

**SAINTS, DOCTORS, AND SOOTHSAYERS:
THE DYNAMICS OF HEALING IN
GREGORY OF TOURS'S
*DE VIRTUTIBUS SANCTI MARTINI***

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Besides objecting to Gregory of Tours's "barbarized" Latin, critics and historians often regarded his writings as proof of the crude and superstitious outlook of the author and his society.¹ Countless incidents of miraculous healings and divine interventions, meticulously recorded by Gregory, formed the basis of such an interpretation. Although students of this period are becoming less inclined to show such disdain for the prominent role Gregory gives to the supernatural in everyday life, there is yet to be, as Peter Brown has noted (222), "a *religionsgeschichtliches Kommentar*" on the work of this prolific writer and bishop of sixth-century Gaul. The absence of a new, thorough, and precise interpretation of Gregory means that the conventional assessment of his work remains largely unchallenged.² Of course, a brief discussion such as this cannot provide the "full religious commentary" on Gregory of which Brown speaks and for which he claims there is an "urgent need" (222). Nevertheless, the following remarks may contribute to the larger process of changing our understanding of Gregory and of reinterpreting the religious practices and attitudes of his society.

Generally speaking, my intention is to consider Gregory's depiction of healing miracles and then to remark briefly on their social relevance. In particular, I will examine those texts in which remedies administered by doctors or soothsayers compete with the possibility of healing through the

supernatural means of a saint's intercession and divine power (*virtus*). I will confine my remarks almost exclusively to Gregory's *Four Books Concerning the Miraculous Deeds of Saint Martin*.³ In this work, written over a twenty-year period (ca. 573–594), Gregory records the appeals which individual men and women, from all levels of society, made to Saint Martin for help. Though much of what will be said is, I think, applicable to Gregory's hagiographic writing as a whole, I have chosen this text because it is exclusively concerned with miracles—precisely the sort of work most susceptible to the modern reader's interpretation of Gregory and his society as being outrageously and excessively credulous.

Perhaps with the exception of Venantius Fortunatus, no other writer of the Merovingian Age did more to promote the cult of the saints than Gregory of Tours.⁴ The sheer bulk of his writing makes Gregory one of the most prominent enthusiasts of the veneration of the saints ever known in the history of hagiography. To examine the way this sixth-century bishop describes his own experiences with sickness will give us some indication of how one of the most ardent believers in the curative powers of Saint Martin behaved when threatened by debilitating illness.

In the *VSM*, Gregory records a number of his own ailments, ranging from severe headaches to choking on a fishbone.⁵ While several of these accounts depict the author immediately turning to the miraculous intervention of Martin for help, Gregory also describes occasions in which he first attempts to be cured by medical means alone. In such cases, the initial efforts to heal Gregory by a doctor or by the application of a prescribed remedy fail. The description of a physician's efforts to cure the bishop's dysentery, for example, characterizes the possibility of a supernatural cure as a last hope, an alternative sought only when the doctor's medicine proves unsuccessful. After frequent vomiting, fever, pains in the stomach and bowels, Gregory fears for his life and exclaims to the "chief physician" Armentarius:

"Omnem ingenium artificii tui inpendisti, pigmentorum omnium vim iam probasti, sed nihil proficit perituro res saeculi. Unum restat quod faciam; magnam tibi tyriacam ostendam. Pulverem de sacratissimo domini sepulchro exhibeant, et exinde mihi facito potionem. Quod si hoc non valuerit, amissa sunt omnia evadendi perfigia." Tunc misso diacono ad antedictum beati praesolis tumulum, de sacrosancto pulvere exhibuit dilutumque mihi porregunt ad bibendum. Quo hausto, mox omni dolore sedato, sanitatem recepi de tumulo. (*VSM* 2.1)

[“You have applied every invention of your profession; you have now tried the power of all your remedies but a thing of the world is of no advantage to one who is about to die. There is one thing left that I may do. I will show

you a great remedy. Let them take the dust from the most sacred tomb of Lord [Martin]; and then concoct a drink for me. If this does not work, all opportunities of escaping are lost." Then a deacon was sent to the above-mentioned tomb of the holy patron; he brought some of the sacrosanct dust and, when it was diluted, they offered [it] to me to drink. After it was drunk, the pain soon subsided and I received health from the tomb.]

Gregory's remarks to his doctor clearly indicate a genuine desire for a medical means of recovery (even the miraculous remedy is mixed by the physician). The supernatural intervention of Martin becomes a possibility *only* in the context of the doctor's limitations as a healer. The saint's power represents a religious alternative to the unsuccessful secular remedies. This description of Gregory's dysentery and his recovery suggests a far more dynamic approach to healing than his modern detractors have acknowledged.⁶ The account is characterized as much by Gregory's initial trust and eventual disappointment in the abilities and remedies of his doctor as it is by his faith in the power of Martin.

