth centuries AD. In the ninth century the legend was translated into Latin by Paul the Deacon, who associated the legend with that of the Desert Mother Mary of Egypt, patron saint of penitents. In the 1260s, Rutebeuf adapted the story as a play in Old French, in which spectators could watch the pious deputy of the bishop of Cilicia, Theophilus, who enters into a pact with a demon aided by a Jewish intermediary called Salatin. Theophilus is nominated to replace the bishop after the bishop's death, but he turns down the promotion. Once the bishop's successor takes up his new role, Theophilus is stripped of his role and functions, making him destitute. This turn of the Wheel of Fortune leads to Theophilus entering into a pact with the demon. Salatin chants the 'Bagahi (sic) Laca bachahe, etc.' (v. 160-8) in a dramatic episode to summon and torment the demon to intervene in Theophilus' fortunes. With his wealth and power restored at the price of his soul, he soon repents and the Virgin aids his miraculous recovery of the diabolical pact. Theophilus is saved by the Virgin Mary, who defeats Satan 'on stage'.

While it is not likely that Gardner was aware of Rutebeuf's play, there is an important parallel between *High Magic's Aid* and the medieval drama. Rutebeuf's play demonstrates a keen awareness of the evocative and emotive power of untranslatable words such as the 'Bagahi' chant. As Emma Campbell suggests, the play shows an interest in 'the potency of language as an instrument for intervening in the human world and as a vehicle for communication with the divine' (2012: 112). However, the summoning of the demon shows that language can be wielded for ill as well as for good. When he arrives, the demon

tells Salatin not to bother him again in either Hebrew or in Latin [*'ne en ebrieu ne en Latin'* v. 203]. It is possible that learned audiences of this play would have understood this to be a joke, as the 'Bagahi' chant is neither. Salatin in Rutebeuf's version of the story is not explicitly described as a Jew, but he is so in other versions of the legend, which would make the gibberish chant's association with Hebrew an antisemitic trope. The proximity of his name to Saladin also suggests associations with Muslim stereotypes from the Crusader States in the Middle East. Medieval gibberish in this play thus causes identity distinctions to collapse into each other, transforming Salatin into a foreignized individual onto which audiences could place uncomfortable motives and stereotypes.

In the medieval play, the 'Bagahi' chant brings together a community (the vernacular audience) against a foreignized individual who summons the demon. The words of a medieval Jew/Muslim in *Le Miracle de Théophile* thus provide a strikingly similar analogy to the exclusion of religious communities and their representation as external foes prevalent in mid-twentieth century Europe, stereotypes that continue today. As Keller observes in relation to foreignization and alterity in refugee camps of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: 'If Jews historically served as [the sovereign exceptionalism of the secular state's] internal foe, Muslims provided the external menace' (2017: 196). Giorgio Agamben describes this state of exception in different, but no less radical terms, as being placed 'neither external nor internal to the juridical order', remarking that 'the problem of defining it concerns precisely a threshold, or a zone of indifference, where inside and outside do not exclude each other but rather blur with each other' (2005: 23). In Rutebeuf's play, the 'Eko; Eko; Azarak' invocation places Salatin in precisely such a zone of exclusion and indifference, as he is necessary to drive forward the plot even though his chanting 'outs' him as non-normative.

In contrast to Salatin's invocation of the demon in *Le Miracle de Théophile*, Morven uses the chant in *High Magic's Aid* as part of an initiation ritual. Hutton remarks that for Gardner, all that mattered was that they were 'apparently medieval incantations' (1999: 232). Yet from this vantage we can place the chant in *High Magic's Aid* in a longer, broader trend in which medieval sources are adapted into modern neopagan literature despite their somewhat nefarious origins, blurring fixed ideas about what constitutes transcendence, lineage, or even language. *High Magic's Aid* works on the principle that no practitioner can glorify themselves as having experienced the 'true' meaning of an exclusive or original form of divine knowledge because no one knows the meaning of Morven's chant. This distinguishes witchcraft from the hierarchical model of divine experience asserted by the Catholic Church and exemplified in conservative models of translation deriving from the early modern period. The early modern model of translation suggests a metaphysical basis to untranslatability, or to the original source as having a quasi-divine but indefinable quality that is accessible to the few and betrayed by the translator. However, as Lawrence Venuti (2019) suggests, there are more egalitarian ways of conceptualizing language and translation (and therefore access to divine understanding and experience). For Venuti, language is 'intrinsically metaphorical, including the very language that points to this intrinsic quality, so that a linguistic representation does not offer direct access to reality of truth but rather a representation mediated by a textual network' (85–6). The 'Bagahi' chant is an unusual example of a series of words that are

meaningless in their original context, but which gain meaning and power through adaptation.

