

Arma Christi Rolls or Textual Amulets?

The Narrow Roll Format Manuscripts of “O Vernicle”

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The so-called *arma Christi* rolls of late medieval England have received a fair amount of scholarly attention since Rossell Hope Robbins published on them in 1939.¹ Each of these ten roll format manuscripts produced over the course of the fifteenth century contains a poem-prayer devoted to the *arma Christi*, “O Vernicle,” as well as illustrations for the stanzas. In three of the rolls, an indulgence follows the poem, and one of the three includes a variety of other prayers, devotions, and charms: Philadelphia, Redemptorist Archives of the Baltimore Province, *olim* Esopus (E); from now on the Esopus Roll.² These artifacts of late medieval culture have proved to be a small but rich mine for scholarship on topics such as religious iconography, devotional practices,

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1. Rossell Hope Robbins, “The *Arma Christi* Rolls,” *Modern Language Review* 34 (1939): 415–21.

2. From here on, I will include the sigla parenthetically. For the stemma and sigla, see figure 1, replicated with additions from Ann Eljenholm Nichols, “‘O Vernicle’: A Critical Edition,” in *The Arma Christi in Medieval and Early Modern Material Culture, with a Critical Edition of ‘O Vernicle,’* ed. Lisa H. Cooper and Andrea Denny-Brown (Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2014): 312–13.

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blood devotions, visual culture, material culture, private reading, and vernacular theologies. One question that scholars have often returned to, however, concerns the roll format. Of twenty surviving witnesses of “O Vernicle,” ten are parchment rolls.³ And many are very narrow rolls at that, with seven ranging from around four to five inches wide (ca. 13 cm), one being about six inches wide (15.2 cm), and the remaining two measuring seven and one-quarter and eight inches in width (18.2 cm and 20.2 cm).

Robbins judged that these rolls could not have been used for “private meditation,” for it would have been too troublesome for a reader “to unroll a long sheet every time he wished to pray or meditate.”⁴ Instead, he concluded,

The original function of the “Arma Christi” was congregational. A friar or a priest would display such rolls, either holding them up himself, or hanging them from a convenient ledge or niche in the wall, or suspending them from the pulpit. The worshippers would gain the indulgence by gazing at the roll, and while listening to the priest read the descriptions of the instruments, repeating the *Pater noster*.⁵

While Robbins’s opinion still finds its way into print, it is now considered to be incorrect. Flora Lewis’s oft-cited dissertation argues that the small size of the images make it unlikely that these narrow format rolls would have been useful for public display.⁶ Likewise, Pamela Robinson posits that “the extant rolls are not nearly large enough for their pictures to be seen at a distance.”⁷ And Ann Eljenholm Nichols, who has recently examined all the extant “O Vernicle” rolls and manuscripts, concludes that there is little to no evidence that these rolls were ever displayed in this way.⁸

The current trend is to see *arma Christi* images and imagetexts in general,

3. Nichols, “‘O Vernicle’: A Critical Edition,” 319.

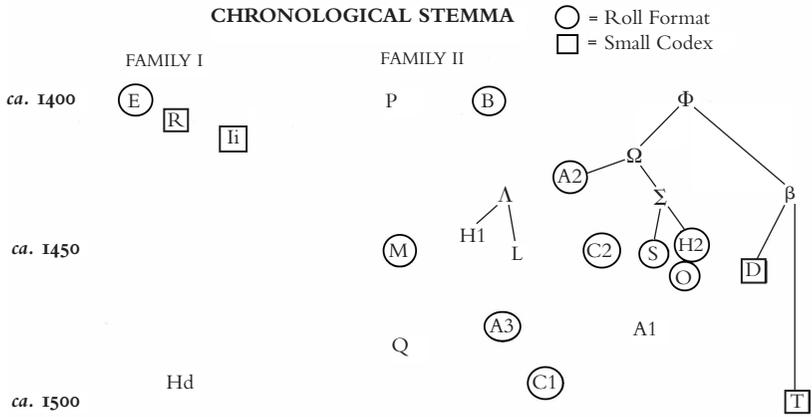
4. Robbins, “The *Arma Christi* Rolls,” 417.

5. *Ibid.*, 419–20.

6. Flora Lewis, “Devotional Images and Their Dissemination in English Manuscripts, c. 1350–1470” (diss. University of London, 1989).

7. Pamela Robinson, “The Format of Books—Books, Booklets, and Rolls,” in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain, Vol. II: 1100–1400*, ed. Nigel Morgan and Rodney M. Thomson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2008), 44.

8. Ann Eljenholm Nichols, “‘O Vernicle’: Illustrations of an *Arma Christi* Poem,” in *Tributes to Kathleen Scott: English Manuscripts: Readers, Makers and Illuminators*, ed. Marlene Villalobos Hennessy (London: Harvey Miller, 2009), 141. For another disagreement with Robbins’s thesis see Don Skemer, *Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages* (University Park: Penn State University Press), 261–62.



A Roman letter designates each manuscript, and a Greek letter represents the hypothetical genetic ancestor of a family of manuscripts. Since Greek sigla represent hypothetical exemplars, they cannot be dated. (See **Manuscripts** for more precise dating of the surviving individual manuscripts.) Lines indicate the assumed ancestral relationship: for example, Φ is the hypothetical exemplar for Ω and β ; and β is the hypothetical exemplar for **D** and **T**. The broken line indicates that **O** is a copy of **H2**.

Manuscript Sigla

- A1 London, British Library, Additional MS 11748
- A2 London, British Library, Additional MS 22029
- A3 London, British Library, Additional MS 32006
- B Edinburgh, Scottish Catholic Archives, GB 0240 CB/57/9, *olim* National Library of Scotland, Dep. 211/9; *olim* Blairs Museum 9
- C1 Oxford, Oxford University, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley Rolls 16
- C2 Oxford, Oxford University, Bodleian Library, MS Additional E.4 (R)
- D Oxford, Oxford University, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 1
- E Philadelphia, Redemptorist Archives of the Baltimore Province, *olim* Esopus, NY
- H1 San Marino, Huntington Library, MS HM 142
- H2 San Marino, Huntington Library, MS HM 26054
- Hd Cambridge, Harvard University, Houghton Library, MS Typ. 193
- Ii Cambridge, University Library, MS Ii.6.43
- L Warminster, Marquess of Bath, MS Longleat 30
- M New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS Morgan B.54
- O New Haven, Yale University, Beinecke Library, MS Osborne fa 24, lots 28 & 29
- P Cambridge, Magdalene College, MS Pepys 2125
- Q Oxford, Queen's College, MS 207
- R London, British Library, MS Royal 17.A.27
- S Clitheroe, Stonyhurst College, MS 64
- T Princeton, Princeton University Library, Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, MS Taylor 17

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Figure 1. Stemma of "O Vernicle" Manuscripts.

including the *arma Christi* rolls, as tools for prayer and meditation in the affective mode. Carolyn Walker Bynum states that by the late Middle Ages *arma Christi* images had “become inducements to empathy, signals of enacted caritas to which caritas responds.”⁹ While still maintaining that prayer rolls “were likely displayed in Churches,” Kathleen Kamerick adds that they “were privately owned as well.” She also speculates on how *arma Christi* image sequences were used for private devotion, pointing out how each instrument “received its own space on a page or roll and its own time within the devotion, extending visually or verbally the reader/viewer’s contemplation of them.” Where the images were accompanied by verses, rubrics, and/or indulgences, the sequence of imagetexts provoked in users a pattern of alternating reading, viewing, and pausing to reflect. Kamerick also describes how the texts often promise rewards for those who gaze on the pictures and how they draw readers’ attention to the links between their sins and the wounds inflicted by the instruments, “insist[ing] upon their surprisingly direct relevance to the beholder’s spiritual life.”¹⁰ Anthony Bale, meanwhile, explicitly disagrees with the thesis that the rolls were meant for public display, writing that the “*Arma Christi* rolls were designed to foster an immediate devotional response, a contemplative immersion in Christ’s Passion.”¹¹ Sarah Noonan also believes that the rolls were designed for private devotional reading, arguing that while users could have read the rolls in sequence, “both the text and the material form appear to encourage readers to move through the *Symbols* by jumping from stanza to stanza, ‘perus[ing] effectively and affectively’ those sections most pertinent to their specific devotional needs and goals.”¹²

In the most satisfying exposition to date of how an *arma Christi* roll might have functioned in private devotional practice, Richard Newhauser and Arthur J. Russell focus on Edinburgh Scottish Catholic Archives MS GB 0240 CB/57/9, *olim* Blairs College 9 (B). They describe how it could have been used in a highly intertextual, multimedia, sensory-affective act of penitential prayer and reflection, and they lay out how the roll’s “nexus of text and image” relates to imagery from sermons on the Passion and the tradition

9. Carolyn Walker Bynum, “Violent Imagery in Late Medieval Piety: Fifteenth Annual Lecture of the GHI, November 8, 2001,” *GHI Bulletin* 30 (Spring 2002): 18.