Nor is this an isolated incident. In another instance, Gregory relates how he uses baths and warm compresses on his stomach when he suffers from the gripes. Only after all medical attempts fail and the pain begins to increase, does he resort to a supernatural alternative:

Adhibui, fateor, saepius balneas atque res calidas super ipsas alvi torturas ligari faciebam, sed nihil mederi poterat infirmitati. Sexta etenim dies inluxerat, quod magis ac magis dolor invalescebat, cum mihi venit in memoria, ante paucos annos, . . . me ab hoc dolore sancti virtute fuisse sanatum. (*VSM* 4.1)

[Very often, I confess, I took baths and applied warm applications to those churnings of the belly, but nothing could cure the illness. The sixth day had dawned and the pain was growing greater and greater when I recalled that a few years earlier . . . I had been cured from this sickness by the power of the holy man.]

Far from being instances of "dense superstition" (Brehaut x), the examples given thus far show Gregory, even as the representative and leading supporter of Saint Martin, giving secular methods the first opportunity to heal him. Contrary to the traditional interpretation of such accounts, there is nothing in the passages cited that suggests Gregory prematurely sought divine intervention. Oddly enough, the very description of Gregory's dysentery discussed earlier has been used to demonstrate the decline of the medical profession in Merovingian society. According to this view, the doctor could not practise his profession due to "the condition of people's minds," which hastily favoured miraculous cures before ever giving

medical treatments the chance to work (Brehaut xxii). But there is nothing in the text describing Gregory's illness that suggests "he soon decided" to abandon Armentarius's treatment. In fact, if we closely examine Gregory's description of the dysentery, we find that an unspecified, but nonetheless substantial, time must have passed before the bishop realized that even the best physician could not help him. First of all, Gregory does not mention a particular week or day on which he contracted the disease. Rather, he gives a broad temporal reference: "*mense autem secundo ordinationis meae, cum essem in villa, incurri disinteria*" ("in the second month of my ordination, while I was at a country-house, I incurred dysentery" [VSM 2.1]). Then he describes the disease in detail. The description is important since it clearly indicates the different stages of the illness. First comes the fever followed by bouts of vomiting; next a loss of appetite and, finally, severe pains pierce the stomach and the bowels. This is the point at which Gregory turns to Armentarius, who has obviously been treating him at various stages of the illness, and exclaims that the "one thing left" is Martin's help. On the basis of such a description we can hardly conclude that Gregory was overeager to find a supernatural cure. This is especially true in the case of the gripes. Gregory suffers for six days before he claims to have resorted to the miraculous aid of Martin. His initial response to the illness and the lapse of time are somewhat embarrassing for Gregory: he "confesses" to using the secular remedies of baths and hot compresses and even tries to excuse his behaviour by insinuating that he had forgotten how the *virtus* of Martin had cured him "years before." These descriptions depicting the treatment of dysentery and the gripes compel us to acknowledge that on two occasions Gregory of Tours — the guardian of one of the most important shrines in Europe, the successor of Saint Martin and the protector of his cult — exhausted the possibilities offered by medicine well before he turned to his holy patron for help. Such behaviour indicates that even the staunchest believer in and promoter of saints in sixth-century Gaul took advantage of the secular healing alternatives available to him.

Nor does Gregory always depict doctors as completely failing in their attempt to heal. In the *Life of the Fathers*, a case involving an epileptic servant again shows the dynamic interplay between secular remedies and the miraculous power of a saint. The incident is worth quoting in full since it illustrates both the temporarily successful cure of the physicians as well as the role of divine intervention in healing:

Phronimi igitur Agatensis episcopi famulus epilentici morbi accentu fatigabatur. ita ut plerumque cadens ac spumans, linguam suam propriis dentibus

laceraret; et cum ei medicis plurima fierent, accidebat, ut paucis mensibus interpositis, non tangeretur a morbo; sed iterum in redivivo cruciatu ruens, peius quam prius egerat perferebat. Dominus vero eius cum vidisset tantas virtutes ad sepulchrum beati Niceti fieri, dixit ad eum: "Vade et prosternere coram sepulchro sancti, orans, ut te adjuvare dignetur. Qui cum iussa explesset, sanus regressus est, nec ultra eum hic adtigit morbus. Septimus enim erat [annus] ab incolomitate pueri, quando eum nobis episcopus praesentavit. (*Liber Vitae Patrum, MGH:SRM 1, 2. 8.8*)

[A servant boy of Phronimius, the bishop of Agde, used to be stricken by an attack of epileptic illness in such a way that, [after] falling very frequently and frothing [at the mouth], he would lacerate his tongue with his own teeth. And when many things were done for him by doctors, it happened that for a few months he was not touched by the illness. But falling again into renewed torment, he was suffering more than he had before. Since his master had seen that such great deeds of power were being done at the tomb of blessed Nicetius, he said to the boy: "go and prostrate [yourself] before the tomb of the holy man, praying that he might deign to help you." When he had fulfilled these commands health returned and the illness did not touch him anymore. Indeed, seven years [had passed] since the boy's cure when the bishop presented him to us.]

