

**Historical and Symbolic Meanings of Body and Gesture in Medieval Miracles, c. 1000-1200**

UTA KLEINE

Medieval miracles can be considered as an emotionally exceptional topic in a double sense.

Historically spoken, they were regarded as acts of divine interference which provoked admiration – according to medieval notions a strong and complex feeling including awe and amusement, confusion and curiosity, fear and delight, stupor and horror. Wonders such as miraculous healings, rescue from danger or death, but also natural phenomena like monsters, dragons, marvellous stones or springs, though extraordinary events (*super/praeter naturam*) in the ontological sense, were at the same time ‘normal’ every-day experiences to most medieval people: expected, evoked, instrumentalized, but also criticized and called in doubt. What may seem contradictory to the modern mind was of fundamental importance (and so to say ‘natural’) in pre-modern understanding: miracles were wondrous not because they were rare, but because they had a secret ‘reason’ that had to be examined – reason not in the sense of a ‘hidden cause’, but of a spiritual significance or a moral usefulness.<sup>1</sup> This is why in medieval Latin they were called *miracula* as well as *signa* or *portenta*. Wonders as miraculous objects or events therefore could – and can – be understood as “epistemic things” (to use Fernando Vidal’s expression). As a consequence, wonder as a feeling must not be understood as a sign of ignorance, but as a cognitive capacity, as a “significance-reaction” (as C. Bynum has put it) that points to meaning. To Albert the Great admiration was “a

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<sup>1</sup> Bynum 1997: 23.

constriction and suspension of the heart” confronted with something “great and unusual”<sup>2</sup>; and Descartes described wonder as a “sudden surprise of the soul which makes it tend to consider attentively those objects which seem to it rare and extraordinary.”<sup>3</sup>

Qualifying wonders as objects of strong emotions has a second, a modern sense. It relates to the fact that they became the object of severe criticism since the eighteenth century. Among the intellectuals of the enlightenment wonders were discredited by a general appeal to new metaphysics as well as to a new sensibility, succeeded by first and unsystematic attempts at experimental investigation. For naturalists as well as for theologians, the ability to wonder at God’s omnipotence and the marvels of His creation was no longer considered as a cognitive passion appropriate to intellectuals and ordinary people alike. Instead, it became the trademark of the uninformed, the unenlightened, the vulgar and was ascribed to physiological deficiencies, such as unrestrained passions or an overflowing imagination. Thus, the miraculous ceased to be a universal model of interpretation for the secret relations between the visible and the invisible. This debate found its late and vehement echo among professional historians of the nineteenth and beginning twentieth century, who dismissed medieval miracles as “completely worthless” (Oswald Holder-Egger) and qualified them as a “literature full of ecclesiastical cheats” (Wilhelm Levison).

Modern historians have far too often proven to be the heirs of this supposedly ‘enlightened’ view, looking for natural causes instead of symbolic meanings, and, failing to find them, banishing miracles from the fields of serious research (as the editors of the famous German Monumenta edition just quoted) or associating them with “popular culture” and magic mentality (as the French historians of *mentalité*). Even though the new ideas of the French *Annales* school must be considered as an enormous scholarly achievement in religious history (to name only this field), their view on wonders and on emotions in general has been

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<sup>2</sup> Albertus Magnus, Commentary on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics: Metaphysica libri quinque priores*, bk. 1, tract. 2, c. 6), quoted according to Bynum 1997: 10.

<sup>3</sup> Descartes, *Les passions de l’âme – Passions of the Soul* (1649), art. 71, 57-58, quoted after Bynum 1997: 5.

somewhat misleading. Historians like Marc Bloch and Ferdinand Lot understood emotions as the inevitable reactions of ordinary people to the insecurities of a hostile environment of which they had only imprecise knowledge and which they could not change by their own force. Insecurity was thus underlying most of those powerful and mainly unfortunate emotions medievalists used to focus on.<sup>4</sup> Religious fear and belief in wonder have tended to be seen together as two coins of the same medal.

Wonders as what might be called the secular passions of a learned elite have since been discovered by American historians of science and of body such as Lorraine Daston, Catharine Park, and Caroline Bynum. They follow a new, constructivist view of wonders (and of emotions in general), understanding them as the result of a rational cognitive process, influenced by cultural patterns which shaped their social meanings and their forms of expression.<sup>5</sup> But this is not to say that emotions were not powerfully felt: in spite of their mutability, “there is nothing ‘mere’ about cultural constructs.” They are, as L. Daston and C. Park have put it, “as real as bricks.”<sup>6</sup> Another example of this rational, constructivist view of emotions is to be found in Gerd Althoff’s notion of emotions and gestures as well-understood ‘signals’ that followed the well-known rules of the political ‘game’.

