EFFUGATIS DAEMONIBUS:
POSSESSION AND THE BODY IN GREGORY OF TOURS’ VITA PATRUM

by

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# Table of Contents

Abstract 3  
Approaching the Possessed Body 4  
Dealing with the Medieval Body 9  
Methodology and Addressing the Nature of Miracles 12  
Gregory of Tours and the Merovingians 16  
Possession and the *Vita patrum* 18  
Exorcism and the Mouth 22  
Vomiting and Devouring 31  
Speech and Possession 38  
Liminality and the Transformation of the Possessed 43  
Locating Possession in the Body 47  
New Testament Possessions and Gregory’s Models 49  
The Body as a Vessel 51  
Contamination and Matthew 15 54  
The Sealed Body of the Saint 56  
Contamination Anxiety and the Mouth 59  
Bibliography 62
"Effugatis Daemonibus: Possession and the Body in Gregory of Tours’ *Vita patrum*

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Abstract

This study examines anxieties about bodily and spiritual contamination expressed via exorcism and possession in Gregory of Tours’ hagiographical work *Vita patrum*. There are no less than thirteen references to possession in this text, ranging from descriptions of specific incidents to more general comments on saints and exorcism. In many of the episodes, the mouth plays a prominent role in both the diagnosis of possession and the subsequent exorcism. Being an inherently liminal space, the mouth is an excellent site at which to observe and interrogate the boundary phenomena connected with the condition of possession. A focus on this particular aperture, which serves as a passage between seen and unseen, interior and exterior, brings concerns about bodily integrity and purity to the fore. Although studies of possession in the New Testament and the high and later Middle Ages abound, comparatively limited attention has been paid to the phenomena in the early Middle Ages. By closely examining the role that the mouth plays in these descriptions of possession in Gregory's account, this paper hopes to add to a recent bloom of interest in early medieval topics and to underscore the role of the body in religious practices in sixth-century Gaul.
Approaching the Possessed Body

The body is a constant presence. Its abilities and inabilities fundamentally shape the human experience. Its boundaries define some of our most basic understandings of space and structure, molding even language\(^1\), and produce an inescapable imprint on cultural production. The body can take on power as metaphor, such as John of Salisbury’s famous body politic, explained in his *Policraticus*.\(^2\) The medieval body is a place of metaphoric and theological difficulty and early medieval literature presents no exception to this. This is well observed within Gregory of Tours’ *Vita patrum*, a compendium of saints’ lives written in the sixth-century, as the body is transformed into a locus of the holy or an object of revulsion in the psychodrama of possession and exorcism. Of the miracles recorded by Gregory in this work, the examples of exorcism and possession provide an especially good opportunity to explore ideas about the limits of the body and allow the audience to see an intertwining of the spiritual and the corporeal. Additionally, they expose uneasiness about the boundary zones of the body, particularly the mouth.

Although Gregory’s fame is tied to his historical projects, works beyond his oft-cited *History of the Franks* are equally valuable in assessing the political and cultural landscape of the period. Of particular note are his hagiographical

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\(^2\) Of course, the model of the body politic provided by John of Salisbury is at its core based on biblical metaphors that place God as the head of man. Ernst Hartwig Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957). 51.
writings, including the *Vita patrum*, which is the focus of this study. This text contains twenty sections, each dedicated to a saint or a set of saints who have close ties to Gaul and to Gregory's family. In fact, the saints of the *Vita patrum* are all figures of the sixth-century Gaul themselves, rendering many of them contemporaries with Gregory. The subjects of these studies are monks and hermits, bishops and nuns, all who exemplify the holy perfection expected of saints and whose miracles are enumerated in each account. In the *Vita patrum* each chapter begins with a short biblical quotation and a corresponding passage of exegesis, which examines the verses in light of the morals most closely associated with the saint at hand. Following this, Gregory begins the biographical text, providing details on the subject’s religious training, location, and miracles. A common motif in hagiographical narratives, exorcism frequently appears in the *Vita patrum* as part of a given saint’s miraculous acts. This is unsurprising, not only because of the didactic possibilities innate to public exorcism, but also because of its establishment in both New Testament and patristic writings as a responsibility of the saint. Casting out demons was one of the first tasks given to the apostles as Christ commanded them “Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out devils: freely have you received, freely give” (*Infirmos curate, mortuos suscitate, leprosos mundate, daemones ejicite: gratis accepistis, gratis*

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3 On occasion, this work is referred to as the *Liber vitae Patrum*, but this directly conflicts with the rationale specifically provide by Gregory himself in his introduction to the work. The singular “*vita*” refers to the shared life of holiness that the saints enjoy, rather than to their actual individual temporal existences. Thomas J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographers* in the Middle Ages. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 7. and Giselle De Nie. *Lives and Miracles*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), xviii.


5 Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages*, 5-6.
With the directive *daemones ejicite*, the practice of exorcism is numbered among the traditional responsibilities of those seeking to imitate both Christ and the early apostles. With regard to exorcism in the Late Antique period, Peter Brown writes, “To a late-Roman man the drama of exorcism was the one demonstration of the power of God that carried unanswerable authority. In the healing of the possessed, the *praesentia* of the saint was held to be registered with unfailing accuracy, and their power, their *potentia*, shown most fully and in most reassuring manner.” This was not a new development, as New Testament exorcisms were similarly used to demonstrate the authority of the person performing the exorcism. The popularity of exorcisms as a manifestation of the power of the divine persisted through the medieval period, accumulating and discarding a number of additional entailments over time.

The scene for the majority of hagiographical exorcisms is easily set—a saint encounters a demoniac whom he or she then releases from spiritual and physical torment. Possession might take a variety of forms and could be expressed by wild raving and bizarre social behavior or by supernatural symptoms, such as levitation or growing suddenly, unnaturally stiff or heavy. The possessed body is an extreme body—it may contort and complete astonishing feats. It actively coalesces a largely invisible spiritual war into a single visible event and in doing so, becomes a figure of ritual liminality, all while placing stress on the vulnerable

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openings to the body. In the throws of possession, a demoniac’s body is transformed into something grotesque that defies acceptable behavior and highlights the body’s dangerous porousness.