The description of treatment for epilepsy follows a pattern almost identical to the one we observed in Gregory's account of dysentery and the gripes. The sick boy first turns to the doctors. In this case, the secular healers administer remedies that actually prevent the recurrence of a seizure "for a few months." But when the illness returns, the boy's master, Bishop Phronimius, realizes that the medical cure lacks a lasting effect, and so he orders the servant to go to Saint Nicetius's tomb. As with Gregory's illnesses, divine intervention becomes an alternative only after the treatment of the doctors fails to work; until that time, no appeal is made to a supernatural agent.⁷

Another instance in the *VSM* even suggests that the alternatives of medicinal healing and miraculous cures are not necessarily opposed but can actually work together, both being simultaneously administered. When a terrible plague ravages the people of Tours, covering their bodies with boils and blisters, successful treatment entails the skill of secular healers working in conjunction with divine intervention: "*in qua aegritudine nihil medicorum poterat ars valere, nisi cum dominicum adfuisset auxilium*" ("against this illness the art of the doctors was able to do nothing except when the lordly help [of Martin] had been present" [*VSM 3.34*]).

These examples clearly show that Gregory did not categorically reject the alternative of secular healing methods. In his *Histories*, Gregory even

credits doctors with saving the life of a badly beaten priest through their application of cupping- glasses.⁸ But the usual remarks about Gregory's depiction of doctors contrast his superstition with the reasonableness of his contemporary and fellow-hagiographer, Pope Gregory the Great.⁹ Though the latter maintains that "acts of virtue" — and not the ability to perform miracles — constitute sanctity, he still includes numerous miracle stories in his *Dialogues* but relies on them far less than Gregory of Tours.¹⁰ The difference between the two authors, at least with respect to their views on secular healing, is based largely on two letters written by Pope Gregory that urge sick friends to follow the advice of doctors.¹¹ Of course, as we have already seen, Gregory of Tours treats the issue of secular healing with far more sophistication than his modern critics care to admit. Since the *VSM* provides explicit examples of Gregory first turning to secular remedies for curing illness, the naïve credulity traditionally attributed to him in matters of healing can no longer be cited as a legitimate distinction between the bishop of Tours and Gregory the Great. Certainly Gregory of Tours has some harsh words to say about physicians, but such remarks, as we shall see, can hardly be explained by a gullible belief in miracles. Given the fact that the texts of the *VSM* presented so far do not completely disregard doctors and their remedies as an option, the gap between Gregory the Great and Gregory of Tours, at least on the issue of secular healing, cannot be as wide as it is generally assumed to be.

When we examine other religious practices of healing described by Gregory of Tours, we find that the possibility of a miraculous cure through the intercession of Saint Martin vies with the folk remedies administered by soothsayers. Evidence from the *VSM* suggests that Martin's *virtus* competed with the healing methods of pagan *rusticitas*, still firmly entrenched in, though certainly not limited to, the countryside of sixth-century Gaul.¹² Because the "rustic" practices of treating illness involve, unlike the methods of secular healers, the use of religious rites opposed by the Church, Gregory shows far less tolerance toward the soothsayer than he does the doctor.¹³

Two striking features appear in Gregory's representation of the religious remedies that rival Christianity. The first is the wide acceptance of pagan healing practices. The phrase "*ut mos rusticorum habet*," or a variation of it, often appears when Gregory refers to folk-remedies. The context in which the phrase appears suggests that the use of soothsayers, amulets, and potions are the "usual practices of rustic people." When a certain Aquilinus, for instance, enters the woods on a hunting trip with his father and is suddenly stricken with fear to the point of madness, his family appeals

not immediately to the *virtus* of Martin but, what is far more common, to the healers of the countryside:

Parentes vero eius intellegentes, eum diaboli inmissione mulcari, ut mos rusticorum habet, a sortilegis et hariolis ligamenta ei et potiones deferebant. (VSM 1.26)

[His relatives, realizing that he is being tormented by an invasion of a demon, bring him amulets and potions from diviners and soothsayers, as is the custom of rustics.]

The same pattern then emerges here as in the case of the doctors. Once the remedies of the soothsayers fail, Aquilinus's family appeals to Martin for a cure:

Sed cum nihil valeret ex more, sancti Martini auxilia prumpti dolore cogente, requirunt. . . . (VSM 1.26)

[But since nothing in the usual manner was able [to heal him], they, prompted by his compelling pain, seek the help of Saint Martin. . . .]

The second feature that appears in Gregory's depictions of alternative religious healing practices is the necessity of renouncing paganism in order to receive a cure. Aquilinus, for example, actually leaves the countryside (*silvas Franciae*) for the city of Tours, where he prays and fasts at Saint Martin's church. Once cured, he never returns to his family — they are forgotten (*oblitisque parentibus*). He becomes, in effect, a member of Martin's family, in whose household he serves, presumably, for the rest of his life.¹⁴ Moreover, the consequences of reverting back to paganism after being cured by Martin are devastating: when an unnamed girl returns to the "vomit of idolatry" she again contracts the paralysis of which she had recently been cured.¹⁵

One could cite other instances in which Gregory expresses disdain for soothsayers and their methods. But the texts presented thus far should adequately establish the fact that the divine intercession of a saint was but one of three alternatives for the curing of a disease.¹⁶ The existence of these alternatives raises a fundamental question: what rationale does Gregory give to explain why the Christian healing alternative, rather than the pagan or secular, offers the most beneficial cure? In other words, why saints instead of soothsayers or doctors?