Emotions cannot be studied without considering their bodily expressions. In order to explore the medieval significances of wonder(s), I have chosen a special type of document: posthumous miracle collections, dating mainly from eleventh and twelfth century Rhineland, and coming mainly from Benedictine monasteries. These records deal with wonders that occurred at the shrine of a venerated saint. Most of the persons touched by a miracle were lay people who reported their experiences to the community in order to have them written down. As they focus on events rather than on passions, miracle accounts provide precise descriptions of body and gesture in concrete situations. Gestures as ways of staging the human body have

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<sup>4</sup> An excellent overview: Rosenwein 2003: 428-434.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.: 435, referring to the work of the cognitivist Magda Arnold: *Emotion and personality* (1960).

<sup>6</sup> Daston/Park 1998: 11.

to be considered not as accidental physiological features, but as meaningful expressions. In his famous treatise on the education of the novices, Hugh of St Victor defines gesture (*gestus*) as “the movement and the figuration (*figuratio*) of the members of the body with regard to any action or attitude.”<sup>7</sup> Even though Hugh refers to the disciplined gestures of the clerics, his ideas of gestures figuring the inner movements of the soul and being able to express all kinds of human action and attitudes were generally applicable. But we have to be careful not to simplify things. The gestures medieval miracle collections describe are those of a lay clientele seen and interpreted by monastic authors, which produces a particular view in which social fact and theological signification are interwoven.

Let me begin with an example, a miraculous cure drawn from the miracles of St Anno, archbishop of Cologne. It took place at Anno’s monastery of Siegburg near Cologne, shortly after his bones had been elevated in the spring of 1183.

‘A crippled girl from the nearby village of Oberkassel was brought to the saint’s shrine lying on a cart. For five years, she had been unable to straighten up. She was laid down before the relics (*prostrata*), where she implored the saint’s help (*suffragium*). At that moment, before the amazed crowd, the nerves under her knee that had glued her lower leg to her thigh began to straighten, producing a wondrous crackling sound (*fragorem mirificum*). Standing upright on her feet, she gave testimony that after God Anno was the author of her regained health. When the inhabitants of her village heard about the miracle, they came to Siegburg to testify that her illness had been a real one and to venerate the saint who had cured her.’<sup>8</sup>

The anonymous author, a monk of Siegburg, claims that the story – like all the other ones he reports (more than 300) – is true. As a reliable historian, he gives not only names of persons and places, he also quotes those eye-witnesses who gave testimony – sometimes even by swearing an oath. Let us take his word for it. For him and his contemporaries, the case of the

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<sup>7</sup> De institutione novitiorum liber, PL 176, col. 938; for a commentary see Schmitt 1990: 177-179.

<sup>8</sup> Siegburger Mirakelbuch: I 6.

little girl was a typical one. About 90 per cent of the registered wonders reported miraculous healings. Even the little girl's illness is a standard feature: deformities as a symptom of muscular, nervous or osseous diseases were among the most frequent (a third of all reported cases), followed by affections of the sense organs: blindness, deafness, muteness. But we have to be careful with modern terminology: medieval observers had their own way of perceiving and describing physical deficiencies or deformities. In general, they did not perceive them as clearly denominated illnesses but circumscribed the most apparent outer signs. In cases like the one just given, medieval authors used terms like "curved" (*contractus, curvatus*), "dried up" (*aridus*) or "lame" (*paralyticus*).

The order of the reported events and the accompanying gestures are also typical. Each story begins with a short description of the main person and her or his ailment (innate disabilities, chronic or acute diseases, accidents, imminent death). It is expressed in terms of suffering and pain, using verbs like *laborare* and *aegrotare* or adjectives like *infirmus, debilis, moribundus, clinicus*. The outer signs of illness in particular attract the observer's interest: posture, deformities, ulcers or tumours, frenzies of the so called demoniacs are described in detail. Often the authors stress the fact that the sick are bent down, with their eyes turned towards the ground, that they have to use crutches or litters or that they are completely unable to move. Feelings of shame and the fear of being a burden to their families are frequently reported. This deplorable situation culminates in feelings of ultimate despair, which lead to the decision to implore the help of a saint, as in the following example of a man from Paris suffering from dropsy, taken again from St Anno's miracles: "It was horrible and piteous to see how the whole belly of this miserable was bloated like a barrel."<sup>9</sup> Having already visited the shrines of many famous saints, he had decided to turn to Anno as his last resort.