In his oft-cited book *Rabelais and His World*, M.M. Bakhtin describes the grotesque body:

> It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world.⁹

The demoniac’s body is crucially sensitive to its boundaries. In particular, the mouth assumes an important role in both diagnosing and remedying possession. It opens up the body and offers a passage between the dichotomous interior and exterior, creating a fundamentally liminal passage. The danger surrounding the consuming, vomiting, and speaking mouth is evident in many of Gregory’s descriptions of exorcisms.

The body of the saint plays an unquestionably large part in the miraculous events described by Gregory, acting as a conduit for the holy presence and power during the life of the saint and even into the period post mortem.¹⁰ Although the body of the saint provides a point of concentrated divine power (or some

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¹⁰ Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, 3-4. Brown writes, “By the end of the sixth-century, the graves of the saints, which lay in the cemetery areas outside the walls of most of the cities of the former Western Empire, had become centers of the ecclesiastical life of their religion. This was because the saint in Heaven was believed to be ‘present’ at his tomb on earth”. Peter Brown here quotes the inscription on the tomb of Saint Martin: “*Hic conditus est sanctae memoriae Marinus episcopus / Cuius anima in manu Dei est, sed his totus est Praesens manifestus omni gratia virtutum*. (Here lies Martin the bishop, of holy memory, whose soul is in the hand of God; but he is fully here, present and made plain in miracles of every kind.)"
representation thereof), the bodies of those who surround the saints play an equally important part in the hagiographical drama. As a physical manifestation of both corporeal and spiritual illness, even sin, moral turpitude, and possession, demoniacs often represent the subject of saints' miracles. The bodies of the people around the saints are acted upon, often in a theatrical manner, to prove the power of the divine.\(^{11}\)

Given that this study is concentrates primarily upon exorcism, it has been necessary to review the extensive literature around the phenomena of demonic possession in the Christian West. The majority of existing scholarship focuses on the late Middle Ages and the Early Modern period, both of which produced spectacular (and descriptively preserved) examples of possession. Despite the number of existing texts, which I suspect will only grow in coming years as the literature on magic, witchcraft, and demonic activity in the Middle Ages continues to expand, the attention paid to such phenomena in the early Middle Ages has remained relatively sparse in comparison. Given the survival rate of manuscript materials from the Pre-Carolingian period,\(^ {12}\) the primary sources from the early Middle Ages are limited, something that no doubt accounts in part for the relative paucity of scholarship on this type of phenomena.


Dealing with the Medieval Body

In her book *Discerning Spirits*, Nancy Caciola quotes the Aberdeen Bestiary: "A human being is twofold: inner and outer. The inner is the soul, the outer, the body."\(^{13}\) Although the Aberdeen Bestiary is a product of the twelfth-century, the sentiment expressed by this section is compatible with the attitudes about the body observable in much earlier writing. The divided body—understood through contrast between interior and exterior, spiritual and fleshly—is a persistent idea.

But how should the medieval body be discussed? In her essay, “Why all the fuss about the body?: A Medievalist’s Perspective”, Carolyn Walker Bynum examines the different ways in which bodies and embodiment have been addressed in scholarship. Although the piece has just recently celebrated its twentieth anniversary, the sentiments of the essay remain relevant to the discussion at hand.\(^{14}\) The incompatibility of many scholarly approaches to the literary, visual, and historical bodies has been unsurprising given that the attempts of biology and new historicism to quantify and describe the historical body have proven difficult to align. The medieval body is, much like the “modern body”, a thing in constant flux—a result of genetics, evolution, and acculturation, even as it is being redefined by scientific discoveries and cultural shifts. The ends of our


bodies and the anxieties attached to those bodies are not easily disentangled and clarified; the same can be said for medieval bodies. As Bynum has noted:

‘Medieval people’ (as vague a notion, by the way, as ‘modern people’) did not have ‘a’ concept of ‘the body’ any more than we do; nor did they ‘despise’ it (although there is reason to think that they feared childbirth, or having their teeth pulled, or the amputation of limbs without anesthesia). Like the modern world, the Middle Ages was characterized by a cacophony of discourses.  

As Bynum observed, there is little reason to think that there is or was a neat, unified understanding of “the body” and all that it entails. However, the lack of one consolidated understanding does not negate any attempt to suss out representations of the body and indeed, those representations (in all their instability and contradiction) can still shed light upon anxieties about the body. Although I am certainly drawing conclusions about broader cultural anxieties about contamination and the body, I hesitate to claim that these specific concerns were endemic in any way to the whole of sixth-century Europe. Rather, the themes detectable in Gregory’s Vita patrum (which echo through following centuries) are necessarily linked to those who have at their behest theological and at least some medical knowledge. The bodies described by Gregory, filtered through a hagiographic lens, are necessarily serving an end: one that is linked inextricably to the didactic demands of a religious narrative.

Bynum’s hope, expressed in her 1995 essay, to separate the “lived body” from the “body which dissolves into language” is a challenge worth considering, but as Nicole Nyffenegger and Katrin Rupp observed in their introduction to Fleshly Things and Spiritual Matters, “In spite of Walker Bynum’s appeal … one

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should keep in mind that most medieval bodies, whether dying or involved in whatever other activity, only exist in the present by virtue of having been written about by a medieval writer."\textsuperscript{16}\!

This is as true for Gregory’s hagiographical text as much as it is true for any other piece of medieval literature. What we know of the pre-modern body and how people thought about those bodies is intimately connected to the body preserved by language. In this case, the bodies of the saints and the demoniacs survive in the writing of Gregory as part of a text that affords its reader scant details about the visual and physical state of the main actors. The focus is on the spiritual state of its subjects and their actions, rather than creating a lush and detailed aesthetic.

One way of thinking about the body is to render it more broadly as a symbol of the community. As Suzanne Conklin Akbari and Jill Ross have mused, “Body was not only that which was most intimately personal and most proper to the individual, but also that which was most public and representative of the interlocked nature of the group.”\textsuperscript{17}\!

