More than a century following its initial publication, Felix Liebermann’s three-volume Gesetze der Angelsachsen (1903–1916) remains the most comprehensive study of Old English law, underlying all subsequent research on the subject. Yet as Patrick Wormald has noted, the authoritativeness of Liebermann’s edition has, inadvertently, also detracted from the study of early English legal history. In The Making of English Law, Wormald writes, “Liebermann, for his part, cast the memorials of Anglo-Saxon justice in a cement mixed over three previous generations of remorseless German-language reconstruction of ‘Germanic’ law. The effect was not only to discourage anything more than tinkering with the structure; as often happens to concrete monuments, Anglo-Saxon law became part of an intellectual landscape rather than an object of studied contemplation in its own right.”1 This sense of the Old English legal canon as a “concrete monument” is not new to Wormald (or to Liebermann): as early as 1568, William Lambarde opened his Archaionomia with a comparison of Anglo-Saxon law to “a wall built of stone and oak to defend a city.”2 As Wormald rightly observes, cementing a canon in this fashion risks obscuring the extent to which its contents reflect the interests and intellectual milieu of modern editors as well as the flexibility, ambiguity, and porousness of the texts themselves. Scholarship produced over the last twenty-five years by Wormald, Paul Hyams, and others reveals the many ways in which pre-Magna Carta legislation diverges from modern notions of law and legal practice.3 Likewise, both recent and longstanding

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1 Wormald, Making of English Law, p. 4.
3 Cf. Paul R. Hyams, Rancor and Reconciliation in Medieval England (Ithaca, 2003), pp. 71–111; Simon Keynes, “Royal Government and the Written Word in Late
disputes—for instance, whether II and III Edgar or I and II Cnut constitute single texts, whether Norðhymbra Cyricgrið is simply a variant version of VIII Athelred, and whether many of the anonymous texts, most notably Rectituidines Singularum Personarum and Gerefa, ever functioned as law at all⁴—highlight the shortcomings of any approach that assumes the extant corpus of early English law to be a fixed canon with clear boundaries and settled criteria for inclusion or exclusion.

Many of these questions are cast into particularly high relief when asked of texts lingering on the margins of the Anglo-Saxon legal canon, such as the charm against theft found in three manuscripts of Old English law—CCCC 190, CCC 383, and Textus Roffensis—as well as Cotton Tiberius A.iii, a collection of monastic texts.⁵ The charm—or, more accurately, ritual, since the text includes Old English performance instructions as well as a Latin prayer to the Cross—provides the reader with a series of ceremonial steps to be taken in order to recover stolen goods or livestock. Although the ritual circulated with legal texts as part of the Edward-Edmund group identified by Wormald⁶ and was inscribed in both pre- and post-Conquest legal manuscripts, it has not been considered part of the early English legal canon by modern editors. Other than the regnal lists and a writ of Cnut’s, the theft-

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