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<sup>9</sup> Siegburger Mirakelbuch: I 55.

The next moment in the course of miraculous events is the journey to the saint's tomb or shrine. If possible, people walked all their way; if not, at least the last part of the journey was undertaken by foot or by crawling on the knees. The sick were usually accompanied by family members, neighbours or friends: pilgrimage was a matter of common interest. Again the narration gives us only a very summary description of this event, without details of gestures or rituals, except in special cases, when whole villages came with their priest, carrying crosses and flags and singing litanies. But the relevant vocabulary may hint at the nature of this event: to go (*ire*), to set off (*iter agere*), to travel (*viare*), to visit (*visitare*) are the verbs, visit (*visitation*) and rush (*concursum*) the nouns normally used. Thus we may conclude that religious visits to local shrines are clearly distinguished from pilgrimages (*peregrinationes*), long and dangerous travels to faraway destinations. But even relatively short trips (average distance: 3-6 medieval miles, 15-30 kilometers) could mean strenuous labour for the persons concerned, suffering from their various handicaps. Considered as a religious sacrifice, the efforts of travelling could be part of the vow that was made to the saint. Thus, Marsilius, a cartwright from the town of Siegburg whom saint Anno had punished by a stroke of lumbago for blaspheming his name promised a visit to reconcile the holy bishop and had to climb up to his shrine on all fours for a whole week before being cured.<sup>10</sup>

Getting in touch with the saint was the most important moment in the course of miraculous events. As in our example from Siegburg, the rituals of contact always took place at the saint's tomb in the church. Usually, there was a crowd of people witnessing the event (*spectante clero et populo, in conspectu omnium*). The gestures are described in much detail: the sick bow or prostrate before the relics, humbly and with many sighs (*supplex et gemebundus*), some lie down on the ground, their arms outstretched in the shape of a cross (*in modum crucis*), others walk around the shrine or try to climb the tomb. Tears and laments used to accompany these gestures of devotion. In most of the cases people try to reinforce the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.: IV 6.

contact, using dust gathered from the grave or relic water as curative substances or demanding to be touched with a separate relic container. Physical contact was essential to the curative process, but words were equally important. The usual way of addressing the saint was a supplication; it could (and should) be accompanied and reinforced by a personal vow (*votum*): an obligation to offer a gift or an achievement in exchange for the saint's help. The usual oblations were candles or objects of wax or silver in the form of the sick limb, money was offered less frequently. We also hear of particular rituals that preceded or accompanied the gift-giving, the most frequent being the measurement of a sick person with a string (which served as wick for a candle in the person's size) or his or her weighing (the person's counterweight being offered in corn, bread or their equivalent in money). It is obvious that most of the oblations had a replicative character: the object had to contain the person, to represent him or her before the saint. The strongest kind of obligation was self-donation, i.e. the sick person submitted his- or herself to lifelong service to a saint. The act was confirmed by an annual payment of a relatively small *census de capite* to the saint (or actually, to his/her church) – a ritual that marked the *cerocensualis* (because the tax was normally paid in wax), a particular legal status that bound a person to the law and the custody of a particular church.

In cases of imminent danger or death, the vow could also be made from a distance. This was the moment when fear and despair changed into strong feelings of hope and trust, a *collectio virum fidei et spei*, as the author of the miracles of saint Anno puts it. From the scarce hints in our documents we can distinguish four succeeding acts: the invocation, the commendation to the saint, the supplication and the formulation of the vow. Prostration, kneeling or bowing and praying with elevated hands and eyes were the gestures of hope and devotion that used to accompany these acts. Expressions like: “with heart and mouth” (*ore et corde*) or “vow of the heart” (*votum cordis*) emphasize the correspondence between a person's gestures and his or her inner attitude. Sometimes the saint assured his presence in visions to the sick or the dying, as in the following example taken from the miracles of the

saintly archbishop Engelbert of Cologne, who had been murdered by a group of opposing nobles in 1225 and was soon venerated as the German Thomas Becket. One of his men named Hermann, a janitor, suffered from a heavy fever caused by an enormous abscess in his side. One night, he had a vision of his master, approaching his bed, speaking comforting words and touching the tumour with his hands. Immediately, a flow of blood and putrid matter erupted from his side, leaving him relieved and cured.<sup>11</sup>