This understanding of the body—as both the individual and the communal—is where I shall begin in addressing the bodies of the \textit{Vita patrum}. The possessed body is rendered a stage for spiritual drama that serves the saint, the community, and the religious beliefs of the age.


\textsuperscript{17} Jill Ross and Suzanne Conklin Akbari. \textit{The Ends of the Body: Identity and Community in Medieval Culture}. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 3.
Methodology and Addressing the Nature of Miracles

This study aims to investigate the mouth as a dangerous and powerful liminal space of the body as it is described in the exorcisms of Gregory of Tours’ *Vita patrum*. In looking at this sixth-century compendium of saints’ lives, one of the primary models for it is obviously the New Testament, in addition to the hagiographical works of other late antique and early medieval authors. When addressing the body as a container and the mouth as an aperture in that container, it is important to look closely at some of the biblical underpinnings, not only in the development and symptoms of exorcisms, but also the ideas about the body as a container, capable of holding the spiritual and reflecting ideas about the boundaries of the body. This study is necessarily diachronic and while its main focus is certainly the text and work of Gregory of Tours, discussions of later, relevant materials have not been precluded from the more general discussion of medieval possession and exorcism texts.

In his 2008 article, entitled "Did Medieval People Believe in Their Miracles," Steven Justice asks if the manner in which we treat the miracles of medieval literature is appropriate and productive. Addressing in particular the landmark work of Carolyn Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, Justice asserts that the manner in which miracles have been handled have not provided any clarity to the nature of medieval phenomena and the extent to which the

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18 For additional discussion on Early Medieval Miracles, see Giselle de Nie’s chapter “Seeing and Believing in the Early Middle Ages: A Preliminary Investigation” in *Word, Image, and Experience: Dynamics of Miracle and Self-perception in Sixth-century Gaul*. (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate/Variorum, 2003), VI 68.
people of the Middle Ages believed these events.\textsuperscript{19} The "problem of pre-modern belief," as framed by Justice, can prove to be a stumbling block in our attempts to deal with the social and religious phenomenon that we wish to address by way of miracle narratives.

Using Walter Daniel's *Vita* of Saint Ailred as an example, Justice argues that medieval people were well aware of both the magical thinking that is often associated with the miracles of saints and were capable of critical approaches to the veracity of miraculous events. In writing the *Vita*, Daniel is confronted by those who do not believe his account of the miraculous smiting of an unfortunate abbot. The author, pressed by this skepticism, clarifies to the reader that it is certainly possible that the abbot had died of causes other than divine retribution, making room for a natural explanation.\textsuperscript{20} The tension between the two accounts, one miraculous and one skeptical, highlights one of the difficulties of contemporary writing on medieval miracles. According to Justice, belief in miracles was both contingent upon "proof" of the event (eliminating the particularly entrenched modern view of the completely credulous medieval mind) and that a miraculous event would have been distinguished from natural forces. On this matter, Justice writes, "...this pair of historical accusations, the fraud and credulity accounts of miracle, manifest precisely the same phenomenological asymmetry as the paired ‘didactic’ and ‘perceptual’ accounts devised by historians who tried to avoid leveling precisely these accusations."\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{19} Steven Justice, "Did the Middle Ages Believe in Their Miracles?" *Representations* 103, no. 1 (2008): 3
\textsuperscript{20} Justice, "Did the Middle Ages Believe in Their Miracles?" 5.
\textsuperscript{21} Justice, "Did the Middle Ages Believe in Their Miracles?" 9.
In order to proceed with this paper, I feel that it is important to address these concerns about the categorical simplification of miracle stories in recent scholarship and how miracle stories are specifically being treated within the context of this paper. Miracle stories appear in all types of literature, secular and religious, and are used to judge the veracity of a saint’s holiness. The canonization process implemented in the High Middle Ages certainly emphasized the observation of *miracula* to verify the truth of the saint and vet him or her for formal canonization. In this sense, miracles are certainly treated as “proof” and require witnesses to be admitted for consideration.\(^{22}\) As Michel Goodich writes, in later periods, a public exorcism with many witnesses could be especially strong evidence for the veracity of a saint’s power and could be used to bolster a growing cult.\(^{23}\) Even then, the quality of a miracle and its veracity were tied to its location, as well as its nature. In the time of Gregory, a special emphasis was placed on miracles that occur after the death of a saint. This is echoed by Walter Goffart in his book *Narrators of Barbarian History (550-800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon*, who writes that for Gregory of Tours, “only posthumous miracles were certain.”\(^{24}\) As with the case of Walter Daniel, there is an abundance of evidence that miracles were not wholly and unquestioningly believed by medieval writers, regardless of what the popular imagination might suggest. According to Justice, in order for an event to be perceived as miraculous,


there must be events that are not miraculous—phenomena that fall outside the purview of the incredible—for example, illnesses cured by medicine, rather than by the power of a saint.

Modern interpretations of the nature of miracles range widely. In Thomas Heffernan's estimation, the lives of saints could be used, not as guides to proper behavior and imitation (*imitatio*), but rather as examples of especially holy people and evidence of the continuing presence of the power of God on earth. This focus on the exemplar of the saint casts the miracle story in a strongly didactic light. Regardless of the truth of the events, the larger narrative about the power of the saint could nonetheless be used to support and to teach directives of the church.

For the purposes of this study, I will be adopting an attitude toward the miracles of the saints of Gregory’s *Vita patrum* that does not address the veracity of the events (for there are no grounds on which to perform such an assessment), but rather focuses on what we are able to learn about concerns about bodily contamination and the mouth in the text. While Gregory has been characterized for many years as an overly credulous source, the purposeful recording of divine intervention in his histories and in his writings on *miracula* does not wholly depend on either the author’s total belief or the veracity of the miracles.

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Gregory of Tours and the Merovingians

In his introduction to *The World of Gregory of Tours*, Peter Brown describes the world of Gregory as one nearly unexplored, a “new continent” which remains yet to be thoroughly mapped.\(^\text{26}\) Scholarship on the Frankish historian has continued to grow and approaches to Gregory have transformed over time, generating new understandings of his work and his place within the ranks of Late Antique and early medieval historians.