According to Gregory, the cures sought by rustics actually lead to poorer health.¹⁷ His scorn of the pagan methods reveals more the desire to eliminate an "alternative system" of religious explanation (Brown 232), than to articulate a rationale for the Christian approach to sickness. Quite simply, when appealed to with genuine faith, Saint Martin is a reliable and effective

healer while the soothsayers “are never of any help to the infirm” (*VSM* 1.27). As in the case of Serentatus’s sick wife, once the herbs, potions, and amulets applied by the “*stulti*” are removed and oil from Martin’s tomb used instead, recovery from illness can occur (*VSM* 4.36). Less fortunate is the boy who falls ill in Brioude: he is treated not with a relic of Saint Julian but by a soothsayer whose remedies kill him.¹⁸ Gregory therefore presents the pagan alternative of healing as ineffective and even dangerous. In his view, only “fools” would seek cures from soothsayers whose methods will undoubtedly bring greater suffering, whereas Martin and the Christian saints, when faithfully invoked, provide certain cures.

To present repeatedly an opposing view in such simplistic and stark terms is, of course, a feature of all propaganda literature, to which hagiography certainly belongs.¹⁹ But Gregory faces a far more complex problem when he approaches the alternative of secular healing. The simple answer that Martin is a more effective healer will not work in cases pertaining to doctors. For there is no overt reason to resist hostilely the healing methods of physicians, since they neither oppose nor openly threaten Christianity as the popular soothsayer does. Indeed, as has been already shown, Gregory himself resorts to doctors. Moreover, unlike the soothsayer, the doctor is at least depicted as having the capability of healing, especially when his talents are used in a Christian context, as was the case during the plague in Tours mentioned earlier. The examples previously cited establish Gregory’s acknowledgment of the physician’s healing potential. The bishop of Tours himself does not hesitate to apply his own medicinal remedies. In short, Gregory obviously assumes that the physician and his methods can heal.²⁰ This assumption requires a rationale for Martin’s healing power that is not based solely on the saint’s efficaciousness as a curer of physical ailments. For without such a rationale, the difference between Martin and, let us say, the doctors who temporarily healed the epileptic boy is only a matter of degree: the saint would simply be a better healer of the body than the physicians, who, by the way, would at least potentially possess a curative power similar to Martin’s since they too were able—albeit temporarily—to cure a disease.

If we intend to understand fully why Gregory claims that the cures of saints are more beneficial than those of the physicians, we will have to resist the traditional and simplistic interpretation of the holy person as the mediaeval substitute for a modern doctor.²¹ While there is no doubt that the author of the *VSM* presents Martin as a highly effective and reliable healer, Gregory also emphasizes that Martin’s power to cure the body is the least

important benefit of a healing miracle. It is not primarily the curing of a disease that distinguishes Martin from the physician but his ability to heal the whole person by spiritually, sometimes even socially, transforming the individual. Gregory, for example, closes the third book of the *VSM* by comparing Martin's *virtus* to a variety of common remedies. Then he adds that Martin not only provides the cures of the body but, "what is greater than all these things, he wipes away and levigates the stains of the conscience."²² In Gregory's view, the cures which Martin performs provide the spiritual healing from sin and hence extend beyond healing corporeal ailments: for just as the saints, as "friends of God" (*amici Dei*), intercede to "curtail the types of illnesses here [i.e., on earth], so too they avert the cruel punishments of torments there [i.e., in hell]; and just as they soothe bodily fevers here, so too they extinguish the external fevers there . . ." ²³ The ultimate cure comes on the day of judgment when Gregory, echoing Sulpicius Severus, hopes to be rescued from the eternal flames on the grounds that "he is that one for whom Martin prays."²⁴

These remarks about Martin's function as a healer, since they reveal how Gregory himself understands the significance of miraculous recoveries, provide a key to interpreting the many cures reported in the *VSM*. He clearly views Martin primarily as a bearer of spiritual health by stressing the saint's capacity to cure sin while also attenuating his role as a healer of the body. For Gregory, Martin's *virtus* attests to the redemption of humanity first undertaken by the Incarnation and repeated in the many cures granted to those afflicted not simply by physical disease but by the far more serious sickness of sin. When seen from this perspective, curing a specific ailment of the body does not count for much. After all, even a doctor can cure an illness, as Gregory and the many others in the *VSM* who turn to secular healing well know. Saints, however, offer more than simply bodily cures. Gregory's own perception of Martin as an agent of spiritual health should caution us against attaching too much importance to the saint's role as a curer of physical illness, usually the only aspect of Martin's function that captures the attention of modern readers. Healing the body in itself is not enough to distinguish the saint from the physician. Gregory realizes this and his view of Martin reveals a continuity between the *VSM* and the earlier Christian literature describing the healing powers attributed to some of the Egyptian monks, available in the West through Rufinus's Latin translations. In the *Historia monachorum*, for instance, the status of miraculous cures is succinctly expressed in terms similar to Gregory's own perception of Martin

found in his closing remarks to the third book of the *VSM*. When viewed solely as physical healers, saints are, quite frankly, not that remarkable:

Quid ergo miramini, si nos parvi homines parva faciamus, claudos et caecos curantes, quod et medici ex arte facere possunt?²⁵

[Why, therefore, do you marvel if we little men do little things, curing the lame and the blind? Even doctors can do this with their art.]