This example leads us to the key-moment of the event, the miracle itself, which is, by its nature, a most mysterious incident: the “joining of heaven and earth” (to use P. Brown’s famous expression) in an act of spontaneous divine interference, caused by a saint’s intercession and mediated through his or her body. This transcendental event took a very particular shape, manifesting itself through the physical transformation of a human body (note the resemblance with the most famous Christian miracle, the Eucharist). Unlike the Eucharist, miracles had to be recognizable by their outer signs. To circumscribe the miraculous moment the authors chose the image of the body rising up from illness or death (frequently speaking of the *surrectio a morbo, a morte*). As we have already seen, it could be accompanied by wondrous crackling noises produced by the readjusting limbs, by effusions of blood, pus or mucus (signifying the purification of the body) or by violent emotional outbursts (like screams of pain, frenzies, tears). Another concomitant sign of wonder was the reaction of the public rapt by admiration, wonder, stupefaction and awe, sometimes even by fear and horror – this holds especially for miracles of punishment where the miraculous transformation takes the opposite direction, leading from health to sudden illness or death. Not only the spontaneous and complete remissions, but also the gradual, retarded or incomplete recoveries were perceived as miracles – which shows that cures were not so much the object of medical investigation and precise diagnosis as a matter of consensus of opinion.<sup>12</sup> In terms of gesture and posture, the miracle was the moment of bodily elevation. In the social sense, it was the

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<sup>11</sup> Kleine 2007: 293-4.

<sup>12</sup> Finucane 1977: 73.



moment of reintegration. Emotionally spoken, it was the change from pain, fear and shame to sublime delight and admiration via stupor and astonishment.

Public expressions of delight and gratitude formed the last part of the miraculous event (respectively its narration). I shall be brief about this. People gave thanks to the saint by prayers and tears, by kissing the shrine or the grave, by crying out their miracle and publicly praising the saint's name and his effective patronage, even by singing popular chants (*cantationes rusticae*) or performing dances of joy (*tripudia*). A liturgical celebration, including both sides, monks and laypeople, could terminate the event.

Obviously, what I have presented to you so far is a model version of miraculous action, focusing on the common features of the reported events. However, in doing so, I have not exaggerated too much. Most of the authors – as well as most of the 'patients' – seem to be only too aware that the exceptional followed a regular course. They called great attention to the so called *ordo eventus*. This ever repeated order made it easy for people to interpret similar experiences or their own lives as miraculous events. While those who experienced a miracle on themselves can be supposed to have been content with its immediate consequences, those who observed it may have thought otherwise: admiration tended to lead to curiosity and stimulated further questions about wonders' secret reasons. This is particularly true of the monks who carefully registered these events – why else should they take such a remarkable interest in the concerns of the so called 'low people' if not for higher reasons?

This observation leads me back to the beginning of my paper, to the notion of wonder as a significance-reaction, and it opens the final part of my argument, which will deal with the historical and symbolic meanings of miracles.

History first. We are fully entitled to believe that, to the majority of medieval people, miracles were facts – this holds for the intellectual (i.e. ecclesiastical) elite as well as for ordinary people who used to be its principal beneficiaries. Although a particular case could be

doubted or criticized, miracles in general were held to be possible, even normal. Hagiotherapy was a common way of curing the sick, as were magical and medical treatments. The related rituals and gestures suggest that healing was a public act and a social phenomenon. Cures could be a means of taking care, of patronizing. Healing miracles created or tightened social bonds –between the participating persons (groups of travellers, mourners, witnesses), and, perhaps even more important, between the sick and the saint, as the manifold gestures can show us. They are the physical expression of a transcendental exchange between two bodies in which the holy, that is the pure and therefore the incorrupt body of the saint, transfers his or her celestial powers to the mortal body of the sick, carrying the signs of moral, and therefore also physical corruption (you already get a hint at the symbolic side). These bonds could be long-lasting, as in the cases of self-donation. In general, people made a deliberate and individual choice the saint to whom they made a commitment. But sometimes, as in the case of the posthumous miracle cults of the archbishops Heribert and Engelbert of Cologne, we find a considerable number of collective followers and clients among those touched by a miracle and it is obvious that they considered themselves as natural, that is, as privileged ‘clients’ of their saint: earthly bonds could be prolonged to eternity.<sup>13</sup> Pilgrimages to powerful and benevolent patron saints were also able to strengthen the social and territorial bonds between a monastery and the surrounding population. But it is advisable to make a critical note to this idea of social coherence stressed so frequently by hagiographic authors: actually, we know little about the lasting effects of these personal bonds and although I am convinced of their general effectiveness, I am nevertheless uncertain as to how far the general principle worked in the individual case. We hear of reiterated visits and regularly fulfilled vows of annual payment, but countless miracles of punishment suggest the contrary, namely that vows were easily forgotten, ignored or voluntarily broken. We should therefore ascribe a good deal of this social harmony to a specific monastic ideology, to a principle I would like to call the