The ‘Bagabi’ chant from Rutebeuf’s play and ‘Eko; Eko; Azarak’ refrain from Fuller raised questions for Gardner’s initiates and subsequent generations of Wiccan writers, who have debated how to interpret these mysterious words. Janet and Stewart Farrar wrote that the meaning of both texts was unknown and unclear to them. They followed Michael Harrison in suggesting that that the ‘Bagabi’ chant may be a corruption of Basque and a ‘Samhain’ (Halloween) rallying-call (2021: 44). The Farrars also quote Doreen Valiente, who in private correspondence apparently stated: ‘No, I don’t know what they meant! But I think somehow that “Azarak” and “Zomelak” are God-names’ (2021: 44–5). The confusion between initiates, some of whom were close to Gardner, suggests that these chants, although forming an integral component of Wiccan ritual ‘liturgy’, nevertheless have a polysemous quality that represents their strength rather than weakness as ritual tools. This is the trick of *High Magic’s Aid*; that, by putting the medieval gibberish words of power into the mouths of those who perform ritual themselves, those practitioners defy patriarchal models of power and lead to a continually renewed model of transcendence.

Names of power and good Christian folk

Although *High Magic’s Aid* reached a relatively insular audience of witchcraft initiates and seekers, part of the chant Morven uses in the initiation ritual was adapted two decades later in a context that demonstrates the mainstream appeal of the occult, untranslatability, and queer forms of religious expression. The final case study I discuss here is not a novel, but a BBC TV series that continues to be popular to this day in the UK and beyond—*Doctor Who*. In one serial of this series originally aired in 1971, and released on DVD in 2012, a character called the Master invokes a ‘dæmon’ using some of the same untranslatable words that Morven uses to initiate the young men into the Craft in *High Magic’s Aid*: ‘Eko; Eko’. The serial is called *The Dæmons* and each episode of this series received viewing figures of over 8 million viewers ([News in Time and Space Ltd, 2022](#)).⁵ What happens, then, when ‘Eko; Eko’ goes mainstream? In this final section I turn to questions of patriarchal supremacy in adaptations of neopaganism on screen to highlight the gatekeeping of magical acts through mysterious sounding language.

The Dæmons is the fifth serial of the eighth season of *Doctor Who*, the British science fiction television series at the time featuring Jon Pertwee as the titular character. In this serial, a time traveller called the Master (played by Roger Delgado) awakens the ancient horned alien Azal (Stephen Thorne) in a cavern beneath an English church, with the intention of using Azal’s dæmonic power for evil. The setting is the village of Devil’s End, where a local white witch (Damaris Hayman) foresees the coming of the horned beast as a great evil, but she is widely dismissed. She goes to see the local vicar, the disguised Master (the Doctor’s nemesis), who tries and fails to hypnotize her. Underneath the village church, the Master conducts ceremonies attired as a masonic-inspired High Priest, aided by a coven of hooded members, with the intention of summoning Azal. In an eccentric plot twist, the Doctor explains to his companion Jo Grant (Katy Manning) that the Dæmons are a sect of aliens who have been using Earth as an experiment throughout

human history (noting the extinction of the Neanderthals and the downfall of Atlantis as evidence of their failed experiments!); the Dæmons have thus been absorbed into the human mythological cycle. The Doctor muses that invoking this particular dæmon—Azal—would result in ‘domination by the Master or total annihilation.’⁶ During the rituals, the Master uses the words of power, ‘Eko; Eko’, as a summoning tool, combining them with the dæmon’s name to make: ‘Eko; Eko; Azal’ (Part 1: 22:25). This follows the same pattern of invoking demonic names in the Western Mystery Tradition as performed by Thur in *High Magic’s Aid*. In a similar scene to the summoning of Bartzebal in the latter, the Master summons Azal but is firstly rebuked by the dæmon. The chant is repeated in Part Four to invoke Azal for a second time as the Master prepares to sacrifice a chicken in his honour (1:36:45). After a series of unfortunate events, Azal’s power is turned against himself by the Doctor’s companion’s act of self-sacrifice, and all continue their May Day celebrations.

The overlap of fictional and real occult ritual takes centre stage in the production of this series. In an interview on the accompanying documentary Damaris Hayman, who plays the white witch and psychic Olivia Hawthorne, confesses to having steered the direction of occult representation in the series, especially of certain otherwise undescribed ‘physical actions’. In her role as the surprisingly powerful village eccentric who can control the wind, she instructs another protagonist on the nature of black magic and the repeal of the Witchcraft Act in 1951 (*The Devil Rides Out*, 2012: 37:45). She was able to do so because of her interest in the supernatural, which turned her into a ‘reference guide’ for the production team (8:15). Despite drawing on local folk knowledge, the latter were nevertheless concerned about the reception of some of the material for the underground ritual that took place in what they describe as the ‘Cavern’. Instead of calling the space a ‘crypt’, which is certainly what it looks like on screen, they preferred the term ‘Cavern’ so as not to offend ‘Christian sensibilities’ by portraying the ritual on hallowed ground (24.20). What the production team created, therefore, was a space of exception that drew on a temporal untranslatability communicated through the image of hooded occultists in sacred space, as well as the mysterious chanting of the Master.