The physician, of course, makes no attempt to address the spiritual dimension of an individual and so, in Gregory's view, fails to provide a redemptive element to the healing process. The best the doctor can do is put a person back into his original condition, which, regardless of how physically healthy the body becomes, is still a state of sin and death. This reluctance on the part of the physician to take into account the relationship between a person's spiritual state and physical illness is at the heart of Gregory's criticism of medicine. After describing the miraculous cure of Deacon Theudomer's cataracts, Gregory asks:

Quid unquam tale fecere cum ferramentis medici, cum plus negotium doloris exserant, quam medellae, cum, distentum transfixumque spiculis oculum, prius mortis tormenta figurant, quam lumen aperiant? (*VSM* 2.19)

[Have doctors ever done such a thing with their instruments of iron, since they practice the business of pain more than of healing when, with the eye swollen and pierced with needles, they fashion the torments of death rather than clear the vision?]

The implication here is that the unnatural and painful techniques of the physician fail to address the psychological and spiritual needs of the patient. The medical treatment involves reducing the sufferer to a diseased body part, which is to be treated by external means alone. The religious response to the illness entails the internal treatment of prayer and emotional outpouring: "*noctem totam lacrimis et orationibus deductam. . .*" ("the whole night was spent in tears and prayers. . . ." [*VSM* 2.19]). Theudomer thus undergoes a spiritual transformation through his religious activity, which eventually leads to the physical cure. But it is the religious activity of the one afflicted rather than the cure itself that is the central focus not only in the case of Theudomer but also of nearly every healing miracle described by Gregory. This approach to healing suggests that the physical cure of a specific ailment is of no benefit or, rather, cannot occur when one remains, so to speak, spiritually sick. Hence the doctor, because of his limited treatment of the diseased eye, really causes "eternal blindness" (*aeternam caecitatem*).

Now we come to the heart of Gregory's rationale for promoting saints, rather than doctors, as healers. There is an underlying theological premise running through the *VSM* (and all of Gregory's hagiography) that directs the ultimate aim of humanity to redemption. Put simply, the saint — not the physician and certainly not the soothsayer — offers the afflicted the means to the redemptive experience. This theological outlook explains what constitutes sickness and health. Whatever threatens the redemptive experience results in illness; whatever affirms it causes health, both physical and spiritual. Some of the numerous instances in which Martin inflicts harm illustrate this principle. Working on a Sunday, during certain times in Lent, or on Martin's feast day can result in a variety of physical ailments.²⁶ What Gregory considers immoderate behaviour on holy days also causes maladies: a woman who conceives on a Sunday bears a terribly deformed child; a deacon is blinded for getting drunk instead of going to Mass (*VSM* 2.24; 3.38). Such examples explicitly attribute illness to sacrilegious behaviour. Those who jeopardize their hope of redemption, the spiritually ill, acquire a debilitating sickness that compels them to engage in prayers, vigils, and fasting — redemptive activities and the cures for spiritual illness that, in turn, lead to the restoration of physical health. Once again, the actual cure of the afflicted body part plays only a minor role in these healing miracles. Of major significance is the individual's genuine acknowledgment of sin and the earnest belief in the saving power of Martin.

When seen in this light, the spiritual transformation brought about by the individual's own initiative and religious behaviour really constitutes the healing miracle rather than an inexplicable suspension of the natural order.²⁷ In fact, a miraculous cure cannot take place without such a transformation. A recovering alcoholic from Bayeux, for instance, after soberly spending six months in vigils and prayers, ceases his religious activity, takes to drink again and eventually dies.²⁸ As this account suggests, the *virtus* of Martin cannot help heal and redeem without the cooperation of the afflicted individual.

This failed miracle involving the alcoholic suggests a causal relationship between the afflicted person's behaviour and a cure. As the various cases we have examined indicate, a genuine and sustained appeal to Saint Martin, accompanied by the rituals that go along with it, always results in healing. This pattern appears throughout the *VSM* and it is especially conspicuous in the punitive miracles that, as we saw, harm those who engage in sacrilegious activities. Only after the individual refrains from such conduct and resorts to the remedies of prayer, fasts, and vigils, does healing

occur. Behaviour to the contrary, if it persists as it did in the case of the imbibor from Bayeux, can result in death. From so clear and definite a pattern, the precise relationship between the afflicted and the experience of healing emerges: miraculous cures depend directly on and derive from an individual's religious response to illness. Given the obvious emphasis Gregory puts on the initiative of the sick and the instrumental role they play in their own healing process, it hardly seems accurate to characterize the miracles described in the *VSM* as "fortuitous" or "gratuitous."²⁹ Healing miracles simply do not happen on their own; they are the result of a clearly defined pattern of religious behaviour that creates the conditions necessary for divine intervention. Though the frequency of miraculous occurrences in the *VSM* may indicate a constant flow of *virtus* streaming from Martin's tomb, tapping into it usually results from following a series of prescribed rituals often taking days and sometimes years to perform.