10. Kathleen Kamerick, *Popular Piety and Art in the Late Middle Ages: Image Worship and Idolatry in England, 1350–1500* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 173.

11. Anthony Bale, *The Jew in the Medieval Book: English Antisemitisms, 1350–1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 157–62.

12. Sarah Noonan, “Private Reading and the Rolls of the *Symbols of the Passion*,” *Journal of the Early Book Society* 15 (2012): 296.

of the Seven Deadly Sins. Furthermore, they argue that the roll format forces the user to scroll through the poem's list of instruments in a set sequence and to focus on each individual moment in the Passion sequence.¹³ The text, meanwhile, helps users "to understand the pictorial presentation in terms of their own moral life, and the sensory perceptions evoked by the memory of the Passion are made into valid devotional lessons."¹⁴ In particular, the images and the text work to transport users to an imaginative Jerusalem, through which they travel in a virtual pilgrimage.¹⁵

But at least two recent studies have questioned whether the "O Vernicle" imagetext was actually intended for affective devotion. Ann Eljenholm Nichols sees it as part of "the tradition of penitential literature. The poet uses the *arma* as focal points for serial consideration of personal sin to facilitate an examination of conscience for specific sins."¹⁶ Shannon Gayk makes a similar argument about the version of "O Vernicle" in Cambridge, Harvard University, Houghton Library, MS Typ. 193 (Hd), writing that it "is essentially penitential in its approach to the instruments; it uses them first to evoke the memory of a moment of the Passion narrative, but then emphasizes their metaphorical associations with different vices. . . . The instruments thus primarily function as tools for penitential introspection and prayer."¹⁷ At least one of the extant *arma Christi* rolls, however, suggests there were other possible uses for these artifacts than affective devotion or penitential prayer.

1. THE ESOPUS ROLL: ITS APOTROPAIC CHARMS AND IMAGETEXTS

The Esopus Roll opens with the pseudo-Bedan Prayer on the Seven Last Words. The rubric to this apotropaic prayer promises that whoever says it daily on bended knee can neither be harmed by the devil nor by wicked men, nor will they die unconfessed. The prayer is followed by a short poem listing the seven times that Jesus bled and the seven sins that these bleedings heal (*NIMEV* 1701). Located after these are "O Vernicle" (*NIMEV* 2577), its summary *arma Christi* poem, "I thank thee Lord" (*NIMEV* 1370), and the

13. Richard Newhauser and Arthur J. Russell, "Mapping Virtual Pilgrimage in an Early Fifteenth-Century *Arma Christi* Roll," in *The Arma Christi in Medieval and Early Modern Material Culture*, 84 and 88.

14. *Ibid.*, 91.

15. *Ibid.*, 99–108.

16. Ann Eljenholm Nichols, "The Footprints of Christ as *Arma Christi*: The Evidence of Morgan B.54," in *The Arma Christi in Medieval and Early Modern Material Culture*, 115.

17. Shannon Gayk, "Early Modern Afterlives of the *Arma Christi*," in *The Arma Christi in Medieval and Early Modern Material Culture*, 278–79.

indulgence that travels with “O Vernicle” in seven manuscripts, “These armes of Crist” (*NIMEV* 3305). This indulgence not only promises that “looking over” the *arma Christi* will bring remission of any temporal punishment still owed to God for sin repented of and confessed, but also promises protection from a “wicked death,” from being tempted by the devil, and from problems in childbirth.¹⁸ The indulgence is followed by another apotropaic imagetext, one giving the Measure of Christ: a Tau cross in the margins is to be multiplied fifteen times (the standard multiplier in fifteenth-century Measures of Christ) to arrive at Christ’s height.¹⁹ As in a number of other manuscripts, this imagetext includes a version of a Middle English prayer to Saints Quiricus and Julitta, “who were invoked consistently against personal dangers such as fevers, fiends, battles and weather, and, most consistently, for the protection of ‘women in travail.’”²⁰ The last items on the roll are a Tetragrammaton-Agla charm with seven crosses followed by the apotropaic intercessory prayer “Deus qui liberasti susannam,” which petitions God, who saved Susannah, Jonah, Daniel, and Peter, for protection from problems such as tribulation, distress, and slanderous and treacherous enemies.²¹

Mary Morse suspects that further study of the Esopus Roll may prove it to be one of the earliest English birth girdles—those textual amulets for safe and successful childbirth that were meant to be applied to or even wrapped around a woman’s body.²² It contains images and imagetexts that overlap with those on rolls that could have been used as birth girdles—something I will discuss later in this article. But even if the verdict on the Esopus Roll were to come down on the side of its not being a birth girdle, its contents clearly align it with the ancient, widespread, and often Church-sanctioned

18. For a concise description of indulgences and pardons, see Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c. 1400–c. 1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 287–92. For an extended study see Robert N. Swanson, *Indulgences in Late Medieval England: Passports to Paradise?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

19. For the number fifteen in Measures of Christ, see Skemer, *Binding Words*, 143.

20. Mary Morse, “Alongside St. Margaret: The Childbirth Cults of Saints Quiricus and Julitta in Late Medieval English Manuscripts,” in *Manuscripts and Printed Books in England, 1350–1550: Packaging, Presentation and Consumption*, ed. Emma Cayley and Susan Powell (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 187.

21. For another description of this section of the Esopus Roll see Morse, “Alongside St. Margaret,” 206. For a variety of apotropaic prayers that invoke this quartet of Biblical figures and their source in the official deathbed prayer *Proficiscere anima Christiana*, see Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 266–68.

22. Morse, “Alongside St. Margaret,” 193–94 and 205–6. On birth girdles in general, see Skemer, *Binding Words*, 235–50.

tradition of amulets containing Christian charms for healing and for all kinds of protection, such as from sudden death, death in childbirth, the malevolence of enemies and of the devil, and the dangers of travel and extreme weather.

To illustrate, Kathryn R. Rudy's work on the Trygg Hours (London, British Library, Harley MS 2966) shows that its users were devoted to its images, kissing and rubbing some to near erasure. They also had extra talismanic images and badges stitched onto its pages, and they valued the inclusion of a variety of apotropaic prayers.²³ For another example, a manuscript survives of Nicholas Love's *Mirroure of the Blessed Lyf of Jesu Christ* that begins with a Latin rubric and prayer to Saints Quiricus and Julitta that instructs devout beholding of the Measure of Christ. Other Latin prayers for spiritual and bodily protection follow, including one with an explicitly amuletic rubric that promises that anyone who says the next prayer or beholds it devoutly each day will neither die unconfessed nor die in war. The rubric also instructs that the same prayer-charm said over a cup of water will make the water efficacious for stopping storms at sea and helping women in labor. It wraps up by saying that "whoever carries it on him/herself will be loved by all people and will have popularity in the eyes of all people and no one can enumerate the goodness of this prayer but God alone."²⁴ The prayer that follows the rubric petitions for a wide variety of protections, includes crosses interspersed with invocations of holy names that direct users to bless themselves, others, or objects, and ends with a version of the prayer charm, "Deus qui liberasti susannam." The presence of this assemblage of prayers and charms in a manuscript of the unmistakably orthodox *Mirroure* is concrete evidence of how the line between sacrament, sacramentals, and Christian and other magical charms was never all that clear.

Sacramental blessings were part of the Mass and other sacraments and rituals, but even sacramentaries and other official books were also stocked with a variety of blessings for peace, blessings to protect from disease, and blessings

23. Kathryn M. Rudy, "Kissing Images, Unfurling Rolls, Measuring Wounds, Sewing Badges and Carrying Talismans: Considering Some Harley Manuscripts through the Physical Rituals they Reveal," *eBLJ* 2011, Article 5, *The British Library*, <http://www.bl.uk/eblj/2011articles/article5.html>.

