

The Word that Binds the True

By Daniel A. Schulke

The Coin of the Word, and its value as evidenced by the Deeds which follow, is minted every moment, of every day, in the great foundry of Truth and Lie. Yet a coin and its value are two separate creatures, each occupying a different circle of power. The hallowed ground where they unite in marriage lies within the bounds of Oath truly sworn in the Circle of Art. Such may be found in numerous esoteric folk traditions, magical lodges, and in the sects of some religions. Each type of oath has its own unique purpose, character, magical modality, and attendant spirit-host; yet there are certain things which most, if not all magical oaths have in common.

Indeed, given the predominance of oaths of Silence and Secrecy among practitioners of the Art, one may wonder what, if anything, may rightly be spoken of. However, my present concern shall primarily be the function of Oath within the Round of Art, its magical cartography and *monas*, rather than the particulars of specific exemplars. In this, I must ultimately speak as a practitioner rather than as a scholar. Adherence to oaths of secrecy among practitioners is often a barrier to academic investigation, a boundary held by the faithful in accordance with the Word, and often repudiated by the historian. Nevertheless, the Oath has endured many forms of scorn, and no doubt shall endure that of the scholar as well.

Oath, from the Anglo Saxon *eoth* or *ath*, is an explicate pledge invoking a god, spirit, ancestor, place, or sacred object as witness unto the truth of the words sworn, and is among the most ancient forms of ritual solemnity. A much-venerated pagan relic is the Hippocratic Oath, a pledge of medical ethics held in high esteem among healers from the 1st century CE onward. Its preamble calls forward the gods of curing to bear witness to the oath: “I swear by Apollo Physician and Asclepius and Hygieia and Panacea and all the gods and goddesses, making them my witnesses...” The oath concludes by pronouncing that he who remains true to the oath shall prosper, while he who does not shall attain ‘the opposite lot’, inviting the scrutiny of the gods themselves upon his actions. Pagan oaths to trees, the sky, and *genii loci* are found at the level of votary practice, as well as swearing by the saints and the hair upon God’s head, attested in diverse Christian homilies and penitentials such as that of Caesarius of Arles. Oaths as heathen religious practice were also proscribed by Christian authorities such as the severe fines levied by Charlemagne against Saxons who paid vows to trees, groves, and springs.¹

Gravid pledges have long been institutions of Crown, Church, and municipality, and served well in various military contexts, especially to address such concerns as loyalty and individual sincerity. The gravity of an oath’s binding nature is attested in ancient English law, where persons known as “Oath-Helpers” were called upon to vouchsafe the oath of another person in the capacity of witness. The power of oaths endures in modern court proceedings and is bolstered by severe penalties for perjury. Among Christians, the seventeenth-century Protestation Oath, sworn against papist doctrine, fulfilled a function of dividing friend from foe, and was accorded a degree of ritual status.² Other Christian sects, such as Quakers and Anabaptists, prosecute taboos on

oath-taking, based on the teaching of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew Chapter 5 to 'swear not at all'.

Indeed, oaths of secrecy among practitioners of the magical arts are a feature of sorcery from the most ancient records. As Hans Dieter Betz has observed, certain portions of the corpus of Greek Magical Papyri are governed by a complexity of magical protocols, including concealing divine names and the initiatic concerns of mystery-cults³. Among the various admonitions of secrecy accompanying this magical corpus, were concerns of the spells falling into the hands of the unworthy. Betz notes the following oath in PGM IV.850-929:

I swear to you by the holy gods and heavenly gods not to share the procedure of Solomon with anyone and certainly not to use it for something questionable, unless a matter of necessity forces you, lest perchance wrath be preserved for you.

In other sections of the papyri, the warning follows simply: "Keep it secret!" The ancient association between magic and oath endures in the Hebrew *shaba*, bearing the dual meaning 'oath' and 'seven'. In some traditions an oath sworn seven times is fully bound, and idiomatic usages refer to 'sevening oneself' in the context of being oath-bound. Similar concepts can be found in the folk magic of Britain and America, relating to the number three, and those who are 'thrice sworn'.

Concerns of secrecy dominate the III^o Freemason's Oath, which forbids the swearer to initiate, pass or raise "a woman, madman, fool, young man, atheist, or an old man in his dotage". The Freemasonic Oaths of the III^o found their way into the Horseman's pledge to "hele, conceal and never reveal the horsemanship which I am about to receive...I solemnly swear that I will neither write it nor indite it, nor carve it on wood or stone, nor yet on anything movable or immovable under the canopy of heaven..." Certain features of the rites of the Society of the Horseman's Word have found their way into Essex Craft.⁴ Other magical lodges containing severe oaths include the Order of Eastern Templars, which include harsh and sometimes gruesome consequences for those who do not meet their words with equal deeds. The Master Therion, who regarded the Magical Oath as the foundation of the Work and a supreme act of Will, remarked that the Oath "binds the Magician for ever."⁵

Magical oaths of varying kinds, though of mysterious substance and rarely spoken of, have also existed within the confines of traditional witchcraft. Robert Cochrane, the old Magister of Clan Tubal-Cain, knew of the 'Law', and Evan John Jones the 'Word'⁶. From my own experience I am aware of the presence of oaths in some forms of Essex, Buckinghamshire, Herefordshire and Gloucestershire Craft; sworn magical compacts are also prevalent in diverse forms of Craft in the West Country. Such oaths may be sworn in the presence of trees or stones regarded as local gods, and votive offerings may be given. Pledges taken amid fairy rings, stone circles, or in caves bind the swearer in the presence of the Good Folk, just as the troth of graveyards is adumbrated by the ancestral shades, the presence of the departed serving as 'magical hands' to witness the vow. In other cases, Oaths within the Round of Art may be affirmations of transcarnative spirit-pacts between groups or individuals.