Georgius Florentius was born in either 538 or 539\(^\text{27}\) and took the name Gregorius (Anglicized “Gregory”) once he joined the clergy, perhaps styling himself after his maternal great-grandfather, Bishop Gregory of Langres. He received his clerical training with Nicetius of Lyons, his maternal great-uncle,\(^\text{28}\) and would become the bishop of Tours (taking up the former seat of Saint Martin) in 573 CE.

Although his fame is largely dependent upon his historical projects,\(^\text{29}\) writing the only “large-scale” surviving history from the period,\(^\text{30}\) his works beyond his oft-cited *History of the Franks* has value in assessing the political and cultural landscape of the period. During the Enlightenment, Gregory was cast as a wholly credulous figure—a truly gullible historian who failed to discern legend

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\(^{27}\) De Nie. *Lives and Miracles*, vii.

\(^{28}\) De Nie. *Lives and Miracles*, vii

\(^{29}\) Thomas F.X. Noble, "Gregory of Tours and the Roman Church." In *The World of Gregory of Tours*, edited by Kathleen Mitchell and Ian Wood, 146-61. (Leiden: Brill, 2002),145. Gregory of Tours is often used as the primary source of his age and so our understanding of the time period is often filtered through his works. Walter Goffart writes “Gregory was the first Latin Christian to write history on an ambitious scale in well over a century, and he was even more unusual for addressing himself predominately to current events.” Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History: A.D. 550 – 800*, 130.

\(^{30}\) De Nie. *Lives and Miracles*, viii.
from reality and who actively synthesized unfiltered and likely spurious material into his histories.\textsuperscript{31} Although regarded primarily as a historian, this does not negate the literary quality of his works. As Goffart has written, “History is a type of literature; the task of our narrators was, in Sallust’s phrase, to turn deeds into words.”\textsuperscript{32} In addition to his work as a historian, Gregory penned a number of hagiographical pieces: \textit{The Glory of the Martyrs}, \textit{The Passion and Miracles of St. Julian Martyr}, \textit{The Miracles of St. Martin}, \textit{The Life of the Fathers}, and \textit{The Glory of the Confessors}.\textsuperscript{33}

In Erich Auerbach’s classic text \textit{Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature}, an entire chapter is devoted to an excerpt from Gregory’s histories. Aurbach characterizes Gregory’s Latin as clumsy and laments its lack of style when compared to the great classical historians.\textsuperscript{34} This is consistent with Gregory’s own estimation of his writing; even in the opening to the \textit{Vita patrum}, Gregory refers to his own “inexperience and ignorance” (\textit{imperiti idiotaeque}).\textsuperscript{35} But the conclusions of Aurbach and Gregory’s own admission (which, in the author’s case, is very likely the product of an existing trope, rather than a sincerely believed fault) has come under close scrutiny in recent years.

Challenging the conventional assessment of Gregory’s Latin, Peter Brown has

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{32} Goffart, \textit{The Narrators of Barbarian History: A.D. 550 - 800}, 17.
\item \textsuperscript{33} On occasion, the \textit{Vita Patrum} work is referred to as the \textit{Liber vitae Patrum}, but this conflicts with the rational specifically provide by Gregory himself in his introduction to the work. See above, footnote 3.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Erich Auerbach, \textit{Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature}. Translated by Willard R. Trask. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 77-95.
\end{itemize}
written, “The confession of the failure to write ornate Latin was, in fact, advanced by Gregory as a weighty claim to authority. Writing about holy men in his Life of the Fathers he adopted the same ‘ideology of pure speech’—a style untouched by artifice and, so, endowed with supernatural trenchancy—that had characterized the monastic leaders of an earlier age…” Not only does Brown point to an intentional simplicity in Gregory’s writing, but suggests his aspirational models were patristic, rather than classical. Under this assumption, holding the compositions of Gregory to the standards of “golden age” classical Latin seems misguided given the gulf in not only time period, but also in content and purpose. Looking only at the Vita patrum, one finds that each section begins with a short and flowery bit of exegesis—proving Gregory to be not wholly inept and highlighting the more sparse style that he utilizes for the biographical text.

**Possession and the Vita patrum**

In the Vita patrum, the saints detailed by Gregory are not only figures of moral uprightness, but participate in a culture of miraculae. They are depicted as performing a myriad of miracles, from the rather simple to the astonishing. While many of these acts can be categorized as conventions of medieval miracle narratives, others have unusual features or could be cast as new developments for the sixth-century that would explode in popularity at a later date. The body of the saint plays a crucial role, acting as conduit for the divine presence and divine power during the life of the saint and into the period post mortem.

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The interaction between the person of the saint and the body of the demoniac, with or without the element of physical touch, creates a series of micro-narratives of illness and recovery. The intertwining of the corporeal and the spiritual within these narratives allows the reader to explore attitudes about the Merovingian body, as well as the socio-religious attitudes associated with it. To this end, the occurrences of possession and exorcism within the *Vita patrum* serve as an interesting series of case studies that can provide a point of entry to this discussion of the Merovingian body and contamination.

In the *Vita patrum*, there are no less than thirteen references to exorcism and possession, ranging from descriptions of specific incidents to more general comments on a saint's abilities to manage and perform exorcisms. Exorcisms were a public affair, which provided a glimpse of holy spectacle and reminded the viewer of the unseen, ongoing battle between spiritual forces. As Nancy Caciola has observed, "Possession and exorcism figured prominently in the early Church as the main arena through which the cosmic battle between good and evil was played out, a quotidian enactment of Christian eschatology and soteriology."\(^37\) As an outward and visible display of the power of God, the church and the saint, exorcism’s role in a public dialogue and drama in presenting the power of the holy is quite clear.

