Miracles and Social Status in the Middle Ages

Introduction

Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski
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« Something was thought to have happened ; the rest is interpretation. »¹ With this succinct phrase Benedicta Ward circumscribes the complex problem of miracles in the Middle Ages. Both parts of the phrase emphasize the human agent over the supernatural : « thought » as well as « interpretation » are human actions applied to an inexplicable event, with the latter pointing into the direction of the written word. By the mere fact of being written down, the supernatural event was also interpreted : agents and recipients had to be identified, a chronological order had to be imposed, cause and effect had to be examined. Once laid down on parchment or paper, the texts themselves could be interpreted and be used for a variety of goals, such as the canonization of the saintly giver of miracles or adding to the popularity of a given shrine. The written sources for miracles are varied : the major sources for accounts of miracles are saints’ lives, narrative collections and plays (focused on a particular saint or often on the Virgin Mary), witness testimonies from canonization trials, and collections of miracles reported by the recipients of miracles at individual shrines. To these texts we can add visual sources, such as manuscript illuminations, paintings, and sculptures.

What kind of questions can these sources answer ? The miraculous intervention is most often directed toward human beings who are in need of aid, be it a physical cure for an illness or a spiritual cure for moral failings. « Le miracle se nourrit du péché », as Yasmina Foehr-Janssen puts it². The saint or the Virgin respond to prayers if the humans’ devotion and prayers are strong enough to call forth supernatural intervention. This intervention is directed toward « the attainment and preservation of human happiness »³. The big question is of course how to define happiness. For most of the miraculés at saints’ shrines restoration of their health would be sufficient to attain happiness. This kind of miracle is at the center of Gábor Klaniczay’s contribution. He investigates healing miracles of different types and periods from the perspective of the « miracle with conditions » in which saints and the miraculés engage in a kind of bargaining : vows are made and gifts are promised in exchange for a miraculous cure ; non-fulfillment of a vow can result in the saint’s vengeance. Klaniczay traces the transformations of this type of miracle which, in the

later Middle Ages, lost its popularity as a pedagogical tool. The lessons taught by these « exchange and vengeance miracles » began to be couched in different kinds of moral discourses. Were these types of miracles more common in the popular sphere than in aristocratic circles? Klaniczay surprisingly finds a very democratic application of these miracles: for the most part, social class does not seem to have acted as a determining factor in this context.

Unlike this type of miracle, many other miracles, those by the Virgin Mary in particular, have strong social components. In a number of narratives, the Virgin seems to have a special love for those who commit sexual sins or try to subvert the social hierarchy, provided that their eventual repentance is sincere and ardent4. One such sinner is Théophile, one of the most popular figures in medieval miracle tales. His desire to attain a higher social status leads him to a Faustian pact with the devil; only his sincere repentance finally brings about his miraculous rescue by the Virgin Mary. But is it really a sin to want to rise in the medieval social hierarchy? Could a social climber hope to be assisted by divine supernatural forces rather than by the devil? This is one of the questions at the origin of this mini-thème and that is explored in detail by Kiril Petkov for the society of late medieval and Renaissance Venice.

Other questions, also related to social status are imbricated in the study of miracles. For example, Pierre-André Sigal in his vast study of miracles collected at shrines, found that at Notre-Dame des Lumières near Apt the majority (67%) of the miraculés who received cures at a distance from the shrine were of the popular and bourgeois classes while only 19.7% came from the aristocracy. 92.2% of those cured from blindness at all shrines Sigal studied belonged to the popular class5. Other categories examined include how long a sick person of a given social class waited before seeking help, for example, through a pilgrimage or whether certain types and ways of receiving miracles are reserved for a special class6. Thus, in many categories inventoried by Sigal social class plays an important role, but Sigal himself often finds explanations for the differences that are determined by social class difficult to ascertain. We therefore decided to offer here a few precise case studies that are for the most part focused on social status, and not just the social status of the recipients of miracles but also on that of the saintly intercessor. Given that the vast majority of canonizations from the 11th to the 15th century concerned aristocrats7, we thought it

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6 *Ibid.*, p. 302 and 305. Thus, for example, visionary experiences of miracles are pretty much limited to monks and clerics while the specific miracle of the freeing of a prisoner pertains mostly to the noble class.
important to explore whether a royal saint like Saint Louis would have special functions for the upper classes and whether these classes had views of Saint Louis that were different from those of the lower classes. This multiple perspective informs the contribution by Cecilia Gaposchkin.

Gaposchkin takes a three-pronged approach to the miracles of Saint Louis as they have been recorded at his canonization trial in 1282-1283. She asks the questions: how did people of different classes hear of Louis’ miraculous interventions? How did they approach him? What were their experiences of the miraculous like and how in turn did these experiences shape their view of the holy king? This triangulation of the problem leads to some surprising results. We learn, for example, that for ordinary people Saint Louis was pretty much a saint like any other; they sought his help based on his posthumous reputation for certain types of miracles about which they hard mostly from other people of their own class. For aristocrats, by contrast, his saintly life was an important factor in their choice of intercessor. Gaposchkin also takes us inside Saint-Denis and gives us a tour of Louis’ tomb and its surroundings, showing how people from different classes behaved in this sanctuary while seeking Louis’ supernatural aid.

Kiril Petkov transports us to late medieval and early Renaissance Venice where we witness a number of miracles performed by a fragment of the True Cross that Philippe de Mézières (1327-1405), a politician, writer, and crusade ideologist had given to the confraternity of San Giovanni Evangelista. Petkov focuses on two miracles, both of them performed at a bridge, that serve, on the one hand, to raise the social status of the Vendramin family, then in the process of becoming one of the most important patrician families in Venice, and on the other, to denounce (post-mortem!) a dissolute lay brother from a lower social stratum. In a nuanced reading of archival material and two major paintings Petkov shows that these miracles were signals that the Venetian populace interpreted correctly: when the True Cross reliquary fell off the San Lorenzo bridge only Andrea Vendramin managed to retrieve it, indeed it swam in his direction and in a stately swim witnessed by throngs of awed bystanders he brought it safely ashore, thus raising his prestige as much as he raised the Cross from the water. Petkov offers an incisive analysis not only of the texts describing this event but also of the beautiful painting by Gentile Bellini that memorializes the miraculous rescue of the Cross. At the other end of the spectrum we find the late immoral friar whose funeral procession was to include the True Cross. The Cross, however, refused to be carried across the San Lio Bridge, thus causing an enormous scandal. This miraculous event also resulted in an important painting, this one by Giovanni Mansueti. Petkov’s careful comparison of the narrative and stylistic elements of these two paintings anchors the apparition of the supernatural in the civic and social reality of the city of Venice.

The majority of the saintly intercessors starring in medieval miracle collections come from the upper social strata, but the same does not hold true for the recipients of miracles. All classes pray to the Virgin Mary and the saints, and all classes can be rewarded with miraculous intercession. Are miracles, at the receiving end, a democratic institution, then? No doubt, compared to the recipients of

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canonizations, those of miracles span a much wider social spectrum. Our case histories pose many questions on the relationship between miracles and social status; they answer some of them, but not all. They invite other researchers to view the complex links between class and miracles through the lens proposed here and shed new light on both saintly intercessors and miraculés as well as on the nature of the miracles themselves.

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