24. Princeton, Princeton University Library, Kane MS 21, fols. 1v–2v. My translation. The two rubrics are transcribed in Skemer, *Binding Words*, 152, Note 70, but the second rubric as transcribed needs to be emended according to the MS, for the transcription leaves out the final words and mistakes *gratiam* for *grantum*.

to protect from dangerous weather, to give some examples.²⁵ Sacramentals were particularly popular throughout the medieval period and beyond. Derek A. Rivard identifies three main types of sacramentals: (1) “blessed objects that were widely distributed for use by recipients, some for use on specific days of the liturgical calendar (for example, the candles blessed for Candlemas and the palms for Palm Sunday)”; (2) “rites and benedictions performed by priests to ensure a beneficent natural order”; and (3) “prayers and incantations used to gain protection of various sorts.”²⁶ All of these objects, prayers, and rites brought divine power into play in the human world for healing, protection, and a variety of practical results. But, as many scholars have pointed out, there is no absolute or intrinsic way to distinguish magical from religious language, especially when it comes to prayers, blessings, charms, conjurations, and indulgences and other pardons.²⁷ Although Peter Lombard’s *Sentences* had facilitated a growing theological acceptance of what the Council of Trent would later codify as the Seven Sacraments and there were efforts to make distinctions among sacraments, sacramentals, blessings, benedictions, and consecrations, categories remained fuzzy when they were recognized at all.²⁸

Nevertheless, across the medieval period there was generally a fairly clear understanding that magic involved the aid of demons and that sacraments, sacramentals, and Christian apotropaic prayers, incantations, and rituals appealed to God and figures who mediated divine power, like the Virgin Mary and the saints.²⁹ These words and actions that are so easy to interpret

25. Derek A. Rivard, *Blessing the World: Ritual and Lay Piety in Medieval Religion* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 30–37.

26. *Ibid.*, 41.

27. Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 69–72. See also David Elton Gay, “On the Christianity of Incantations,” in *Charms and Charming in Europe*, ed. Jonathan Roper (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 32–46; Karen Louise Jolly, “On the Margins of Orthodoxy: Devotional Formulas and Protective Prayers in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 41,” in *Signs on the Edge: Space, Text and Margin in Medieval Manuscripts*, ed. Sarah Larratt Keefer and Rolf H. Bremmer, Jr. (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 148; László Sándor Chardonens and Rosanne Hebing, “Two Charms in a Late Medieval English Manuscript at Nijmegen University Library,” *Review of English Studies* n.s. 62.245 (2010): 183; and Swanson, *Indulgences in Medieval England*, 247–48.

28. Rivard, *Blessing the World*, 40.

29. Richard Kieckhefer, “The Specific Rationality of Medieval Magic,” *The American Historical Review* 99, no. 3 (1994): 813–36. See also Richard Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites: A Necromancer’s Manual of the Fifteenth Century* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1997), 15–16.

as “Christian magic” were most of the time just the “application of sacramentals to this-worldly concerns.”³⁰ And many of these worldly concerns were apotropaic or exorcistic, with the holy objects and/or prayers and incantations employed to protect from or ward off disease, to deflect a variety of social and physical threats, to keep demons and their evils and temptations at bay, or to drive demons out of people and places. Eamon Duffy has gone so far as to argue that this use of sacramentals is not “the devotional underground, it is the devotional mainstream,” part of “a popular religion which extended from the court downwards, encompassing both clerical and lay devotion.”³¹

Kathleen Kamberick has also described how widespread were soothsaying, charms, amulets, and other Christian quasi-magical words and objects. Caxton’s 1489 translation of *Le Doctrinal de Sapience*, a book he calls “ryght vile and prouffyttable to alle crysten men” (very useful and profitable to all Christian men), discusses sorcery, divination, and textual amulets, pointing out that,

Alle they that make suche thynges or doo make it, or bere it or do it to be born and haue trust and affyaunce therin, and they that selle it, gyue or lene it, synnen right greuously but yf they be symple people and so ignoraunt of symplesse that by ignoraunce they be excused. The whyche thyng excuse not them yf they be suffycyentely warned and taught.³²

[All those that make such things or have one made, or wear one or advise one to be worn and have trust and faith in it, and those that sell, give, or loan one, sin very grievously unless they are uneducated people and so ignorant due to their lack of learning that they may be excused by this ignorance. Do not pardon them of this thing if they have been sufficiently warned and taught.]

Likewise, the early-fifteenth-century treatise *Dives and Pauper* follows its enumeration of divinations, charms, and textual amulets with the stern warning that

30. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 282. See also Kieckhefer, “The Specific Rationality of Medieval Magic,” 833.

31. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 278–79.

32. *The Doctrinal of Sapience*, edited from Caxton’s printed edition, 1489, ed. Joseph Gallagher, Middle English Texts 26 (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1993), 55. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

alle swyche forsaken þe feyth of holy chyrche and her cristendam and becomyn Goddis enmyys and agreuyn God wol greuously and fallyn in dampnacoun withouten ende, but þey amenden hem þe sonere. And þerfor þe lawe comandyth þat byshopis schulden ben besy to destryyn al maner wychecraftis, and ȝif þei foundyn ony man or woman þat ȝeue hem to wychecraftis, but [þey] wolden amenyn hem. he schuldyn cachyn hem out of here byschopryche with opyn despyt . . .

[all such people forsake Holy Church's faith and her religion and become God's enemies and distress God very grievously and fall into damnation without end, unless they amend themselves without delay. And therefore the law commands that bishops should be busy in destroying all kinds of witchcraft, and if they discover any man or woman who is dedicated to witchcraft, they should drive them out their bishopric with public humiliation . . .]

Texts such as these and others show that there was a recognition of difference between licit prayer and illicit charms and between sacramentals and objects used as apotropaic or healing amulets and talismans—even if there was sometimes disagreement about what actually constituted superstition.³³ This recognition of difference went along with attempts to root out practices perceived as illicit. Clergy might preach against superstition and magic, and Church courts might correct and, more rarely, punish users of these charms, rites, and objects.³⁴

In the following pages, I am first going to argue that at least one version of the “O Vernicle” text is essentially apotropaic. Its language is consistent with that of apotropaic prayers and charms, and the *arma* depicted in the series of imagetexts are presented as having power in and of themselves, functioning almost like pictorial relics; for the quasi-incantatory stanzas continually invoke the *arma* for protection from sin, demons, and the consequences of sin.³⁵ I am then going to turn to the question of the material support for

33. Kathleen Kameron, “Shaping Superstition in Late Medieval England,” *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 3.1 (2008): 30.

34. *Ibid.*, 29–36.

35. Bynum observes that until 1300, the *arma Christi* were “signs not of suffering but of triumph, of Christ’s authority to judge. They were, as the name implies, coats of arms, signs of nobility and power; and as *arma*, they were also defensive (shields against the devil and his works) or offensive (weapons of attack against the enemies of Christ). Only in the later Middle Ages did they become signs of pain and injury, visual triggers to remind Christians of what God had suffered for them, and even such torture was sometimes understood as love” (“Violent Imagery,” 18). Future work might consider the possibility of a connection between this earlier theology of the *arma* and the continuing amuletic invocation of the *arma* for bodily and worldly protection, while at the same time as they are being adapted to new devotional ends.

these imagetexts and will consider whether the visual impact of some of these rolls could have caused them to signify as apotropaic amulets. First, they are in roll format. Second, many of them are in very narrow rolls. My ongoing inventory of English manuscripts in roll format shows that most surviving rolls that are around five inches or less in width (ca. 13 cm) are either amulets or *arma Christi* rolls. The narrow roll format very well might have contributed to what I will call an “amulet effect”: the potential perception and use of some of these rolls (and even the smaller manuscripts) as “functional objects” of “practical devotion,” defined by John R. Decker as “the activation and employment of images, objects, and practices dedicated to keeping body and soul safe and secure as the individual struggled along the more mentally and spiritually demanding paths of salvation and redemption.”³⁶

II. THE LANGUAGE OF “O VERNICLE”: DEVOTIONAL AND/OR AMULETIC?

Ann Eljenholm Nichols’s critical edition of “O Vernicle” has shown that “O Vernicle” circulated in two distinct versions. What I will call version A is not only preserved in the oldest surviving witnesses, it is also the version in fourteen of the twenty manuscripts of the poem—including the Esopus Roll (E). What I will call version B has significant alterations to the text and occurs only in the six manuscripts of Family II, Branch Φ . Version A is neither distinctly affective nor purely penitential, even if the last two stanzas (Christ Carrying the Cross and the Sepulcher) and the poem “I thank thee Lord” (which follows the Sepulcher stanza in three rolls and six codices) do turn readers’ thoughts to penitence and confession. Even if the Christian economy of salvation has its elements of *quid pro quo* logic, version A of “O Vernicle” shades more towards the *quid pro quo* logic of the indulgences, amulets, and talismans of practical devotion than, say, of penitential practice.³⁷ For example, the word “forgive” occurs only three times in version A, and the words “repentance” and “penance” occur only once each. What dominates, rather, is a language of protection—but protection from future punishment for sin, rather than from temptation to sin. At the same time, in both the opening stanza and the indulgence “These armes of Christ” (when it is included) the act of gazing at the images is privileged as the cause of this protection.

36. John R. Decker, “‘Practical Devotion.’ Apotropaim and the Protection of the Soul,” in *The Authority of the Word: Reflecting on Image and Text in Northern Europe*, ed. Celeste Brusati, K. A. E. Enenkel, and Walter S. Melion (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 360.