Despite Goffart’s assertion that “Gregory’s determination to multiply the holy is nowhere more apparent than in his positive and uncritical approach to authentication,”\(^38\) the treatment of possession was understood as separate from

\(^37\) Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages*, 228.

normal medicine\textsuperscript{39} and Gregory himself distinguishes between the two. Gregory’s differentiation between natural illness and spiritual contamination is not to say that he found them to be wholly separate. Indeed, a polluted spiritual condition could be associated with physical illness.\textsuperscript{40}

The didactic and dramatic elements of possession were maintained up to and beyond the Merovingian period, although the details of possession and exorcism were subject to a variety of mutations. Indeed, the accounts of possession written by Gregory are nested within stories that are intended not only underscore the power of the saint, but also to champion the power of the divine over the forces of evil. In this way, such encounters render visible phenomena that would otherwise remain invisible and intangible to the average person. While the period in which Gregory is writing is over 350 years after the council of Nicaea and the Merovingian region was associated quite strongly with the church, there were ongoing attempts to root out persistent heresies.\textsuperscript{41} For evidence of this, one can turn to the writings of Pope Gregory the Great (540-604 CE). One particular surviving letter, which discusses the destruction of images by an overzealous bishop, admonishes the clergy member who destroyed the images in the church. For Gregory the Great, the sculptures and paintings were not only

\textsuperscript{39} Michael Goodich observed that exorcism, as a cure to “metaphysical” ailments, rather than the “natural” illnesses which might be addressed by medicine, “thus occurred after all regular therapies had been examined”. Michael Goodich, \textit{Other Middle Ages: Witnesses at the Margins of Medieval Society}. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998). See also Raymond Van Dam, who wrote: “Rather than attributing their ailments and misfortunes to the influence of external demonic agents, people usually conceded that they were personally responsible for both their sins and their illnesses” Van Dam, Raymond. \textit{Saints and Their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul}. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 89.


\textsuperscript{41} Noble “Gregory of Tours and the Roman Church,” 158. A major concern of the Roman Church and the age of Gregory is Hersey; Brown, \textit{The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity}, 119.
“the books of the illiterate,” but their splendor also did much to draw people to the church.\textsuperscript{42} The vivid vignettes of the \textit{Vita patrum} act in a somewhat similar way. When read aloud, they share the glory of the saints with an audience through the accounts of astonishing miracles. As Goffart observes, “For both Gregories, however, there remained the grave pastoral problem of how to penetrate the skepticism and doubt of their congregations, of how to overcome the understandable reluctance of men to grasp anything except visible experience.”\textsuperscript{43}

It is important to note, that although the sixth-century is often framed as a “pagan” century in Gaul, the Merovingians were less likely to be seeking active conversions than fighting heresies or supporting the faith of the existing parishioners. In his essay “Paganism and Superstitions in the Time of Gregory of Tours: Une Question Mal Posée!” Yitzak Hen writes that although Gregory of Tours records the survival of pagan shrines,\textsuperscript{44} these should be interpreted as potentially fictional settings for the acts of a given saint— set pieces rather than historical reality. Such an event falls into a hagiographical literary trope repeated in a variety of lives. What sources suggest a “pagan” Gaul with an abundance of active pre-Christian cults are Carolingian and should be read critically as products of their later origins, rather than accurate historical records\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{42} Pope Gregory the Great, “Letters to Bishop Serenus of Marseilles”, \textit{from Registrum epistularum, in Early Medieval Art, 300-1150: Sources and Documents}, ed. Caecilia Davis-Weyer, 47-49

\textsuperscript{43} Goffart, \textit{The Narrators of Barbarian History: A.D. 550 - 800}, 144.


\textsuperscript{45} Hen, “Paganism and Superstitions in the Time of Gregory of Tours: Une Question Mal Posée!” 237.
I hold that these hagiographical accounts are more than just tales that spark the imagination of an audience or inspire awe in the hearts of the listeners, but also reflect the shared cultural values, ideas, and themes that a Merovingian writer like Gregory would have found important and hold possibility for insight into broader cultural themes present in Merovingian Gaul.

**Exorcism and the Mouth**

The mouth is a point of perforation in the surface of the body that allows material (spiritual and corporeal) to enter and to exit. Perhaps adding to the troublesome nature of the aperture, is its location on the face, a site that is not only key to expression, but is also theologically and metaphorically the part of the body most “in charge” because of its relationship with the head. Although necessary for both verbal communication and for eating, the mouth represents a point of weakness in the surface of the body—producing a liminal zone between interior and exterior. In her book *Dark Age Bodies*, Linda Coon observed that "the mouth is a treacherous orifice," a sentiment that is only further underscored by its role in the phenomena described by Gregory. In these cases, the mouth plays an important role in both the diagnosis of a possession and the subsequent process of exorcism. From demonically inspired speech to the wild biting of a demoniac, the mouth is depicted in these instances as points of entrance and exit. To scholars of the high and late Middle Ages, the majority of the symptoms accounted for in Gregory’s accounts are recognizable in much later cases – even into the Early

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Modern period. The mouth often takes part in the dramatic realization of a possession as the afflicted vomits forth foul materials or declares truths that a mortal individual could not have knowledge of.

Gregory’s descriptions of possession, for the most part, resonate with other written accounts of the phenomena. In his Catechisms, Cyril of Jerusalem writes that:

... the unclean devil, when he comes upon the soil of a man... perverts the tongue and distorts the lips. Foam comes instead of words; the man is filled with darkness; his eye is open yet his soul sees not through it; and the miserable man quivers convulsively before his death. 47

Cyril emphasizes the danger and ugliness of possession, and calls forth both the physical and emotional trauma of a demoniac. This description, as we shall see, is consistent with many of the exorcisms featured by Gregory in the Vita patrum.

Let us move to examine the examples provided by Gregory, looking at how specific instances of exorcism are handled by the author. Drama was certainly not lacking in these possessions and one of the most striking examples can be found in the possessed man encountered by St. Patroclus. The afflicted man is described as biting everything in sight, his teeth bloodied as a result of his attacks ("qui rictibus patulis dentibusque cruentis quod attingere poterat dentibus propriis laniabant"). Patroclus, seeing the afflicted man, takes action to cast out the demon.