If, then, the miracles depicted in the *VSM* cannot be characterized as "gratuitous wonders," the gap between the sophisticated hagiography of Gregory the Great and the more elementary miracle stories of Gregory of Tours again narrows. To claim that Gregory of Tours's miracles seem to lack a spiritual content when compared with those of Gregory the Great, is to overlook the way in which the former explicitly associates a healing miracle with the redemptive experience and freedom from sin. Promoting respect for holy days, discouraging immoderate sex and drinking, as well as exaggerating the dangers of pagan folk remedies, reflect the bishop of Tours's spiritual and pastoral concerns as much as they do those of Pope Gregory.³⁰

Before concluding this discussion, one other aspect of the healing miracle deserves our consideration. Those who are healed sometimes experience more than a spiritual transformation and physical cure. Gregory gives accounts in which the redemptive experience of a healing miracle takes the form of the individual's change in social status. The moving account of Theodomund illustrates such an occurrence (*VSM* 1.7). Unable to hear or utter a coherent word, he remains quietly mumbling prayers and weeping at Martin's basilica. All the money received in alms he gives to his fellow paupers and the other needy who visit the church. Then, after three years, he is cured with a painful discharge of blood bursting through his mouth. Because of his great devotion to Martin during this long suffering, he has gained the respect of Queen Clotild, who has him educated and made a cleric. He becomes renowned for having memorized all the Psalms. Theodomund thus changes from a sick, poor, uneducated lay person to a

healthy, well-provided, educated cleric. As in all the other cases examined so far, the significance of this healing miracle extends far beyond the physical cure. Theodomund undergoes a dramatic and substantial social change—a change in which the redemptive experience of healing finds expression in the social transformation of a severely afflicted but profoundly religious individual; a change which, in another respect, also makes a sociological statement regarding healing alternatives. Neither the doctor nor the soothsayer, as Gregory presents them, socially transforms the sick, marginal, or oppressed to a higher social status within society. But Theodomund's experience suggests that Christianity offers royal support (from Clotild), the possibility of social mobility, and a position of importance within the community.

The redemptive experience of Christian healing can entail not only a future reward in heaven but also an immediately accessible one on earth; it can free an individual not only from the slavery of sin but even from the conventional forms of servitude within society. For example, when Veranus, the servant of the priest Symonis, suffers from gout, his master vows that if Martin cures him he will free his slave and allow him to become a cleric (*VSM* 2.4). This account again illustrates the social relevance of the healing miracle: the sick slave becomes a healthy and free cleric as a result of experiencing Martin's *virtus*.³¹ And, as if to reinforce the theological and social significance of this event, Gregory not surprisingly exclaims: "*O admirabilem beati viri redemptionem!*"

Other instances could be cited. But the examples presented here should again adequately demonstrate that the healing miracle involves far more than the curing of a physical ailment. Compared with the religious and social significance of experiencing Martin's power, the physical cure is only of secondary importance. In fact, as another study has already suggested, the modern conception of a miraculous cure has little to do with Gregory's presentation of those who receive help from the saint.³² The present discussion has, it is hoped, added to this observation by showing that the social dimension of the healing miracle provides Gregory with material to promote more extensively some clearly attainable advantages of appealing to Martin rather than to a doctor or a soothsayer.

The acknowledgment that a healing miracle involves primarily a personal religious transformation, sometimes accompanied by a change in social status, is in itself an important step toward reassessing Gregory and accurately understanding what constitutes the miraculous in Merovingian society. Equally important, I think, is the role other approaches to illness may have played in shaping the function of the saint and his shrine

within a community. For when seen from the perspective of competing healing alternatives, Gregory's emphasis on the individual's religious and social redemption in life and death pinpoints precisely those benefits that paganism and medicine are neither able nor claim to provide, but which the wide range of individuals described by Gregory desperately seek. And so, if we still insist on speaking of a decline in the art of medicine during the Merovingian Age, we must at least acknowledge the possibility that for Gregory's society this decline may have less to do with an irrational religious impulse than it does with an inability on the part of secular healing to address adequately the diversity and depth of human suffering.

Such a consideration puts Gregory's concerns into a modern context. Though contemporary society rejects his world view, there is, I think, a touch of irony in the fact that this neglected and severely criticized figure of the sixth century conceived of healing not simply in terms of mending pieces of the human anatomy but of embracing the social, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of the individual — the medical soundness of such a view we in the twentieth century are just beginning to rediscover.³³

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NOTES

¹ Gregory's modern detractors are too numerous to name here. Their views are summarized and challenged by Goffart, pp. 112–234. For other remarks on the traditional interpretation of Gregory, see Brown, p. 223. On Gregory's "barbarized" Latin, see Wallace-Hadrill, p. 54. A fuller treatment of Gregory's language is given by Bonnet, *Le Latin de Grégoire de Tours*.

² However, in addition to Goffart's reappraisal of Gregory and Brown's own work on the subject, there have been other attempts to change the direction of studies on Late Antique religion in general and Merovingian hagiography in particular; most notable of the latter are those of Van der Essen, and Graus. The latter's book on Merovingian hagiography has superseded the two earlier studies on the subject by Marignan and by Bernoulli.