37. Decker, “‘Practical Devotion,’” 361, 364.

Granted, devout beholding is common in late medieval religion—it could serve to focus the mind to prayer or to stimulate the emotions.³⁸ But in version A the beholding itself was what was mainly efficacious. This type of gaze was perceived as a potential error by both advocates and critics of devotional images, whose commentaries, as Sarah Stanbury points out, “recogniz[e] that the line is often blurred: people believe, however mistakenly, that images themselves perform the miracles.”³⁹

Protection and the power of beholding are emphasized in the very first stanza of all versions (A and B) of “O Vernicle” (quoted here and elsewhere, but without the added punctuation, from Nichols’ edition—which is based on the Esopus version):

O Vernicle I honour hym and þe
 Pat þe made thorowe his privete
 Þe cloth he sete to his face
 Þe prent laft þer thorow his grace
 His mouth his nose his eghen two
 His berde his here dede al so
 Schilde me fro all þat in my life
 I haf synned with wittes fyfe
 Namelich with mouth of sclauderyng
 Fals othes and bakbytyng
 And made bost with tong also
 Of synnes that I haf i do
 Lord of heven forgif it me,
 For þe figure þat I here se (ll. 1–14)

[O Vernicle, I honor him and you
 That made you through his privacy.
 He set the cloth to his face,
 Left the print there through his grace;
 His mouth, his nose, his two eyes,
 His beard, his hair did [leave a print] also.
 Shield me from all that I have sinned
 With my five wits during my life—

38. On devout beholding of indulgenced images see Kamerick, *Popular Piety*, 169–90, and Skemer, *Binding Words*, 169 & 262.

39. Sarah Stanbury, *The Visual Object of Desire in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 11.

Namely, with a slandering mouth,
 False oaths, and backbiting,
 And I also made boast with my tongue
 Of sins that I have done.
 O Lord of Heaven, forgive me for it,
 Because of the image that I see here.]

The Vernicle is both a relic of the Passion and a witness to the divine power of Jesus: as legend has it, it was a cloth miraculously imprinted with an image of Jesus's face when a woman named Veronica offered it to him to wipe away his sweat as he rested for a moment from carrying the cross. The stanza describes the miracle with the words "made through his *privete*," with *privete* connoting here as much a "secret procedure [or] technique" as a "sacred mystery."⁴⁰ It then prompts users to petition the miraculous image with the words, "Schilde me fro all [th]at in my life / I haf synned with wittes fyfe." The grammar is difficult here, as it is in many places in version A of the poem. When parsed, this petition implies, "Protect me from sins I have already done"—thus, by extension, "from the results of what I have done." In the original indulgenced prayer composed by Innocent III in 1216, the indulgence was granted for saying the prayer in front of an image of the Holy Face as imprinted on Veronica's veil. A later indulgenced prayer to the Holy Face, the *Salve sancta facies*, offered even more reward for reciting the prayer devoutly before the image.⁴¹ In contrast to these indulgences, forgiveness in the stanza of "O Vernicle" devoted to the Vernicle is predicated neither on penitence nor on the devout performance of the prayer, but rather on simple beholding of the image. Forgiveness and shielding overlap in this stanza to the degree that the image becomes apotropaic—warding off the merited punishments for sins.

The Middle English indulgence "These Arms of Christ" that accompanies "O Vernicle" in seven witnesses also promotes the beholding of the image. The Latin indulgence considered closest to the one that was the source for the Middle English does so as well, advising that "Whoever, contrite for his

40. "Privete," *Middle English Dictionary*, University of Michigan, last updated April 24, 2013, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>.

41. Kathryn M. Rudy, "Images, Rubrics, and Indulgences on the Eve of the Reformation," in *The Authority of the Word: Reflecting on Image and Text in Northern Europe*, 458. See also Flora Lewis, "Rewarding Devotion: Indulgences and the Promotion of Images," in *The Church and the Arts: Papers Read at the 1990 Summer Meeting and the 1991 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, ed. Diana Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 189.

sins, will gaze at (*intuebitur*) these arms of Our Lord Jesus Christ has three years from Blessed Apostle Peter.” The Latin indulgence in the Cambridge, Magdalene College, MS Pepys 2125(P), version of “O Vernicle” says, “Whoever will have devoutly looked at (*deuote inspexerit*) these following arms of Our Lord Jesus Christ will have six thousand years indulgence.”⁴² The Esopus version of “These arms of Christ” uses the verb *behold* in rendering this clause, while some other witnesses use *oversee*, a verb that had a range of meaning in Middle English, most pertinently *to observe something, to look over, or to read through or peruse*.⁴³ Furthermore, the Middle English version of the indulgence elaborates on the putative Latin source, adding descriptions the rewards of simple beholding. ⁴⁴ “Sight of the Vernicle” confers forty days of pardon, and if a person beholds the arms every day she “will do no wicked deeds, nor will be troubled by the Devil (*cumbert wuth the kued*).”⁴⁵ The fact that the *arma Christi*, as visual images, are the objects of the verbs in these indulgences focuses attention on the images in the imagetexts, rather than on the accompanying petitions, and echoes the emphasis on beholding found in the opening stanza.

The *arma Christi* stanzas in version A follow suit in invoking the power of the instruments through their images, and the desired results skew strongly towards the protective. The Swords and the Clubs have power to “kepe me” (protect me) from fiends. Likewise, the Veil Before His Eyes will “kepe me” from “vengans of childhode and of ignorans” (retribution in respect to [sins of?] childhood and ignorance) as well as from retribution in respect to sins of the eyes and nose. The Seamless Tunic and the Purple Garment can be “be my socour and myn helpyng / Þat my body hate used soft clothyng” (my recourse and my help when my body has used soft clothing), and may the Crown of Thorns “Schild me fro pyne of hel pitte / Þat I haf deserued thorow uane witte (shield me from the pain of the pit of Hell that I have

42. Nichols, “The Footprints of Christ,” 121 and 137, Table 4.2.

43. “Oversēn,” *Middle English Dictionary*. *Oversee* is in London, British Library, MS Royal 17A.27 (R) and in Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University, Houghton Library MS Typ. 93 (Hd). For a partial transcription of the Esopus version of “These Armes of Christ,” see Nichols, “The Footprints of Christ” 121.

44. It should be noted that London, British Library, Additional MS 11748 (A1) contains a much shorter version of the indulgence prayer (14 lines vs. 32 lines) that neither elaborates on beholding nor describes any apotropaic virtues of beholding. It is transcribed in *Legends of the Holy Rood*, ed. Richard Morris, EETS o.s. 46 (London: Trübner, 1871), 196.

45. London, British Library, Royal 17A.27 (R), f. 80v. Transcribed in *Legends of the Holy Rood*, 196.

deserved due to a foolish mind). The Nails can “help me out of sinne and wo / Pat I haf in my life do” (help me out of sin and harm that I have done in my life). The stanza on the Spear asks, “Hit quenche þe sinne that I hafe wrought” (May it expunge the sin that I have done), and the Tongs that pulled the nails out, “of all my synnes þai lese me” (they free me from all my sins). Protecting from retribution, shielding and succoring, and expunging sin, the *arma* in the A version of “O Vernicle” are employed in these stanzas almost like apotropaic talismans.

The changes to version B of “O Vernicle” suggest that a later redactor may have striven to correct the text. The redactor not only replaced invocation of the *arma* with direct petition to Jesus in twelve stanzas, he (or she) also made intermittent but substantial alterations to the text. Take, for example, the stanza on “The Knife of the Circumcision”:

Version A (Esopus [E])

Pis knyf by tokeneth circumcicion
 He destrude syne al and sum
 Of oure forme fadir Adam
 Where thoro þu toke kynd of man
 Fro temptacion of leccherye
 He be my socour when I scal dye
 [This knife symbolizes the circumcicion.
 It destroyed sin, one and all,
 Of our first father Adam
 Due to which you took on the nature
 of man.
 From temptation of lechery,
 May it be my protection when I shall
 die.]

Version B (BL Add. 22029 [R])⁴⁶

Þis knyf betokynis the circumcicion
 That dystroyd owre synnys alle and sum
 Of owre formfathyr Adam
 Where thoro we toke þe kynde of man
 Fro temptacion of leccherye
 Lord, kepe me tulle that I deye
 [This knife symbolizes the circumcicion
 That destroyed our sins one and all
 Of our first father Adam
 From which we acquired the nature
 of man.
 From temptation of lechery,
 Lord, preserve me until I die.]