According to Gregory:

atque inibi, cum multos inerguminos, manu inposita, per signu crucis effugatis daemonibus, menti integra reddidisset, unus ad eum adductus est rabidus, qui rictibus patulis dentibusque cruentis quod attingere poterat dentibus propriis laniabant. Pro quo per triduum in orationone prostratus, obtenuit ad illam divinae miserationis potentiam, ut, mitigato furore, leto obnoxius mundaretus, inmissisque in os eius digitis fugato feralis atrocitatis spiritu, personam restituit incolomitati.49

And in that place, since he had restored healthy minds to a great number of possessed people, chasing away demons by the imposition of hands and the sign of the cross, he was brought a madman, who opened his mouth wide and showed bloodied teeth, because he bit to pieces everything he could reach. He lay in prayer for this man for three days and obtained divine mercy of the Almighty that his fury would quieten, and that he would be cleansed from the danger of death; he put his fingers into the man's mouth and chased out the cruel demon who assailed him, restoring them to health. 50

Gregory begins his description of the incident by mentioning Patroclus’s previous successes with performing exorcisms. This is an unsurprising skill, but Gregory’s description of it serves to establish the credentials and experience of the saint. In the past, the Patroclus has driven out demons with the sign of the cross (per signu crucis effugatis) alone, but this will not do for the rabidus individual. As a result he must lay in prayer for three days, asking for divine influence, so that the man be calmed prior to performing the exorcism. In his account of later medieval exorcisms, Michael Goodich writes, “Among the exercises employed were fasts undertaken by the victim or members of the family, confession, or the recitation of prayers, masses or the Paternoster by the

49 Krusch, *Gregorii Episcopi Turonensis Miracula et Opera Minora,* 704. The Latin text of *Vita patrum* has been quoted from Bruno Krusch’s 1890 edition of the text for the *Monumenta Germanica Historica.*
50 Edward James, *Gregory of Tours: Life of the Fathers.* (Liverpool University Press, 1991), 68. All English translations used are from Edward James’s edition of the *Life of the Fathers,* although I extensively referenced Giselle De Nie’s excellent edition from Dumbarton Oaks.
exorcist or community.” Thus this extra effort to ensure the success of an exorcism is preserved in later practice.

When attempting the exorcism, Patroclus places his hand directly into the man’s bloody mouth. The demoniac's erratic and violent behavior marks the mouth as an unsafe space, making the saint’s gesture quite dangerous. The action of the saint is quite unusual—as more commonly, demons are driven out by words or gestures or even a “laying on of hands.” Patroclus’s action is not only more physically involved than the other popular methods and represents some manner of hazard to his person, it is significantly more intimate and more invasive than the other methods mentioned by Gregory.

The manner in which this exorcism is performed is not established in New Testament examples and there appears to be a limited number of similar occurrences outside of the writings of Gregory. In much later exorcisms (perhaps most famously during the possessions at Loudun in 1634), exorcists might place their fingers into the mouth of a demoniac, not as part of the exorcism, but to prove the holiness of the exorcist and the veracity of the possession: it was thought that the possessed person would be prohibited from biting down and injuring the priest. While this is not a part of Gregory's account, and does not appear to be a motivation for Patroclus’s actions, nonetheless the

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51 Goodich, Other Middle Ages: Witnesses at the Margins of Medieval Society, 156.
52 Edward James, Gregory of Tours: Life of the Fathers. (Liverpool University Press, 1991), 68.
53 Another example of this can be found in the life of St. Martin. See Levak, The Devil Within: Possession & Exorcism in the Christian West, 95.
54 This action of the priest also causes the possessed woman to go into convulsions. See Michel de Certeau, The Possession at Loudun. Translated by Michael B. Smith. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 143.
demoniac does not injure the saint during the process despite the apparent lack of discrimination in his earlier attacks.

By placing his fingers into the mouth of the demoniac, the saint breaches the outside boundary of the body. This crossing of a corporeal threshold by the saint is an incursion into internal space, crossing a physical boundary in order to affect the spiritual. This type of exorcism is not entirely isolated in the *Vita patrum*, there are two other instances of this practice described by Gregory: in the chapter devoted to St. Illidus, who is called upon to exorcise a young girl and in the life of St. Quintianus, who encounters a possessed man wracked by convulsions.

In the case of St. Illidus, as with Patroclus, the saint has already reached a level of relative renown for his miraculous acts. Hearing this, the emperor at Trier seeks his help in resolving the plight of his daughter:

Unet factum est, ut haec gloria Treveriei imperatoris aures attingeret, cuius filia cum ab spiritu inmundo correpta graviter vexaretur, et non inveniretur a quo possit erui, beatum Illidium fama detexit. Et dicto citius ab imperatore directi pueri, sanctum senem in ante dicta repertum urbe potestasti regiae celeriter repraesentant. At ille, venerabiliter exceptum, de exitu infelicis conquiritur filias. ille vero confisus in Domino, in oratione prostrernitur, noctemque eum sacris hymnis canticisque spiritualibus ductam, in missis in os puellae digitis, nequam spiritum a corpore abegit obsessae.55

Finally the rumor of his glory came to the ears of the emperor at Trier, whose daughter suffered much, being possessed by a devil; no one could be found to cast it out. Illidus was recommended by popular rumor. Immediately the emperor sent messengers, who speedily brought the holy old man to Trier by royal authority. He is received with such great respect by the ruler, who is very troubled by the unhappy plight of his daughter. The holy bishop, trusting in the Lord prostrates himself in prayer. He passed an entire night singing sacred hymns and songs and the put his

fingers into the mouth of the young girl and chased out the evil spirit which had tormented her body.\textsuperscript{56}

The similarities to the exorcism performed by Patroclus are immediately apparent—the saint receives the possessed individual, prays for a period of time, and then exorcises the demon by placing his fingers into the mouth of the afflicted person. While other measures and exorcists have failed, the saint is able to drive out the demon from the girl.

