

## Song Review

# Lady Gaga, “Abracadabra”

Interscope Records, US 2025

On 3 February 2025, the American singer-songwriter Lady Gaga released her single “Abracadabra”, which is part of the album *Mayhem* (Interscope, release 7 March 2025).<sup>1</sup> It had premiered one day earlier during the 67th Annual Grammy Awards, accompanied by a music video. Lady Gaga has stated that the song and the music video are about facing your inner critic and self-doubts and persevering – or, “finding the magic in it all”.<sup>2</sup> And indeed, the song itself, with its references to magic and spell-like qualities, takes after magical incantations.

Incantations are defined as illocutionary and perlocutionary acts intended to change the current situation.<sup>3</sup> Their use can be traced back to antiquity, and they have long been a subject of philological analysis.

The song “Abracadabra” and its accompanying music video reference both Christian and occult symbols and practices. I use the term “occult” here to describe a religious-historical phenomenon that allots people a power of their own in relation to transcendence, for example in magic or oracles. Occult practices are interwoven with various religious traditions, including Christian ones. The references to Christian and occult symbols in “Abracadabra” are strongly reminiscent of Old High German incantations and blessings dating from the Early Middle Ages. In these texts, magic is effected by invoking Christian and other powers. Lady Gaga’s song, while it is far removed from Old High German incantations, seems to build a similar relation between Christian and occult symbols.

1 ABRACADABRA (Lady Gaga, Parris Goebel, Bethany Vargas, US 2025), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vBynw9Isr28> [accessed 16 April 2025].

2 Jeffs 2025.

3 Beck 2009, 1483.

It is therefore an unconventional but nevertheless fruitful thought experiment to look at Lady Gaga’s song “Abracadabra” through the lens of Old High German incantations. The goal is to highlight the song’s structure, the stylistic devices used, and, not least of all, the Christian and occult references in the lyrics and music video. Viewing the song from this perspective should be understood as an attempt to find the magic in it all.

Old High German incantations generally consist of two parts: the *historiola*, a short narrative detailing the effect of the incantation, followed by the *incantatio*, the spell proper.<sup>4</sup> The latter often has a metrical form, indicating that it may have been sung or chanted.<sup>5</sup> It can be argued that “Abracadabra” follows the same structure. The song has two verses, each of which is followed by the same eight lines (the pre-chorus).<sup>6</sup> The verses have a more narrative quality and therefore resemble a *historiola*, even more so in contrast to the chorus (and post-chorus).<sup>7</sup> The choruses can be regarded as an *incantatio*, a magical formula, because they each contain six iterations of the magically connotated word *abracadabra* and because they are performed rather like a chant and with a distinct rhythm that stands out from the rest of the song.

The chorus and post-chorus of “Abracadabra” exhibit two more characteristics of an *incantatio*. First, they repeat a magical word, *abracadabra*, a stylistic device intended to strengthen the effect of the *incantatio*. Secondly, the word is varied in the chorus:

Abracadabra, amor-oo-na-na  
Abracadabra, morta-oo-h-ga-ga  
Abracadabra, abra-oo-na-na  
In her tongue she said, “Death or love tonight”

An *incantatio* is often formulated not with everyday language but with words that are incomprehensible and possibly magical. An example containing such vocabulary is the “Züricher Hausbesegnung”, a blessing that ends with the untranslatable word “chnospinci”,<sup>8</sup> whose apotropaic effect is in-

4 Beck 2009, 1483–1484.

5 Beck 2009, 1483.

6 The lyrics are quoted from Genius Lyrics 2025. This website formats the pre-chorus as two parts (refrain and pre-chorus). For better understanding, I will use the term “pre-chorus” for both parts.

7 Following the structure given by Genius Lyrics 2025.

8 Müller 2007, 282–283.

tended to ward off the devil. Likewise, the variations of *abracadabra* in the chorus of Lady Gaga's song seem nonsensical and possibly magical words.