Version A addresses the knife, with *he* “reflect[ing] the masculine gender of the Latin noun (*cultellus*).⁴⁷ *Þu* appears to slip into addressing Christ, but the final two lines return to direct address of the knife, saying, “From temptation of lechery, may it be my protection when I die.” The language is confused, to say the least, and it is tempting to read “fro” as “for” in the sense of

46. Also transcribed in *Legends of the Holy Rood*, 173.

47. Nichols, “‘O Vernicle’: A Critical Edition,” 380.

“because of,” as one later scribe did.⁴⁸ This would allow the clause to mean that at the hour of death the knife will be a protection or remedy from the consequences of having been tempted by lechery. The “Knife of the Circumcision” stanza in the B version, on the other hand, is somewhat clearer. In what seems an unclear allusion to teachings on how humanity fell into sinfulness because of the sin of Adam, such as that in Romans 1–8 (a section of the letter that also dwells on sins of the flesh, including lust), the B version implies that because of the sin of Adam humankind acquired sinful human nature (*þe kynde of man*). The circumcision, as the first shedding of Christ’s blood, stands in for the Passion and Salvation, and, hence, the destruction of the sins that are now natural to fallen mankind. The stanza ends with a petition to Jesus to keep the user of the prayer-poem free from temptation to lechery. For another example, the stanza on “The Sponge” changes from asking the sponge to save the user when he dies from the fact that he “dronke in glotonye” to, in the B version, asking Jesus to forgive the user for this sin before he dies.

While the version B redaction of “O Vernicle” might seem to attenuate the “amulet effect” of version A, it does not eliminate all apotropaic elements—something that would have been unusual in this type of practical devotion. Take for example, the changes to “The Hammer”:

Version A (Esopus [E])

þe hamur both sterne and grete
 þat drofe þe nayles thorow hand & fete
 Hit be me socour þat in my life
 If ony man I smote with staf or knife
 [The hammer, both stout and large,
 That drove the nails through hand and
 feet.
 May it be my protection when, in my
 life,
 If I struck any man with a staff or knife.]

Version B (BL Add. 22090 [R])

þe hamur both sterne and grete
 þat drofe þe nayles thorow hand & fete
 Lorde be my socowre in alle myn
 lyffe Φ
 Iffe ony man stryke me with staffe or
 knife Ω
 [The hammer, both stout and large,
 That drove the nails through hand and
 feet
 Lord, be my aid in my whole life
 If any man strikes me with a staff or
 knife.]

48. Oxford, Queen’s College, MS 207 (Q), as described in Nichols, “‘O Vernicle’: A Critical Edition,” 354.

Version A in the Esopus roll would appear to be asking that the hammer be something of a charm of protection if the user has clubbed or stabbed someone. Five other witnesses make this clear, rendering the line as “If I eny man smote (in one case *smite*) with staf or knife.”⁴⁹ Version B changes this, in Branch O asking Christ to provide aid and healing if the person praying has been injured and in β asking to be protected from injury itself.⁵⁰

The apotropaic “amulet effect” of “O Vernicle” is heightened when the poem is accompanied by the indulgence “These Arms of Christ,” which besides offering remission for temporal punishment due for sin in Purgatory also promises other protections:

And also who þat eueri day
 Þis armus of crist be-hold may.
 þat day he ne sal dee no wiked ded
 Ne be cumbert with þe kued
 And also to wymen hit is meke and mild
 Whan þey traelne of her chi[l]d.⁵¹

[And also anyone who may behold
 These arms of Christ every day,
 That day he shall do no wicked deed,
 Nor be bothered by the devil;
 And it is also merciful and gentle to
 Women when they are in labor with their child.]

But the “amulet effect” of the “O Vernicle” imagetext was very likely strong even when an indulgence or other rubric was lacking. *Arma Christi* images were some of the most widely disseminated indulgenced images at the time,

49. See Nichols, “‘O Vernicle’: A Critical Edition,” 368–69.

50. For other examples, the rubric for the Measure of the Cross and Saints Quiricus and Julitta in London, British Library, Charters 43.A.14 (most often referred to as Rot. Harley [or Harley Roll] 43.A.14) includes the line, “þou schalt not be hurte nor slayne with no maner of wepyn.” A similar rubric in New York, Morgan Library, MS G.39 reads “In batell þou shalt not be slayn, ne dy of no maner of wepyn.” Both are transcribed in Curt F. Bühler, “Prayers and Charms in Certain Middle English Scrolls,” *Speculum* 39.2 (1964): 274–75.

51. As in London, British Library MS Royal 17.A.27(R), edited in *Legends of the Holy Rood*, ed. Richard Morris, EETS o.s. 46 (London: Trübner, 1871), 196. Compare with the version from Cambridge, Mass., Harvard, Houghton Library MS Typ. 193(Hd) transcribed in Gayk, “Early Modern Afterlives,” 279.

and the popular indulgenced images of the Man of Sorrows and the Mass of St. Gregory also often included the *arma*.⁵² Kamerick points out how indulgenced prayers that were not illustrated often assumed either mental imaging on the part of the user or the user's possession of or presence before the required image.⁵³ Inversely, as Swanson suggests, if an image that usually had a rubric promising indulgences, protection, or other rewards happened to circulate without the rubric, it might be presumed by users to confer these benefits anyway.⁵⁴

Talismanic image-texts in which sacramental theology overlaps with a practical devotion that comes close to seeming magical were common in late medieval Europe, but *arma Christi* images and imagetexts with their connection to the central event of salvation were particularly polyvalent.⁵⁵ What Gayk has shown about the adaptability of the *arma* in the early modern period applies to the late medieval context as well. She writes:

the continued vitality of the *arma Christi* is also due in part to their representational flexibility, to their formal mobility, to their status as semiotic chameleons. They persist because they are just as easily read as emblems as they are as talismans or relics. Their meaning is largely determined by their material and textual contexts: found on a birth girdle, the *arma* function talismanically, protecting against bodily harm; found with an indulgence, they can protect against divine judgment; found with devotional lyrics, they are meditative and penitential.⁵⁶

Morse, meanwhile, in her work on “late fifteenth century prayer rolls that may have functioned as birth girdles,” has coined the apt phrase “devotional doubles” in describing rolls that “seemingly responded to a general market demand for easily portable manuscripts with prayers . . . for daily reading and specific protective needs.”⁵⁷ While context and users' intentions certainly shaped perceptions of the function and efficacy of roll format manuscripts containing the “O Vernicle” imagetexts or other *arma Christi* imagery, these images' strong association with apotropaic prayers, indulgences, and charms

52. Kamerick, *Popular Piety*, 159, 172–75, 186, Swanson, *Indulgences in Medieval England*, 257–59, 267.

53. Kamerick, *Popular Piety*, 172–73, and Gayk, “Early Modern Afterlives,” 277.

54. Swanson, *Indulgences in Medieval England*, 263.

55. For examples of a range of protective and prayer rolls with *arma Christi* see Skemer, *Binding Words*, 259–68.

56. Gayk, “Early Modern Afterlives,” 275.

57. Morse, “Alongside St. Margaret” 187–88.

very well could have caused rolls they were in to signify as amulets. Furthermore, if the prayer poem “O Vernicle” were to have been understood as amuletic, this might explain why it was so often copied into rolls; for using a roll as the material support for these texts and images could contribute powerfully to the “amulet effect.” To quote Don Skemer, “Textual amulets were the successful union of content, form, and function.”⁵⁸ Perhaps artifacts like these need to be viewed as “imagetextobjects,” in which the material support is an intrinsic part of the meaning (and even the power) of their images and imagetexts.⁵⁹

III. THE VISUAL IMPACT OF DIFFERENT SIZES OF ROLL FORMAT MANUSCRIPTS

In studies of the history of the book, the stress on the shift from scroll to codex has often obscured the fact of the ubiquity of manuscript rolls during the Middle Ages.⁶⁰ In England the Exchequer maintained Pipe Rolls for the royal accounts, and the Chancery produced Charter Rolls, Patent and Close Rolls of royal letters, and Fine Rolls recording “offerings made to the king or his justiciar for royal favour”; courts from the King’s Bench down also kept records on rolls.⁶¹ The number, use, and abuse of these official rolls even became an object of satire in *Mum and the Sothsegger*.⁶² The roll format was also popular for genealogies, genealogical histories, and armorials. Pamela Robinson speculates that in these cases the roll format “appropriately conveyed to the reader a sense of historical succession.”⁶³ Clemens and Graham point out that rolls are better than codices for emphasizing how lines of descent flow without breaks; they are also better for showing the long, inter-related diagrams so popular for showing the intricacies of genealogical histories.⁶⁴ Other surviving English rolls include monastic mortuary rolls, death

58. Skemer, *Binding Words*, 126.

59. A useful comparison is with how a book of magic “shares in the numinous qualities and powers of the rites it contains” (Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites*, 4).

60. Raymond Clemens and Timothy Graham, *Introduction to Manuscript Studies* (Ithaca, N.Y.: University of Cornell Press, 2007), 250.

