The purpose of the present essay is soon summarised: it is - in discerning a certain ambiguity in some of the forms and legends of the badges with which we have become perhaps over-familiar - to question the dichotomy we have retrospectively imposed on this corpus of material by using the polarised terms ‘Sacred’ and ‘Profane’. Of course, the phrase has proved convenient as a title, a catch-all title, indeed, but I suggest it may unconsciously have straitjacketed our thinking with regard to these miniature artefacts, which - as I seem to find myself saying whenever I talk about them - are of disproportionate importance for our understanding not just of late medieval Dutch iconography, but of late medieval culture as a whole.

Some of the badges we have become accustomed to categorise as profane, while they may not be overtly Christian, nevertheless testify in my opinion to a religious way of thinking. I do not doubt that many, or rather, most, of the badges are amuletic, are protective, seeking to manipulate that uncertain power, Fortune, whether it is to repel bad luck - the apotropaic badges, properly so called - or to attract the good. I see the blatantly sexual badges, like the still mysterious statues known by the equally mysterious Irish term *sheilagh-na-gig*, as apotropaia in this defensive sense, as warding off the attentions of that malign force which was known already in the Middle Ages as the the Evil Eye.

That said, it is nevertheless convenient for us moderns to categorise this material in this way, because we know what we mean when we use the polar terms, Sacred and Profane, though medievals would have been puzzled by our modern understanding of these labels. The medieval Weltanschauung did not divide the world rigidly into the unthinking and immiscibly opposed categories that we do, it was not thus polarised, but a continuum, a ‘religious’ way of thinking which pervaded all strands of society. Of course, there are poles on any continuum, opposite ends of the spectrum, and if memorials of Christ, the
Virgin and the saints are at one extreme on that continuum - what I shall nevertheless continue, for the sake of convenience, to call the Sacred pole - then I suppose, the sex-organ badges, and such apparent everyday realia as the pairs of pattens and the chessboards, are at the other, Profane pole.

But if we posit such a continuum which, by definition, has opposite extremes at either end, what, then, of its mid-point, the grey area in the middle? Are there badges whose imagery it is difficult for us to place firmly in either sacred or profane camp - even from our modern perspective - betwixt-and-between badges, neither/nor or both/and badges, liminal images, not sure whether they are sacred or profane? Or perhaps certain they are both? I suggest that there are, indeed, and it is with these ‘ambiguous’ images in particular that the bulk of this essay is concerned.

Even before the advent of Protestantism proper, the Christian church had always had a problem with amulets. In 1424, as Brian Spencer noted, Hugh Pie, a Lincolnshire chaplain of Lollard tendencies, confiscated a souvenir of the wonder-working Holy Rood of Bromholm (said to include a piece of the True Cross) from one of his parishioners, and threw it into the fire.¹ But for the theologically unsophisticated, i.e. the great bulk of the population, official Christianity was, perhaps, not the all-sufficient doctrine it was understood to be by authority, but one that might be usefully supplemented by sundry magical practices, albeit given a Christian colouring.

When even the Christ Child, dandled on the Virgin’s knee, is shown in Italian painting of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries wearing a little red coral branch amulet round his neck, how could such a thing not be Christian?² We perhaps think of greetings cards as being a modern phenomenon, and yet some of the earliest known single-sheet woodcuts of the fifteenth century might legitimately be considered to fall into this category. As still today, in the Middle Ages the New Year was the time to pass on one’s good wishes for the forthcoming year to friends and relations. Some twenty-five such German sheets survive from the latter part of the fifteenth century;³ one type depicts

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