Like the earlier example of Patroclus, Illidus is able to carry out the exorcism with the addition of his fingers into the mouth of the possessed: \textit{in missis in os puellae digitis, nequam spiritum a corpore abegit obsessae.}

Gregory’s use of the verb \textit{abigo} in his description is interesting. Such a word choice not only carries the meaning of “driving cattle” (thus the sense of “to drive out” provided by James’s translation above), but also has a medical connotation—used to refer to both the removal of a disease (like a tumor) and to indicate a forced birth or the action of performing an abortion.\textsuperscript{57} These latter two definitions emphasize not only the curative powers of the saint and draw a connection to medicine, but also underscore the physicality of actions of the saint. To use a verb which also carries connections to abortion or the otherwise forced removal of a fetus from an individual’s body recalls a procedure that draws something unwanted (and in the case of a demon or a tumor, dangerous) from the interior of the body in an effort to return the body to some pre-occupation state. Thus it highlights the concept of bodily occupation, that there was indeed something

\textsuperscript{56} James, \textit{Gregory of Tours: Life of the Fathers}, 13.
\textsuperscript{57} Charlton Thomas Lewis and Charles Short. \textit{A Latin Dictionary}. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993)
living inside the possessed person. The fact that such a word is used when the
saint is healing a female demoniac can hardly be ignored, although, I am hesitant
to extend the parallel with female reproductive processes much further, given that
a similar action is taken upon the bodies of two male demoniacs. Nevertheless the
word choice should be noted as especially stressing the removal of something
from the interior of a body.

In addition to the two examples provided above, a third event of this kind
is described in the life of Quintianus. The next instance of this type of expulsion
of a demon features a much more detailed description of the symptoms of the
possession:

Eiciebat autem et daemonia se confitentia. In monasterio autem
Cambidobrensi veniens, cum inerguminum quendam reperisset atrocius
debacchantem, misit presbiteros, ut ei manus inponerent; sed cum eorum
exorcizatione larva non fuisset expulsa, sanctus Dei comminus
adpropinquans, in missis in os eius digitis, personam reddit absolutam. 58

He also drove out demons. Having come to the monastery of
Cambidobrensis, he found a demoniac there in the midst of horrible
convulsions, and he sent priests to lay hands on him. But their exorcisms
did not drive out the demon, and the saint of God approached him closely,
put his fingers in the man's mouth, and delivered him. 59

Here, Saint Quintianus comes upon a man who is displaying a common
physical characteristic of possession: terrible convulsions. Like emperor’s
daughter who appears in the life of Illidus, this demoniac has proven difficult to
cure. Although the saint sends priests to the man, they are unable to heal him via
the laying on of hands. Ultimately, the task falls to Quintianus and like the two
other examples, the saint successfully exorcises the troubled man by placing his

58 Krusch, Gregorii Episcopi Turonensis Miracula et Opera Minora. Monumenta Germaniae
Historica. (Hannoverae: Impensis bibliopolii Hahniani. 1885), 676.
59 James, Gregory of Tours: Life of the Fathers, 26.
fingers into the man’s mouth. While there is no indication of additional efforts (e.g. prayers, song, fasting) on the part of the saint, he only takes action after other exorcism attempts have failed, and the seriousness of the situation seems to require the more intensely physical intervention that is provided by Quintianus.

While this example does not have the evocative use of “abigo” in describing the saint’s action, the curing of the possessed is framed with language that is similar to that used in the events from the life of Patroclus. Patroclus successfully removes the demon, “restoring [the possessed man] to health” (personam restituit incolomitati). Similarly, Quintianus is described as “delivering” the afflicted person (personam reddit absolutam). Returning to the Latin, these lines may be more literally rendered: Patroclus, with the success of the exorcism, “restores the person to safety” and Quintianus “returns the person to wholeness.” With the use of language that stresses a sense of renewal or restoration, these accounts have the saint returning the afflicted to a normal state of spiritual and physical health. Thus, the saint (via their connection to the divine) provides a spiritual and physical remedy for the demoniac, returning the possessed person to a pre-possession state of health.

While the healing of the demoniac is the desired outcome of any exorcism, what makes these three examples especially interesting is the mode of intervention by which the exorcism is performed. The saint's bodily incursion upon the possessed individual is undoubtedly more invasive than, for instance, a "laying on of hands" (manu inposita), and is framed in Gregory's account as being more efficacious in the expelling of demons. In this regard, the penetration of the
body by the hand of the saint marks a more intimate intervention as the divine power wielded by the saint is directed into the body. By this logic, the mouth becomes an entrance for the holiness of the saint and a point of access for a cure: using a pathway not unlike the one utilized for oral medication in the treatment of bodily illness. More generally, in the descriptions provided by Gregory, the touch of a saint (or others granted the power to expel demons as well) is accorded an extra efficaciousness in comparison to purely verbal interventions. This does not make touch a requirement for a successful exorcism, as is evident in other instances in the *Vita patrum*, but the inclusion of touch illustrates the variety of ways in which medieval bodies might interact when pursuing such a cure.

The practice of crossing an external boundary of the body or taking in something intended to purge evil from the individual is not limited to Gregory’s narratives. As Goodich writes, a demoniac might be encouraged to drink water in which relics were washed, imbibing it as a sort of spiritual cure. But in an example that better parallels the practices of Patroclus, Illidus, and Quintianus, Goodich recounts the specific (and unusual) exorcism performed by Gerard of Pisa: “[Gerard] took a piece of cypress wood, touched it to the portrait of St. Louis, dipped it in burning oil, and then touched the victim’s tongue with the stick…”60 Here, like the examples provided by Gregory, there is a move to cross the outer boundary of the body in order to push out the demonic presence. Although the examples provided by Goodich are from a later time period, they reflect many of the same impulses embedded in the examples from the *Vita patrum*.