61. Information on the Exchequer, Chancery, and Court Rolls is located on the Web site of The National Archives: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>. An overview of roll format manuscripts can be found in Michael Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record, England 1066–1307*, 3rd ed. (Maldon, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 137–46, and in Clemens and Graham, *Introduction to Manuscript Studies*, 250ff.

62. Richard Firth Green, “Medieval Literature and Law,” in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 419–20.

63. Robinson, “The Format of Books–Books, Booklets, and Rolls,” 43.

64. Clemens and Graham, *Introduction to Manuscript Studies*, 251.

inventories, and a variety of other inventory and accounting rolls, all of these containing types of continuous lists that might necessitate the addition of membranes. Notable survivals of rolls include the Guthlac Roll, which contains a unique series of roundel images of the life of St. Guthlac,⁶⁵ a copy of Walter of Bibbesworth's rhymed *Tretiz* for teaching French vocabulary, the two roll format copies of the recipe collection *The Forme of Cury*,⁶⁶ Cambridge, Trinity College MS 0.3.58 with its carols and hymns with notation, and BL MS Additional 23986 with its versions of *The Song of the Barons* and the *Interludium de Clerico et Puella*. These last two testify to the probable circulation of other rolls containing songs, poems, and even theater parts.⁶⁷ Also intriguing are a small parchment roll that seems to be a list of offenses against the church for bishop's officers to use during visitations and a roll held at Columbia University that consists of a table for calculating English land measures.⁶⁸ Both of these would have been portable reference rolls for traveling officials.

Roll format manuscripts produced outside of the government and judiciary are less likely to have survived unless they were luxury rolls, such as the large, diagram- and image-laden genealogical histories. Their low cost, portability, and the lack of a protective cover doomed most rolls to be as ephemeral as unbound booklets, if not more so. The small number of surviving extra-official and nonluxury rolls with their various contents serve as faint traces of and tantalizing clues to the probable wide dissemination and circulation of modest manuscript rolls intended for all kinds of practical, literary, and devotional purposes.⁶⁹

Nevertheless, but unsurprisingly given the focus of his book on documentary culture, Michael Clanchy privileged official records in his speculations on the significance of the roll format, venturing the opinion that the use of rolls in "the Exchequer may have had the odd effect of hallowing the roll format in England."⁷⁰ Anthony Bale follows on this in his comparison of "O Vernicle" rolls with official manuscript rolls.⁷¹ He speculates that the "O

65. London, British Library, Harley Roll Y.6

66. New York, Morgan Library, MS B.36, and London, British Library, Additional MS 5016.

67. Clemens and Graham, *Introduction to Manuscript Studies*, 250.

68. London, British Library, Additional MS 28713, and New York, Columbia University, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, X510.P21.

69. Clemens and Graham, *Introduction to Manuscript Studies*, 258. See also Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*, 144–45.

70. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*, 142.

71. Bales, *The Jew in the Medieval Book*, 154.

Vernicle” rolls form “a kind of covenant with the reader/viewer, in a format similar to legal covenants or baronial charters.”⁷² To elaborate on Bale’s opinion, the visual impact of an “O Vernicle” imagetextobject would be one of quasi-legal, even contractual, authority, thus corresponding to the contractual logic of the imagetexts and other prayers inscribed within—such as: “If I gaze on this Vernicle, because Christ suffered in expiation of my sins, I will not suffer the effect of my sins.” If, however, we can assume the circulation of significant numbers of other kinds of manuscript rolls, there are other possibilities for the visual impact of these artifacts. There were rolls of different sizes, and the sizes have a rough correspondence to types of contents.⁷³

The “O Vernicle” rolls are all, save for two, around four to five inches wide. In order to get a sense of what this size could have signified, I started compiling data on surviving English roll format manuscripts from before 1600. To date, the following catalogues have been surveyed:

- Digital Scriptorium [A union catalogue including larger collections such as the Huntington Library, the Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale, Beineke Library, and Harvard, Houghton Library and a number of smaller collections.]
- The British Library
- The Morgan Manuscript Library
- The Wellcome Library

The database also includes rolls referred to in publications when details could be verified from catalogues or other reliable sources. I excluded the large number of Pipe Rolls compiled over the course of the Middle Ages. I likewise excluded the large numbers of Chancery Rolls as well as court records such as the Eyre Rolls, plea or *Coram Rege* rolls, Essoin Rolls, Controlment Rolls, and so on. The Pipe Rolls averaged about fifteen inches in width (ca. 38 cm)—about half of a large sheep membrane.⁷⁴ By the reign of Henry III,

72. *Ibid.*, 155.

73. After listing categories of roll manuscripts, Sonja Drimmer writes, “Within each of these categories, objects conform not only in their textual contents and function but also in physical character, where more granular genre distinctions emerge. Logically, those that had a public function or were intended for display are wide enough to be viewed from a modest distance” (“Beyond Private Matter: A Prayer Roll for Queen Margaret of Anjou,” *Gesta* 53, no. 1 [2014]: 107).

74. For sizes of medieval membranes see Johan Peter Gumbert, “Sizes and Formats,” in *Ancient and Medieval Book Materials and Techniques: Erice, 18–25 September 1992*, ed. Marilena Maniaci and Paola F. Munafò, *Studi e Testi* 357–58, Vol. 1 (Città del Vaticano: Biblioteca apostolica vaticana, 1993), 236.

the Chancery Fine Rolls were close to the size of Pipe Rolls.⁷⁵ But J. Peter Gumbert's research shows that eight to eleven inches (ca. 20 to ca. 28 cm)—about half of an average sheep membrane—seems to have been the preferred width for ordinary government and legal rolls. As the database grew, it showed that eight to eleven inches was also the preferred width for genealogies and genealogical chronicles as well as for a variety of other estate, family, and personal accounts and records.

Significant for my argument is that forty-five of the 133 manuscript rolls in the database so far are less than eight inches wide (20.20 cm or less) and twenty-four are very narrow, ranging from one and one-half to around five inches wide (3.6 cm to 13 cm).⁷⁶ Of these twenty-four, twelve are likely to have served as textual amulets and seven are “O Vernicle” rolls—one of these being the Esopus Roll and two of the amulets being the Wellcome and Takamiya birth girdles. Of the twenty-one that range from just over five inches to just less than eight inches (ca. 13 cm to ca. 20 cm), two are amulets and three are “O Vernicle” rolls.⁷⁷

Don Skemer has described how, “In the Middle Ages, the two most common writing formats of textual amulets were folded sheets or small text rolls.” Small booklets or codices could also be used as amulets.⁷⁸ The dimensions of textual amulets before folding or rolling were variable. Sometimes the text might be written on trimmings left over from book production or even (for added power) on strips cut from sacred books.⁷⁹ Smaller rolls and folded sheets might be worn suspended from the neck in cloth or leather bags or in suspension capsules made of lead, bone, horn, and other materials. Luther, Skemer writes, mentioned containers made from “the hollow shafts of quills.”⁸⁰ Skemer also describes how, “[b]y binding textual amulets and other consecrated objects to the body, people believed that they could enjoy supernatural protection night and day.”⁸¹ Amulets were often apotropaic, designed to ward off a variety of spiritual and bodily dangers, but they could also be

75. They average around 35 cm, or just about fourteen inches (“Project Information,” *Henry III Fine Rolls Project*, The National Archives and King’s College London, last modified May 16, 2014, http://www.finerollshenry3.org.uk/content/information/project_info.html).

76. See Figure 2: Category frequency of English rolls less than eight inches wide.

77. See Figure 3: Comparative list of English rolls less than eight inches wide.

78. Skemer, *Binding Words*, 125.

79. *Ibid.*, 139 and 128–29.

80. *Ibid.*, 156–57.

81. *Ibid.*, 133.

placed directly on or wrapped around affected parts of the body as cures.⁸² Caxton's *The Doctrinal of Sapience* describes how

Ther ben somme that make wrytynges and bryettes full of crosses and other wrytynges, and sayen that alle they that bere suche breuettis on them may not perysshe in fyre, ne in water, ne in other peryllous place. And ther ben also somme breuettis and wrytynges whyche they do bynde vpon certeyn persones for to hele them of somme sekenesses and maladyes.⁸³

[There are some who make writings and documents full of crosses and other writings, and say that anyone who bears such documents on themselves will not perish in a fire, nor in water, nor in any other perilous place. And there are also some documents and writings that they have bound on certain people in order to heal them of some sicknesses and maladies.]

Kathryn M. Rudy has discovered a rubric in a Southern Netherlandish Book of Hours that suggests that an amulet could even be sewn into a bandage or a sick person's linens:

Write these names onto a piece of abortive parchment that is long enough to go around the sick person's neck, sewn into the sick person's linens. This is tried and true. The angel from heaven brought it to Rome during a great plague and gave it to the pope at his pressing request and his serious appeal. These are the words: [. . .].