³ Henceforth cited as *VSM*. All citations of Gregory are taken from the editions of Bruno Krusch, abbreviated as *MGH:SRM* I.2. All translations of Gregory's writings which appear in this paper are my own.

⁴ Cf. Wallace-Hadrill, p. 54.

⁵ The frequency with which Gregory reports the cures he himself received from saints differs considerably from the rare occasions in which his contemporary hagiographers describe their own experiences of miraculous healings. Fortunatus mentions only that he was once cured of an eye disease by Saint Martin (*Vita Martini*, ed. Leo, 4. 640–79); but even this account is questionable, as suggested by Brennan, p. 55. Likewise, Gregory the

Great relates only that Saint Andrew once cured him of an intestinal disorder (*Dialogues*, ed. de Vogüé, p. 260 [3.33.7]). On the difference between Gregory the Great and Gregory of Tours in this matter, see McCready, p. 111.

⁶ The description is generally regarded as an opportunity Gregory took to show the inferiority of secular healing. Dalton remarks: "Armentarius, failing to cure Gregory of a sickness, is scornfully apostrophized by the bishop, who always preferred miracles to science . . ." (I:417). Brehaut maintains a similar view of the incident (xxii). But even if Gregory did intend to show the inferiority of secular healing, Dalton and Brehaut have still failed to acknowledge that the account explicitly shows the great extent to which Gregory obviously relied on a doctor during a life-threatening illness. This particular episode in the *VSM* suggests that finding a cure is not a matter of preferring "miracles to science" but, quite frankly, turning to whatever will work.

⁷ This is not uncommon. *VSM* 1.16: "dum Placidius procurator desperatus a medicis . . ."; *VSM* 3.56: "Ex hoc null[i] us medici se [mulier] credens posse fomento sanari, beati basilicam expetivit. . . ."

⁸ *Historiarum libri X* (henceforth cited as *HL*), ed. Krusch and Levison, 7.22: ". . . elisum super scamnum pugnis ac diversis ictibus verberavit, ut paene animam reddere videretur; et fecisset forsitan, si ei medicorum ventosae non subvenissent." For other remarks on such incidents as well as comments on the social significance of healing in Gregory's writings, see Van Dam, pp. 256–76, especially 261–63.

⁹ Dalton, I:419: "The attitude of the bishop of Tours was very different from that of his contemporary Gregory the Great, who, though an equal believer in miracles, did not hesitate to recommend the Roman physicians to his sick friends." Dudden, p. 445, makes a similar remark when comparing the two.

¹⁰ *Dialogues* 1.12.4: "Vitae namque vera aestimatio in virtute est operum, non in ostensione signorum. Nam sunt plerique, qui etsi signa non faciunt, signa tamen facientibus dispares non sunt." See also McCready, pp. 65–83, especially 67, n. 7 where Gregory the Great's position on miracles is contrasted with that of Gregory of Tours.

¹¹ Gregory the Great, *Registrum epistularum*, ed. Norberg, XI.21: "Ex qua re sollicite et singillatim eos quos hic doctos lectione nouimus medicos fecimus requiri, et quid singuli senserint quidue dictauerint sanctitati uestrae scriptum misimus." Also *Registrum* XIII.28: "Et ideo quoniam eruptionem sanguinis patientibus ieiunia medici omnino dicunt esse contraria. . . ."

¹² I bear in mind that Brown, pp. 230–32, warns against associating *rusticitas* exclusively with the rural population and paganism. On the kinds of paganism surviving in Merovingian society, see Le Goff. On the Church's attempt to convert the countryside during this period, see Stancliffe.

¹³ Cf. Graus, p. 81.

¹⁴ *VSM* 1.26: ". . . oblitisque parentibus, in eo loco usque hodie pro beneficio accepto deservit."

¹⁵ *VSM* 1.2: "Rursumque ad idolatriae vomitum revocata, languorem, quem obtentu pontificis caruerat, iteratis incurrit."

¹⁶ On this point Graus, p. 81, remarks: "Aber nicht nur Heiden waren auf diesem Gebiet Konkurrenten der Heiligen: auch an Ärzte, mit ihrer nur allzuoft bescheidenen Kunst wandten sich Kranke. . . ." See especially n. 118 where he cites references to saints who sought the help of doctors.

¹⁷ For a different impression. cf. Gregory's *HL* 5.34. Recalling a plague, Gregory describes some ingenious practices of the "country-folk" whose remedies proved successful:

"Rusticiores vero coralīs hoc pusulas nominabant — quod non est incredibile, quia missae in scapulis sive cruribus ventosae, procedentibus erumpentibusque visicis, decursa saniae, multi liberabantur. Sed et herbae, quae venenis medentur, potui sumptae, plerisque praesidia contulerunt."