Venerated as well are traditions of swearing oaths upon objects bearing especially powerful numina, such as the bones of one's ancestors. By this is the Word vouchsafed in the dark bosom of the Mighty Dead, who may dispense boon or curse in accordance with troth, and worthiness of deed in the eyes of the ancestral spirits. This is an enduring feature of folk magic, be it Christian, Heathen, or of mixed religious pedigree, and serve as a reminder to the Seeker that his or her pledges are binding to the grave, and indeed beyond. Scottish oath-stones, such as the Baul Muluy, a stone amulet used in Arran for oath-taking, well illustrate the power such relics command. The Black-Stones of Iona were so named because of the wretched misfortune which fell upon those who had broken oaths sworn upon them.⁷ Within modern forms of Traditional Craft and folk tradition, magical oaths are taken upon cross-roads, Bibles, standing stones, and certain kinds of graves. In addition to their unique occult powers in the capacity of fetish, objects and places so sworn upon forge the fire-brand of the moment's enchantment, becoming a vivified mark bridging matter and spirit. Impressed in magical time, they recur as signs or omens, reminding the pledge of his oath or empowering him to uphold it. For those in severance of their oath, such omens assume a diabolic mantle, serving as the intercessors of bane. In either case, fair or foul, the association between oath-object and swearer is perpetual.

Magical Oaths within the Craft may also take the limited form of vows, be they of solitude, silence, chastity, or poverty; their distinguishing feature being that they are taken for a limited duration as devotional practice, rather than carried unto the coffin. In some circles, vows and oaths are not spoken of as such, but there exist in identical solemnity "Laws" so-called, governing proper decorum within and without the Circle. Such spiritual directives are considered given by the gods and spirits of the clan, against which one transgresses at one's own peril.

In the medieval and early modern eras, witchcraft persecutors accorded great significance to the diabolic pact, and some modern scholars have been quick to minimise the importance of this historical strand. However, oaths unto spirits, fair and foul, were well known in classic occult literature, such as *The Book of the Sacred Magic Abramelin the Mage*, which sought sorcerous power through ascetic Yahwistic devotion. While condemning various 'witches' encountered in his wanderings for engaging the diabolic pact, the author also presents formulae for animating corpses, unleashing war, and command over various princes of Hell. This seeming inconsistency is mitigated on the basis of a sorcerous ethos found in many forms of witchcraft: to *command* the Devil is not identical to making a pact with him, a notion implicit in Toad-witching.

All oaths are fundamentally a binding, the quintessential modality of the sorcerer, and thereby the witch. The ancient near eastern sorcerer rendered as *hbr hbr*, and variously translated as "binder" or "spell-binder", is thought to stem from a Semitic word meaning "to bind", and in ancient references appears associated with magical oaths.⁸ Though binding of individuals by pledge of the Word is likely, there is a dual meaning here, for *hbr* is also possibly related to binding of spells by tying knots, a practice which both Near Eastern forms of sorcery and Traditional Witchcraft share.

In its enlightened form, the power of binding is an expression of the alchemical-geomantic *coniunctio*, the mystical fusion of separate principles for the generation of a third, potentiated form. The magico-sexual nuances of such binding should not be

forgotten, for the Word binds the pledge not only to his honour and his fate, but also the body of the Beloved. However, despite any transcendental rubric imposed by either scholar or practitioner, the bind-oath remains sorcery at its heart, a nuptial actuation between practitioner and that which he embraces, be it spirit or flesh. This axiom is best remembered by those who swear within the Circle of Art. For though the heart may provide the cardinal fire of joining oneself to the Art, it is the spirit which remains ensorcelled, whether by the golden ring of the Beloved, or the iron joug of slavery. Such is the Blessing and Curse of the Word!

As with all acts of binding flesh to flesh, spirit should not be bound indiscriminately, but as an act of solemnity, passion, power and honour. Where devotion meets resolve in incantation, the audience of shades is assembled. Let him who speaks remember that there are certain words to which the ears of the Fates are especially attuned; words such as ‘always’, ‘never’, and ‘I swear’. Thus, if pledge is taken, one should know full well the meanings of each of the oath-words spoken, their subtleties, and their implications into perpetuity. By the deed of the Word, a boundary is explicated, separating the hallows within from the fallows without. Thus a circle inviolable is drawn, the integrity of which is a reflection of the honour –and thereby the power- of the swearer. Nor are the parameters of oath relaxed outside the working circle, for the bound of troth has ensorcelled the swearer as a Circle of One.