The Cavern in *The Dæmons* exists in multiple spaces at once, visually suggesting a film set, a cavern, and a crypt, while aurally evoking pagan witchcraft and the Western Mystery Tradition. Just as *High Magic’s Aid* uses occult symbolism and gibberish to express witchcraft’s status as a counterculture, such symbolism becomes more fashionable in the process. What is socially incomprehensible (i.e., non-conforming) becomes comprehensible though a queer process of untranslatability. The Cavern is one thing for the production team and actors, but another entirely for the projected audience of *Doctor Who*, identified here as good Christian folk. This is an important process given the fact that the dæmons are referenced not only as aliens but as fundamental to humanity’s mythological cycle, because the latter reading helps to make sense of their presence, introducing the mythological interpretation of aliens and occult symbolism suggested by the serial.

Despite evoking similar processes of untranslatability, the mystification of the rituals that take place in the Cavern in *The Dæmons* functions in a different way to the models for transcendental experience found in *High Magic’s Aid*. In the latter, Morven speaks the words of power as she initiates Jan and Olaf into the old religion. In *The Dæmons*, the words are placed instead into the

mouth of a practitioner of black magic. The 'Eko; Eko; Azal' chant is uttered by the patriarch, whose very name means the same—the Master. The audience is swept into this soundscape with a familiar patriarchal figure as guide, participating in the ritual by proxy. It is only through a woman's self-sacrifice, in the form of the guidance of an eccentric white witch from the local village, that order is restored to the universe. *The Daemons* intuits what could go wrong when pagan chant is used for the selfish desire of the patriarch using power for his own good. This moralistic reading contrasts with the queer, community-forming processes explored above in twentieth-century neopagan novels, which deliberately inhibit forms of top-down power play in favour of a more elusive state of unknowing to enable the unfolding of religious experience.

Each age and cultural cycle produces new versions of eclecticism and occult practice for seekers interested in transcendental experiences. These are usually pitted against a cultural or religious norm, such as an institution like the Catholic Church (*High Magic's Aid*) or good Christian folk (*The Daemons*). Queer forms of ritual or religious practice as they are depicted in neopagan literature enable practitioners of non-mainstream religions to participate in transcendence in ways that might at first seem superficial—for example, stripping in ritual or speaking gibberish words. Yet, by adapting a chant that seems to mean nothing, and incorporating it into the key initiation ritual of modern pagan witchcraft, *High Magic's Aid* opens a way for practitioners to defy the religious norms that define medieval and modern religious practice. By insisting on the ancient, obscure lineage of words of power, and yet resisting their translation, key elements of witchcraft's liturgy become meaningful in subjective ways for witches only through shared ritual. The process through which practitioners of the Craft put the words into their own mouths, for which there is now a documented history, is at once an act of resistance to the norm and of participation and inclusion in a non-mainstream community, as well as a submission to an unlikely matriarch and symbol of the Goddess.

Obscuring the soundscapes of ritual serves diverse purposes according to context. This discussion has revealed just how important such contexts are for the interpretation of ritual, especially when the meaning of untranslatable words is open to interpretation or lack thereof. The 'Bagahi' chant intoned by a Jew in a medieval play has the power to unite a community against a foreignized individual. By contrast, in *High Magic's Aid*, the same chant, appended by the 'Eko; Eko' refrain, highlights a transtemporal and communal response to the unknown aspects of religious experience when spoken by a woman who is also a figure of desire for the men she initiates into pagan witchcraft. In the 1970s TV series *Doctor Who* the producers deliberately offered alternative readings of key ritual scenes and the 'Eko; Eko' invocation so that audiences could participate in ambiguous, alien rites that are disrupted for the sake of the community at large. These chants are defined by untranslatability, which in turn reveals states of exception from the mainstream even as it makes non-conventional actions and practices more exciting and enticing for mainstream audiences. This is the case across the media discussed in this article through which the chant is delivered to bring the occult to wider audiences, either to capture the imagination of potential initiates and practitioners of witchcraft, or simply for the purpose of entertainment. The transtemporal queerness of these processes, their defiance of normative representation, and their insistence on individual reflection and experience, makes room for neopagan literature to counter the mainstream.

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Notes

1. The edition of the novel I will use in this article is a modern reprint. See [Gardner \(2010\)](#).
2. While there is generally no set ‘liturgy’ for pagan witchcraft, and many practitioners would indeed reject the term, there are many words, incantations, and recommendations shared between practitioners. A comprehensive overview of this liturgy is provided in [Farrar J and S \(1981\)](#).
3. As Hutton notes, ‘the ‘high magic’ in the novel comes plainly from one source, Mathers’s edition of the *Key of Solomon* (1999: 226), a text which has had a profound and lasting impact on Western occultism.
4. The play survives in four manuscripts now held at the Bibliothèque nationale de France.
5. The term ‘dæmon’ was deliberately spelt in an arcane way so as to give the season an ‘air of mystery’ ([The Devil Rides Out, 2012](#): 7:00).
6. [Doctor Who: The Dæmons \(2012](#): 59:50). All subsequent references to running times on the DVD will feature in-text.

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