The roll, Rudy continues, was "to contain the words 'Adonai,' and other Hebrew circumlocutions for God, as well as the nonsense syllables 'fla fla gra gra,' which would have certainly added to the ritual's mystery."⁸⁴ In this case, the nature of the material (abortive parchment) and the shape and size of the material support were as important as the words. Also important is the fact that this amulet was intended to encircle the neck. Circles were age-old, common magical symbols and devices. Either drawn on the ground or created by an object placed around a part of the body, a circle could protect or contain what it encircled. Drawn on a material support, it could serve as a

82. *Ibid.*, 133–138.

83. *The Doctrinal of Sapience*, 55. Also qtd. in Skemer, *Binding Words*, 134–35 and Gayk, "Early Modern Afterlives," 280.

84. London, British Library, Additional MS 39638, f. 15rv. Transcribed and translated in Rudy, "Kissing Images," 42.

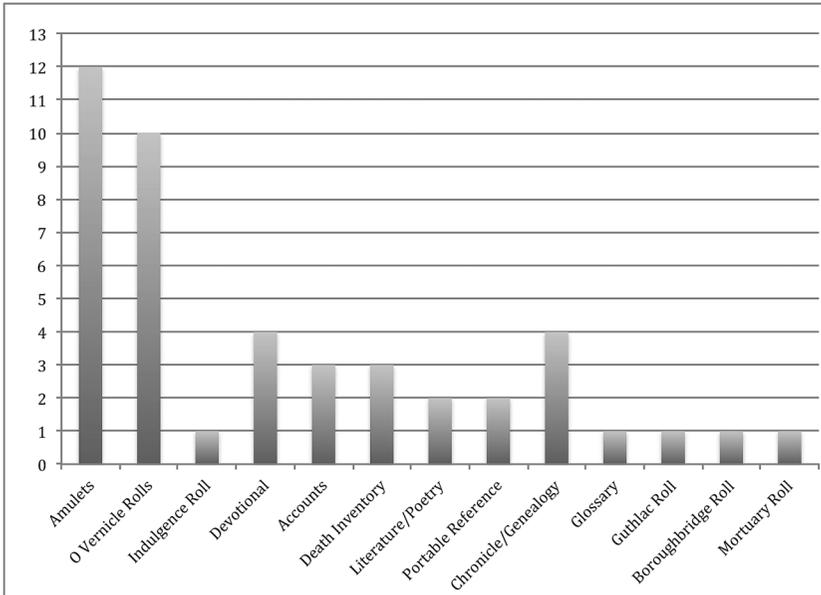


Figure 2. Category frequency of English rolls less than eight inches wide.

talisman for protection.⁸⁵ A number of the narrow format English rolls had both functions: as well as being long enough to wrap around the body, many have seals, circles, and other powerful images drawn upon them.

The most obviously “magical” of the rolls listed in figure 3 is also the narrowest, measuring around one and one-half inches wide (3.6 cm). Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodley Roll 26 is, nevertheless, very long—about thirty-two feet (9.75 m.). Lengthwise on the face is an image of the three nails of the Crucifixion followed by an unreadable text, a list of divine names interspersed with crosses, the opening of the Gospel of John, and the *Pater Noster* in Greek letters. In Skemer’s words, “The top and bottom edges of the roll are varying sequences of pentacles, crosses, and magical signs.”⁸⁶ This was less a text for reading or for ritual use of the words and more an image-textobject where the material support and the assemblage of words and images signified supernatural power. It compares well with a wider amulet roll, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. e Mus. 245. This roll is five inches wide

85. Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, passim, and Skemer, *Binding Words*, 117–20, 138–39, and passim.

86. Skemer, *Binding Words*, 260.

and forty-eight feet eight inches long. Like Bodley Roll 26, this roll is also written lengthwise and has top and bottom borders full of divine names and all kinds of esoteric and magical diagrams and symbols. The three lines of text that take up the middle of the roll sandwich quotations from the Gospels (including the opening of the Gospel John so popular on amulets) between incantations and prayers.⁸⁷

Among the Christian images included in amulets and invoked in charms, the *arma Christi* and the five wounds feature prominently.⁸⁸ What could be more powerful and efficacious than the weapons and wounds that procured the salvation of the world?⁸⁹ One French amulet survives that takes the form of a letter with an image of the Wound in the Side. The letter not only contains incantations, it also instructs how it is to be folded and placed against the belly of a woman in labor.⁹⁰ Likewise, of the eleven amuletic English rolls on my list, nine contain *arma Christi* images. Furthermore, four of the codices containing “O Vernicle” are small enough to have been amulets, all of the four have other apotropaic rubrics and prayers, and three include images of the *arma*.⁹¹ Early printed *arma Christi* imagetexts also survive that could have served as textual amulets.⁹²

London, Wellcome Historical Library, MS 632, is a known birth girdle measuring about four inches wide and eleven feet long (10 × 332 cm).⁹³ Five of its six images are directly related to the Passion: the three nails; the

87. Description based on Skemer, *Binding Words*, 212–13.

88. Kamerick, *Popular Piety*, 180–83, and Skemer, *Binding Words*, 267.

89. As Chardonnens and Hebing have put it: “Christ’s passion is mankind’s salvation, so the instruments of Christ’s suffering and His wounds were often centralized in meditations and apotropaic charms and prayers,” (“Two Charms,” 186–87).

90. Princeton, Princeton University Library, Princeton MS 138.44. Described in Skemer, *Binding Words*, 247–49, and Rudy, “Kissing Images,” 45.

91. Cambridge, University Library MS li.6.43 (li) (ca. 105 × 75 mm [4.1 × 3 inches]); London, British Library, MS Royal 17 A XXVII, fols 71–97 (R) (ca. 160 × 120 mm [ca. 6.3 × 4.7 inches]); Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 1 (D) (ca. 77 × 61 mm [ca. 3 × 2.4 inches]); and Princeton, Princeton University Library, MS Taylor 17 (Hd) (ca. 121 × 91 mm [ca. 4.75 × 3.58 inches]).

92. Gayk, “Early Modern Afterlives,” 281–83. For an example from Germany (Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art 1943.3.831), see Skemer, *Binding Words*, 226–27. While it does not include *arma Christi* images, a printed birth amulet survives that includes prayers to Saints Quiricus and Julitta, a Tau cross, and a measure of Christ charm, see Mary Morse and Joseph J. Gwara, “A Birth Girdle Printed by Wynkyn de Worde,” *The Library*, 7th Series 13, no. 1 (2012): 33–62.

93. This manuscript is discussed in detail in Skemer, *Binding Words*, 259 and in Morse, “Alongside St. Margaret,” 199–200.

arma Christi displayed around Tau cross; the wound in the side surrounded by the wounded hands and feet; a cross with the ladder and the lance crossed by the rod with sponge; and, last, a bloody (and almost rubbed out) Man of Sorrows. The roll accompanies the Tau cross with a version of a Middle English prayer to Saints Julitta and Quiricus that promises among other things that “yf a woman travail [wyth?] chylde lay thys crosse on hyr wombe and she shall be safe delyuered wythoute perell and the childe shall haue cristen-dome and the mother purificacyon.”⁹⁴ Morse has discovered that “[v]ariants of the Middle English Prayer invoking Saints Quiricus and Julitta in Wellcome MS 632 also appear in five other roll format manuscripts which may have been used as birth girdles.”⁹⁵ Notably, four of the five rolls in Morse’s studies of birth girdles contain *arma Christi* imagery, something she has found to be “characteristic iconography for English birth girdles.”⁹⁶

Takamiya MS 56, another of these birth girdles, includes an imagetext of the Three Nails superimposed by a wounded heart and crown of thorns flanked by two scourges.⁹⁷ Later in the roll there is an image of the cross, with prominent nails and a superimposed crown of thorns. The spear and the rod and sponge flank this image. A bit later comes a metric image of the Wound in the Side, with the two wounded hands and two wounded feet positioned around it. New Haven, Yale University, Beinecke Library, MS 410 starts off with an image of Christ, the Cross, and the *arma*. The next illumination is a complex *arma Christi* image. A Cross stands displaying the Vernicle while other *arma* are scattered across the background. At the base of the cross stands a large set of three nails superimposed on a wounded heart and crown of thorns, with the two wounded hands and two wounded feet positioned around them. Below the feet are positioned the Pillar, the Cock, the Hammer and Forceps, and the Scourges. Another birth girdle, London, British Library, MS Add. 88929, not only includes two fairly grisly full Crucifixion images and a bloody Man of Sorrows, it also includes an image of large

94. Transcribed in Morse, “Alongside St. Margaret,” 199.

95. Morse, “Alongside St. Margaret,” 194. The MSS are: New Haven, Yale University, Beineke Library, Beineke MS 410 (†); New York, Morgan Library, MS G 39 (†); London, British Library, MS Additional 88929 (*olim* Durham, Ushaw College MS 29) (†); London, British Library, Rot. Harley MS 43.A 14; and London, British Library, Rot. Harley MS T.11 (†). [† designates the presence of *arma Christi* imagery.]

