CHAPTER FOUR
SUPERSTITION AND PROGNOSTICATION

It is evident by now that the prognostics can be grouped together in various ways, e.g. by context, language, genre, date and place of origin. The term ‘prognostic’, used to describe a genre, unifies many text types of a diverse nature, found in a variety of circumstances. Prognostics, therefore, do not seem to form a homogeneous group of texts. If the structure of prognostics is inspected, for instance, it appears that some are ordered by time sequences, others by the alphabet, numbered sequences or colours. Even within these broad categories, further distinctions can be made. Temporal prognostics may employ hours, days, months (absolute time), days of the moon (relative time), or systems of arbitrarily appointed days. Non-temporal prognostics may use the alphabet, as in the alphabet prognostic or dreambooks, numbered sequences, as in the Sorites Sanctorum, or colours, as in the prognostic on the colour of the moon. In spite of this diversity, prognostics can be accommodated within the larger framework of superstition.¹ In this chapter, it is my aim to clarify the status of prognostication as a superstitious practice. To accomplish this, I first investigate the authority that is voiced by the texts themselves, after which I examine an existing system to subdivide the field of superstition. The results are employed to determine the position of prognostication in Anglo-Saxon England, as gleaned from written sources, and the intended audience of the Anglo-Saxon prognostics.

Appeals to Authority

In the course of history, several prognostics changed from anonymous texts to ones written by historical or biblical figures, while some prognostics came to incorporate verbal echoes from learned or homiletic writings. These two features are a matter of authority: verbal echoes testify to the erudition of the writer and increases the status of the text; and texts

¹ It is to be noted that I use the term ‘superstition’ in an unprejudiced sense to denote a group of practices which fall outside a dominant religious system, with which they coexist. I elaborate upon the word ‘superstition’ on pp. 102-07.
supposedly written by authorities such as Hippocrates or Galen were thought to be more reliable than anonymous works. Moreover, a prognostic attributed to Augustine, for instance, was more likely to escape censure than if the same text were written anonymously.

Prognostics which disclose the name of the author are found repeatedly. Swan wrote that medieval writers sometimes mentioned the authors of their source text, because “they are interested not in the authorial identity of the individuals named, but rather in the status of those individuals as authoritative sources which set up a chain of affiliation and validation for the text which names them”. There is no reason not to extend this chain of reasoning to scribes who added attributions to extant anonymous texts, as in the case of Apuleian Spheres. The earliest example of this genre, in a demotic papyrus, states that the Sphere is devised by Democritus. Medieval versions of this genre also mention Apuleius, Pythagoras and Petosiris as the author. The terms ‘Apuleian Sphere’ and ‘Pythagorean Device’ bear witness to these attributions, as does the so-called letter of the Egyptian astrologer Petosiris to Nechepso. The text on the development of the foetus was ascribed to Hippocrates, Galen and Augustine, among others, but was actually composed by Augustine’s contemporary Helvius Vindicianus. Old Frisian redactions of this text name Augustine, which makes the text virtually impregnable to criticism. The Old English text, incidentally, carries no attribution. Medieval dreambooks were supposedly devised by Daniel. A wealth of alphabetical and thematic dreambooks has been transmitted in Greek and Arabic, notably those of Artemidoro, Astrampsychos, Daniel, Germanos, Nikephoros and Achmet bin Sirin. In Western medieval literature, Daniel’s is the only alphabetical dreambook. The glossed dreambook in Tiberius A. iii, for instance, is entitled “De somniorn di- uersiitate [sic] secundum ordinem abcharii [sic] danielis prophete”. The alphabet prognostic was said to have been devised by Joseph. This, however, is a late medieval attribution. The earliest representative of this genre, in Old English but undoubtedly a translation, is unattributed and does not explain how the prognostic is to be used. The fact that late medieval alphabet prognostics are ascribed to Joseph and used oneirocritically has led modern scholars to describe this genre as the pseudo-Joseph dreambook. The year prognosis has been called the

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2 Attributions of prognostic genres are listed in full in the text edition.
3 Swan (2001: 77-78).
4 Text 7/4, ll. 2, 4.