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<sup>13</sup> Kleine 2007: 292-6 (Engelbert), 106-9 (Heribert).

logic of patronage. The way lay people experienced, used and interpreted these forms of transcendental exchange for their own benefits is largely unknown to us.

As for the symbolic meanings, I would like to distinguish three significations: the allegorical, the moral and the eschatological. Relatively much has been said about the first two meanings. The habit of allegorizing miracles by way of explicit or implicit comparison to the miracles of Christ are readily apparent – many scholars have commented on the authors' predilection for biblical types of miracles such as healings of the crippled, the blind, the deaf and the demoniacs. Drawing on the ideas of Alain Boureau, I would like to explain this as an attempt to sacralise or rather, to retrosacralise secular events by adapting them to biblical models, thus proving that the history of salvation continued to the present.

The moral uses of miracles have been particularly stressed by medieval authors. In writing down wonders, they intended to set a model of faith and obedience to ordinary Christians. To quote the author of a Bavarian miracle collection: "These stories may teach the living, who know nothing about signs and miracles, how they may arrive to believe truly in God."<sup>14</sup> Faith here is to be understood in a particular sense: not in the sense of adherence to a common set of religious values by imitation of the saint's virtues, but in the sense of admiration of his or her power. Provoking admiration was a means of religious conversion, a change of mind by the use of transcendental powers – or, as we may also put it, by emotional overpowering.

Finally, I would like to stress a point on which medieval authors have been sufficiently explicit, but modern scholars less aware: the eschatological significance of miracles. Authors like Peter the Venerable or Thiofried of Echternach have said a lot on the eschatological meanings of the medieval relic cult. Relics, Peter taught, must not be considered as dead matter but as human bodies animated by the virtues the saints had acquired during their lifetime. They should therefore not be treated contemptuously, but be venerated as "vessels of

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<sup>14</sup> Bayerisches Mirakelbuch II 12: 242.

resurrection” (*ut resurrectionis vasa*), as earthly pledges (*pignora*) of the saints’ celestial existence, thus teaching the Christians to believe firmly in the final destiny God had promised to all humans: the resurrection of the body at the Last Judgment.<sup>15</sup> Relic miracles were an effective means to visualize and concretize this eschatological hope, because the idea of restoring a human body from the agony of illness or death is the (more or less) secret link between healing and resurrection. This can be seen in the example of Marsilius, the cartwright punished by a fit of lumbago mentioned above. The author describes him approaching the shrine on all fours, “like a piece of cattle”, as he comments. I quote him again: “It was piteous to see how the miserable was bent down to the ground like an animal, using a stick to hold up his head. Thus he crawled up the mountain, slowly as a tortoise.”<sup>16</sup> This description obviously has a strong symbolic meaning: the upright posture was the principal sign of man being an image of God, because it enabled him to elevate his eyes to heaven and to recognize his creator, as Lactance commented. The tortoise, an animal believed to live in the mud, was frequently evoked in patristic literature as a symbol of the flesh that lived in the mud and in the depths of sin and lust.

Miracles illustrate how through divine intervention the bent-down bodies of the sick could be straightened up, the dried limbs be solved and invigorated, the numb senses be revived in one moment. Thus, they can be said to anticipate the final destiny of the human body. Words like *salvare* and *solvere*, *sanitas* and *salus* are brought together in a very suggestive manner that should make us aware not only of the symbolic potential hidden in these stories but also of the fundamental role of body and bodily language in Christian eschatology.

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<sup>15</sup> Peter the Venerable, Sermo: 266, 269; see also Kleine 2007: 63.

<sup>16</sup> Siegburger Mirakelbuch IV 6.

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