¹⁸ Gregory of Tours, *De virtutibus sancti Juliani*, *MGH:SRM* 1.2 (ed. Krusch), 46a: "Denique mei cum viderent eum in extrema vexari, hariolum quendam invocant. Ille vero venire non differens, accessit ad aegrotum et artem suam exercere conatur. Incantationes inmurmurat, sortes iactat, ligaturas collo suspendit, promittit vivere quem ipse mancipaverat morti." Gregory continues in this vein by recalling a parallel from Scripture (4 Reg. 1:16): "Haec autem me nescio agebantur; quae cum mihi delata fuissent, amarissime reddor et cum gravi suspirio illud commemoro, quod Dominus per Heliam prophetam Oziae regi pronuntiat, dicens: 'Quia dereliquisti dominum Deum Israel et consoluisti deum Acharon, ideo de lectulo, in quo ascendisti, non consurges, sed morte morieris.' Nam iste post adventum harioli validius febre succensus, spiritum exalavit . . ."

¹⁹ Cf. Graus, pp. 72–73.

²⁰ He was also aware of sophisticated medical operations being successfully performed by surgeons in Constantinople and by Reovalis, a doctor in Gaul who had seen and performed such an operation; see *HL* 10.15.

²¹ Such is the interpretation of Brehaut, p. xvi.

²² *VSM* 3.60: "Etiam non solum membra debilia solidat, sed, quod his omnibus magis est, ipsas illas conscientiarum maculas abstergit ac levigat."

²³ *VSM* 4. *Incipit*: "Confidimus enim, quod, sicut hic morborum genera resecant, illic saevas tormentorum poenas avertant, et, sicut hic mitigant febres corporeas, illinc restingant aeternas. . . ."

²⁴ *VSM* 2.60: "Iste est, pro quo Martinus rogat."

²⁵ Rufinus. *Historia monachorum in Aegypto*, 9, 425. For Greek text see Festugière, *X.24*. See also the remarks on this passage by Ward, "'Signs and Wonders,'" p. 540.

²⁶ I refer only to a few of the many instances in the *VSM* where this occurs: 2.13, 46; 3.3, 7, 29; 4.45.

²⁷ Cf. Corbett, pp. 1–13.

²⁸ *VSM* 2.53: "Sed, peccatis facientibus, iterum vinum saepius madefactus, in eadem tribulatione obiit." Another alcoholic is more fortunate. After a debilitating drinking bout, he abstains and is eventually tonsured (*VSM* 2.18).

²⁹ Boesch Gajano, pp. 39–40, considers the miracles "fortuitous" and not causally related to prayer. For an English translation of the passage with comments see Goffart, p. 142. McCready, pp. 91–92, seems to hold a similar view. In comparing Gregory the Great to the bishop of Tours, he states: "It is abundantly clear that, for Gregory [the Great], miracles cannot be gratuitous wonders. He was compulsively interested in the larger religious significance that his miracle stories possessed. In this respect the difference between Gregory the Great and Gregory of Tours could scarcely have been wider." McCready also claims that "unlike Gregory the Great," Gregory of Tours "seems largely unaware of any larger spiritual significance of miracles."

³⁰ On respect for holy days and the dangers of pagan healing practices, see *Dialogues* 1.10.2–4; on punishment for drinking and fornicating, see *Dialogues* 4.33.1–3.

³¹ See also *VSM* 2.30 where a woman's cure is explicitly associated with freedom from slavery. Sometimes slaves may even be injured by Martin in order to be rendered

useless and thus freed from a cruel master. Once released, they are then miraculously healed. See Corbett, pp. 7–11.

³² Corbett, pp. 7–10. On the limitations of the modern conception of miracles in dealing with hagiographic texts, see Ward, “‘Signs and Wonders,’” p. 539. The same author gives a fuller treatment of the subject in *Miracles and the Medieval Mind*.

³³ Consider the following remarks of the prominent neurologist, Oliver Sacks, in light of the *VSM*. After watching at Mass a patient (“Jimmy”) who suffers from severe “Korsakov’s Syndrome,” Sacks observes:

I was moved, profoundly moved and impressed because I saw here an intensity and steadiness of attention and concentration that I had never seen before in him or conceived him capable of. I watched him kneel and take the Sacrament on his tongue, and could not doubt the fullness and totality of Communion, the perfect alignment of his spirit with the spirit of the Mass. . . . *There was no forgetting, no Korsakov's then* [my italics], nor did it seem possible or imaginable that there should be; for he was no longer at the mercy of a fallible or faulty mechanism—that of meaningless sequences and memory traces—but was absorbed in an act, an act of his whole being, which carried feeling and meaning in an organic continuity and unity so seamless it could not permit any break.

Clearly Jimmy found himself, found continuity and reality, in the absoluteness of the spiritual attention and act.

. . . [I]f he was held in emotional and spiritual attention—in the contemplation of nature or art, in listening to music, in taking part in the Mass in chapel—the attention, its “mood,” its quietude, would persist for a while, and there would be in him a pensiveness and peace we rarely, if ever, saw during the rest of his life at the Home.

. . . [H]umanly, spiritually he is at times a different man altogether—no longer fluttering, restless, bored, and lost, but deeply attentive to the beauty and soul of the world, rich in all the Kierkegaardian categories—the aesthetic, the moral, the religious, the dramatic. (37–39)

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