Besides being structurally significant, the chorus, especially the juxtaposition of death and love at its end, highlights one of the central themes of "Abracadabra": the coming together of Christian and occult symbols and practices. As stated in the introduction, "Abracadabra" is reminiscent of early medieval incantations in that both Christian and occult symbols can be found and appear to be a necessary component of the effect, be it magical or otherwise. This is most visible in regard to the figures appearing in the song and in the early medieval incantations. Thus, the differing ways Lady Gaga appears in the video are closely connected to the lyrics and literally visualise the figures mentioned.<sup>9</sup>

Lady Gaga plays two characters in the video, distinguished from each other by the colour of their costumes: red and white. Only the former character is mentioned in the lyrics, in the pre-chorus – "Like a poem said by a lady in red / You hear the last few words of your life" – which establishes her as a sort of counterpart to the listener. As the "lady in red" she wears two costumes in the "Abracadabra" music video: first, a red latex cloak with slits on the front in the shape of a cross and nails through the fabric, paired with a very broad red hat with thorn-like protrusions on the top and black latex gloves; and second, a short red dress that is deliberately torn.<sup>10</sup> The white-dressed character also wears two different costumes: first, a white lace coat with a large train over a white catsuit, with lace panels and hook-and-eye embellishments in the front that are arranged in the shape of a cross; and second, a corset dress with a long ribbon skirt.

Their costumes, which mirror each other in their general shape and design, as well as their alternating appearances in the music video suggest that the two characters Lady Gaga plays are opponents. A similar constellation can be found in the "Trierer Teufelsspruch", which invokes Christ as adversary of the devil in order to banish him: "Nu vuillih bidan den rihchan Crist, the mannelihches chenist ist / ther den divvel gibant".<sup>11</sup> Whether Lady

9 Several statements by Lady Gaga make connections between the lyrics and the music video; see Jeffs 2025.

10 See also Darius 2025.

11 Müller 2007, 282–283. "Now I pray to the magnificent Christ, who is the salvation of mankind, who constrained the devil." (Paraphrased according to the translation by Müller.)

Gaga's red and white characters can be aligned with the devil and Christ, however, would have to be the subject of further analysis.

More importantly, there is another aspect of the costumes akin to a principle followed by another Old High German incantation: Incorporating Christian symbols or prayers but modifying them for magical purposes. An incantation known under the *incipit* "Contra caducum morbum" (literally: against the falling sickness, meaning against epilepsy) requires the utterance of untranslatable and possibly magical words – "Donerdiutiger. dietewigo."<sup>12</sup> – as well as the Lord's Prayer – "et dic pater noster".<sup>13</sup> In the music video of "Abracadabra", this relation to Christian symbols is on a visual level. The costumes, for example, feature different crosses. These Christian references are closely incorporated into a visual performance that could be understood as a magic ritual.

In summary, viewing Lady Gaga's song as an incantation accentuates three aspects. First, on a structural level, the more narrative parts of "Abracadabra" can be contrasted with the chorus and post-chorus, which are repetitive and sometimes chanted and therefore emulate an *incantatio*. Secondly, "Abracadabra" contains invented language; the *incantatio* contains magically connotated words that are not part of the everyday language. Thirdly, "Abracadabra" visualises references to transcendence: although the two characters in red and white costumes appear in opposition to each other, they are both portrayed by Lady Gaga, giving the impression that they are her alter-egos, and their costume design is influenced by Christian and occult symbols.

Whether "Abracadabra" is indeed an incantation or not, Lady Gaga is at its centre. The song and music video, she has said herself, represent her inner conflict, the struggle between her more negative side and her more positive side.<sup>14</sup> In light of the incantation-like qualities of the lyrics and the visual references to Christian symbols as well as occult or magical ones, one might say that perhaps she has crafted a new spell.

12 Müller 2007, 276–277.

13 Müller 2007, 278–279. This incantation requires certain movements, or choreography, for it to take effect. The person who recites the incantation and prayer is to stand in a certain way while speaking, touch the earth, and, finally, jump over the patient.

14 Jeffs 2025; Lady Gaga: Inside "Abracadabra" Presented by Mastercard! (Exclusive), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JEo4QTjn-N8>, 00:00:45–00:00:53.

## Bibliography

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## Filmography

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- Lady Gaga: Inside “Abracadabra” Presented by Mastercard! (Exclusive), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JEo4QTjn-N8> [accessed 16 April 2025].