96. Mary Morse, “‘Thys moche more ys oure Lady Mary longe’: Takamiya MS 56 and the English Birth Girdle Tradition,” in *Middle English Texts in Transition: A Festschrift Dedicated to Toshiyuki Takamiya on His 70th Birthday*, ed. Simon Horobin and Linne R. Mooney (York: York Medieval Press, 2014): 199–219.

97. For a full description of the contents and discussion of Takamiya 56 as a birth girdle, see Morse, “‘Thys moche more ys oure Lady Mary longe.’”

set of three nails superimposed by a wounded heart and crown of thorns, with the two wounded hands and two wounded feet positioned around the crown. The second of the crucifixions in this roll is immediately followed by an image of the Wound in the Side cushioned on a cloud held by angels. New York, Morgan Library, MS G.39, while a wider roll, also includes the Three Nails and Crown of Thorns motif, an image of the Wound in the Side, and the Pelican that is also included in the poem “O Vernicle.” Likewise, the quite narrow London, British Library, Harley Roll T.11 has images of the Wound in the Side and the Three Nails, both with blood drops forming a background. Richard Kieckhefer, meanwhile, has noted that magical conjurations of the time often invoke the Passion, the Wounds, and the different *arma Christi*.⁹⁸

Another narrow format roll, Princeton MS 126, has an illumination of the Trinity as Mercy Seat surrounded by angels holding *arma Christi*. The text on the roll consists of three Latin prayers to the Holy Name. Repetition of holy names was often a feature of Christian charms, even of necromancy, and devotions to the Holy Name, including the spectacle of the name were often felt to be supremely efficacious for all kinds of protection.⁹⁹ Walter Hilton, for example, testifies to popular practice at the same time as he warns against beliefs that afforded power to paintings of Jesus’s name on walls, or as written in a book, or as spoken.¹⁰⁰ Skemer writes that the text in Princeton MS 126 is not in itself “expressly amuletic”; however, he continues, since “the *Arma Christi* imagery had apotropaic associations . . . the user might have expected an amuletic function, even if none was intended.”¹⁰¹ *Arma Christi* imagery is, in fact common enough on textual amulets and devotional doubles to call into question whether the ten so-called *Arma Christi* Rolls, should, more correctly, be called “O Vernicle” Rolls—since what distinguishes them is the prayer poem, not the imagery.

IV. CONCLUSION

This article introduces three different sets of evidence that, considered together, permit a reassessment of the ten manuscript rolls containing the

98. Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites*, 135–36.

99. Jessica Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness: Private Devotion and Public Performance in Late Medieval England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 178–94. On holy names in necromancy see Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites*, 135 and *passim*.

100. Denis Renevey, “Name Above Names: The Devotion to the Name of Jesus from Richard Rolle to Walter Hilton’s *Scale of Perfection I*,” in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: England, Ireland, and Wales, Exeter Symposium VI, Papers Read at Charney Manor, July 1999* (Rochester, N.Y.: Boydell and Brewer, 1999), 116.

101. Skemer, *Binding Words*, 267.

arma Christi imagetext “O Vernicle.” The four codices containing this text that are small enough to have functioned as amulets might also be included in this reassessment. The A version, with its appeals to the innate power of the *arma* and its bias toward petitions for protection, functions much like an apotropaic prayer charm. The fact that seven of the “O Vernicle” rolls are narrow format and that textual amulets were often narrow format heightens the “amulet effect” of these objects. Then, when the very common use of *arma Christi* image-texts on amulets is taken into account, the distinct possibility emerges that the “O Vernicle” rolls were at the very least used both for prayer and as protective charms. The findings here suggest only a slim likelihood that these imagetextobjects were designed for affective devotional practice, although affective response is possible during any intense prayer no matter what the prayer prompt may be. Penitential prayer is a stronger possibility, but most likely as a response to the B version. And in the case of the Esopus Roll, Morse’s suspicion that it is an amulet, probably a birthing girdle, is I think confirmed, when the roll is compared with the evidence presented here. In the end, the constellation of narrow roll format as material support, the *arma Christi* imagery, and the occasional presence of apotropaic indulgences and other petitions for divine protection are fairly clear indicators that most of the “O Vernicle” rolls could have just as easily been seen as textual amulets for warding off dangers, physical and spiritual, as they were seen as primarily devotional.

As multi-signifying imagetextobjects, the “O Vernicle Rolls” have much in common with the Canterbury Ring, a late-fifteenth-century amuletic ring in the British Museum that is engraved with a Man of Sorrows surrounded by the *arma Christi* as well as several depictions of bleeding wounds. The text that accompanies the images describes them as wells of comfort, grace, pity, mercy, and everlasting life. The inside of the ring, however, the side that would be worn secretly in contact with the flesh, has the words “Wulnera quinq dei sunt medicina mei pia / crux et passio Crī sunt medicina michi jasper / melchior baltasar ananyzapta tetragrammaton’” [The five wounds of God are my holy medicine / The cross and passion of Christ are medicine for me. Jasper / Melchior, Balthazar, Anazapta, Tetragrammaton].¹⁰² As with the Canterbury Ring, all you have to do is take a closer look the “O Vernicle” Rolls to realize their “amulet effect.”

102. “The Coventry Ring,” British Museum, AF.897.

		Size	Classification	Arma Christi Images	I Thank Thee & These Armes	Measure of Christ or Mary	Quiricus & Julitta	Other Indulgences or Rubrics	Holy/Divine Name Devotions	Apotropaic Prayer	Seals or Magical Symbols
13	London, British Library, Add. MS 28713 [List of Offences against the Church]	4" x 16"	Portable Reference								
14	H2: San Marino, Huntington Library, MS HM 26054	4" x 5'4"	O Vernicle	Y							
15	O: New Haven, Yale University, Beineke Library, Osborne fa 24, lots 28 & 29	4.5" x 2'2"	O Vernicle	Y							
16	London, British Library, Add. 88929 (Prince Henry's Roll)	4.64" x 14.5'	Amulet/ Birth Girdle	Y	Y	Y	Y			Y	
17	S: Clitheroe, Stonyhurst College, MS 62	4.7" x 6'10"	O Vernicle	Y							
18	C1: Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodley Rolls 16	4.72" x ?	O Vernicle	Y							
19	Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce g.2	4.75" x 5' 4.5"	Chronicle								
20	Princeton, Princeton University Library, Manuscripts Division, MS 126	4.76" x 2.6"	Devotional/ Amuletic	Y					Y		
21	Utrecht, Catharijneconvent Museum, MS ABM h4a [Beauchamp Roll]	4.92" x 4.7'	Devotional/ Amuletic						Y	Y	
22	Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. e Mus. 245 (R)	5" x 48'8"	Amulet						Y	Y	Y
23	B: Edinburgh, Scottish Catholic Archives, MS GB0240 CB/579	5" x 7'4"	O Vernicle	Y	Y						

		Size	Classification	Arma Christi Images	I Thank Thee & These Armes	Measure of Christ or Mary	Quiricus & Julitta	Other Indulgences or Rubrics	Holy/Divine Name Devotions	Apotropaic Prayer	Seals or Magical Symbols
35	New Haven, Yale University, Beinecke Library, Takamiya 112	7" x 18'	Devotional								
36	Cambridge, Trinity College, MS 0.3.58 [Carols]	7.1" x 7.54"	Literature/Poetry								
37	C2: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Add. E.4 (R)	7.2" x ?	O Vernicle	Y							
38	New York, Morgan Library, MS G.39	7.2" x 19.24'	Annulet/ Birth Girdle	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	
39	London, British Library, Egerton 2580	7.2" x 17.2"	Death Inventory								
40	New Haven, Yale University, Beinecke Library, Takamiya 52	7.3" x 8.25"	Chronicle of Kings								
41	London, British Library, Add. MS 29502	7.5" x 8.2"	Genealogical/ Amorial								
42	London, British Library, Egerton 2360	7.6" x 5.10"	Accounts								
43	London, British Library, Add. MS 39958	7.75" x 2'	Accounts								
44	London, British Library, Egerton 2849	7.87" x 2.3"	Mortuary Roll								
45	M: New York, Morgan Library, MS B. 54	7.95" x ?	O Vernicle	Y							

? Indicates loss of membranes.

*According to Drimmer, London, British Library, Harley Rot. 43 A. 14 "is housed in the British Library under the shelfmark Harley Charter 43 A. 14 and is described in the Harley Charters catalogue, although the case for the manuscript says Rot., and it is cited as such elsewhere" (100).