My contact with a number of diverse traditions of folk magic suggests that there exist specific charms or spells to ritually address the problem of those who turn upon their words. These serve not only to sever association with the offender but, in some cases, return the curse of their trespass, or else deprive them of their powers. Such underscores the seriousness of Oath within the Craft and lends credibility to the notion that oath within a lodge context may originate in milieus where legal persecution of magical practitioners was, and still is, prevalent. This is not to posit a mythical or monolithic ‘burning times’, but rather to acknowledge that forms of legal consequences other than execution, including penance, fines, imprisonment, public humiliation, and seizure of property, could be injurious to both liberty and livelihood, to say nothing of the social marginalisation one might suffer being marked as a *malificus*.

If an oath is easily broken, it is often the case that the strength and power of its bond were of insufficient integrity to begin with. However, as with all forms of mundane commitment, one’s honour, both among the gods and men, is the issue at stake. In the case of breaking magical oath, the erosion of one’s honour before the spirits may result in a self-invoked curse or the spirit-allies forsaking the practitioner. This was well understood in ancient Mesopotamia, for the spirit of oath was *mamitu*, sometimes regarded as a demon, and other times a goddess, having the power not only to threaten retribution upon oath-breakers but also to deliver them a curse.⁹ Within extant strands of Traditional Craft, the consequences of oath-breaking differ little from this ancient religious doctrine, and echo the frequent admonitions of European paganism as they have come down to us in sagas and folktales¹⁰.

Upon the knife-point of Oath one does not swear intent, nor aspiration to fulfilment, nor upon what provisions of the Oath seem most convenient. Rather, one’s ‘life, death, blood and breath’ are wholly committed to the Fates –in entirety, or not at all. It is thus wise to embrace the pagan origin of the Holy Sacrament, for the meaning of

sacramentum is ‘oath’. Its original usage referred to the pledge taken, under Roman law, between parties engaged in lawsuit. The *sacramentum* was thus binding before the gods, and those taking oath placed both their lives and possessions in their hands.¹¹ Forsooth, it may be rightly spoken that the acts of oath-breaking and swearing falsely by their nature repudiate belief in the power of the gods and spirits.

It may thus be asked: what of the oath true-sworn and held as the golden ring? From what I have learned from practice and observation, there is great diversity in the forms magical oaths take, but great uniformity in their function. When magical Oaths are sworn with solemnity and respect, they assume the importance, power, and unifying force of marriage vows. As such, they are an intimate celebration between pledge and Beloved, worthy of upholding and renewing by means of Art. Worthy indeed, of mystical contemplation and praise for the reservoir of power they are. No matter what spiritual path one walks, let the seriousness of Oath be met with enthusiasm, ever the passion of the Elator, for indeed it is one of the few challenges issued by the gods that the Seeker has a hand in co-creating. The moment of oath functions as a waymark upon the path, but also vouchsafes the road for the Seekers who shall come after. For in truth, as in troth, it is unto their spirits, whether they have assumed flesh or not, that we also swear.

Notes

¹ *Capitulatio de partibus Saxoniae*.

² Gaskill, Malcolm. *Witchfinders: A Seventeenth-Century English Tragedy*, Harvard University Press, 2005; pp 34-35.

³ Betz, Hans Dieter, “Secrecy in the Greek Magical Papyri”, from *Secrecy and Concealment*, ed. Hans G. Kippenberg and Guy G. Stroumsa, EJ Brill, 1995.

⁴ Ankarloo and Clark, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Twentieth Century*, pp. 7-8. Generally, the same may be said of the diverse rites of the Toadmen. For a ritual exposition of related mysteries in this area, see Andrew Chumbley’s *One: The Grimoire of the Golden Toad*.

⁵ Crowley, Aleister. *Magick in Theory and Practice*, Castle Books, 1991; pp 123-128.

⁶ The author would like thank to Shani Oates, Maid of Clan Tubal Cain, for her insights into these matters, as well as for references to oaths appertaining ancient Babylonian king-making rituals.

⁷ MacInlay, James. *Folklore of Scottish Lochs and Springs*, William Hodge & Co., 1893; pp 243-44.

⁸ Jeffers, Ann. *Magic and Divination in Ancient Palestine and Syria*, E.J. Brill, 1996; pp 31-33. Jeffers notes that differing scholarship considers the etymology derivative of the Akkadian *habaru*, meaning ‘sound’ or ‘noise’, possibly in reference to muttering and incantation.

⁹ Abusch, Tzvi. *Mesopotamian Witchcraft*, Brill-Styx 2002; pp. 238, 241. A number of the ancient texts were quite clear that *mamitu* was binding, and neither the burden of its obligation nor its curse upon the treacherous could be escaped.

¹⁰ Davidson, H.R. Ellis. *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe*, Syracuse University Press, 1988; p.225.

¹¹ James, E.O. *Sacrifice and Sacrament*, Thames and Hudson, 1962; p. 14.



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