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60 Goodich, *Other Middle Ages: Witnesses at the Margins of Medieval Society*, 156.
Vomiting and Devouring

The biological functions of the mouth make it a clear threshold between the interior and exterior of the physical body. It is transformed into a passage by breathing, eating, and even vomiting—the mouth allows matter to be taken in and to be expelled. The latter of these functions becomes a classic hallmark of possession throughout the Middle Ages and has even persisted into contemporary horror films. In the late Middle Ages and into the Early Modern period, a possessed person may be observed to vomit foreign matter, such as a great quantity of pins or paper.\(^6^1\) The ejection of such material could be seen as a sign of the veracity of the possession and a symptom of the affliction itself. In the *Vita patrum*, vomiting is indeed described, but is neither a chief symptom of possession nor treated as evidence of an ongoing possession. Rather, vomiting is depicted as a physical purging closely associated with the expelling of the demon from the body. In chapter eight of the *Vita patrum*, Gregory describes such an event in the life of Nicetius of Lyon:

\[\textit{Nuperrimo autem tempore, mulieres quaedam vexatae a daemonio, ex termino Biturigo venientes, tres numero, dum ad basilicam sancti Martini deducerentur, hanc eclesiam sunt ingressae. Ilico conlisis in se palmis, dum sancti Niceti faterentur se virtutibus cruciari, proicientes ab ore nescio quid purulentum cum sanguine, ab obsessis spiritibus protinus sunt mundatae.}\(^6^2\)

\(^{61}\) See Levak, *The Devil Within: Possession & Exorcism in the Christian West*, 9. Levak writes: "A recurrent element in many narratives of possession was the vomiting or extrusion of alien objects. Pins and needles were the most common materials, but the list of ejected substances includes nails, glass, blood, pottery, feathers, coal, stones, coins, cinders, sand, dung, meat, cloth, thread, and hair."

Very recently three women coming from the land of Berry, tormented by demons, were on their way to the basilica of St. Martin, and they entered this church. Immediately they clapped their hands together and cried out that they were tortured by the power of St. Nicetius. They threw up out of their mouths I know not what foul substance, mingled with blood, and they were immediately freed from the spirits that had possessed them.63

Here three possessed women on their way to the basilica of St. Martin enter the church where Nicetius’s relics are located.64 Upon entering, they cry out in pain, testifying to their condition. The presence of the body of the saint is enough to vacate the demons from the women and, once they have been so exercised, all three suddenly vomit up a “foul substance” (purulentum), which can also be rendered as “pus” or “rotting matter,” mingled with blood. These women are not vomiting as a symptom of possession, but rather as a sign that the affliction has passed and the “infection” removed from the body. A similar event is described in Gregory’s account of the life of Nicetius of the Trevari:

*Sed et curationum gratia data est ei a Deo. Dum autem haec in illo, ut supra diximus, habitu sanctorum habitacula circuiret, ad templum sancti Maximini antestitis accessit, in cuius atrium pose multas debaccationes tres inergumini praessi sopore quiescebant. Cernensque eos somno deditos, fecit signum crucis econta; statimque expergefacti, elevante in sublimi voces, dato impetu ad vomitum emundati sunt.*65

God also gave [Nicetius] the grace of healing. As he was walking one day around the church of St. Maximin the bishop, in the fore court of which three possessed men rested, overcome by sleep after many convulsions. Seeing them fast asleep, he made over them the sign of the cross, and immediately they woke up, uttering great cries, and suddenly vomiting, they were delivered.66

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63 James, *Gregory of Tours: Life of the Fathers*, 62.
64 It was not uncommon to have demons expelled by relics, rather than a living saint. See Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?: Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation*, 384-385.
65 Krusch, *Gregorii Episcopi Turonensis Miracula et Opera Minora*, 705.
The saint comes upon three sleeping men, exhausted from the symptoms of their condition. Seeing their affliction, Nicetius makes the sign of the cross over them. They wake, and freed of their affliction, they vomit, just as the three women from the earlier example did upon being cured. In both cases described by Gregory, the mouth is depicted as an exit from which unwanted material can be purged from the body. Evidence of the possession is made visible in this way, as is the success of the exorcism.\textsuperscript{67} When the former demoniacs vomit, the audience is assured that what was torturing the afflicted from the inside has been forced out.

The examples provided by Gregory have parallels in medieval visual art. In many images of exorcism, a demon is depicted as emerging from the mouth of the afflicted individual, drawn out by the power of the exorcist. In regard to this imagery, Nancy Caciola writes,

> The central element in accounts of demonic possession is the sense that the afflicted individual has incorporated a foreign being within herself … their exit point is the victim’s mouth, a detail that suggests the need for a specific bodily opening. … Seldom were unclean spirits envisaged as numinous forms wafting out the victim. Rather, they crawled out from an orifice: usually though not universally, the mouth.\textsuperscript{68}

The vomiting in the \textit{Vita patrum} serves as an example of a convention that would make its way into visual tradition—the unholy is expelled from the body through the mouth. The act of vomiting, as a representation of expulsion, attests to the efficacy of the saint’s power and affirming the power of God over the forces of evil that permeate the mortal world.


\textsuperscript{68} Caciola, \textit{Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages}, 41.
Nevertheless, the mouth of the possessed is hardly limited to biting and vomiting and with this in mind, I wish to depart, just briefly, from the program of exorcisms and possessions in order to discuss another function of the mouth: eating. One of the primary purposes of the mouth, eating is necessary for the body to thrive: a person must take in nourishment or they will perish. As a result, the mouth becomes a site of required physical interaction with the outside world.

It is unsurprising then, that such an action predicated on the incorporation of the external into the body would be faced with extensive concern about the risk of contamination—not just physical, but spiritual as well. In Leviticus, the rules for what is good and proper to eat are laid out in careful detail, providing observant readers with a guide on what exactly they should eat and thus, absorb into the body. In her discussion of biblical dietary rules, Mary Douglas writes, “By rules of avoidance holiness was given a physical expression in every encounter with the animal kingdom and at every meal.”\(^6^9\) Indeed, the ritual concern with holiness and the avoidance of contamination are given frequent attention when restrictions are applied to one’s daily gustatory habits. While medieval Christians had for the most part shed the dietary restrictions presented by the Old Testament, they had by no means discarded all concerns with eating. From the ritual associated with communion (a sacrament that by its nature blends eating and ritual imitation) to a fascination with fasting, the interest in creating practice and rules around eating persisted. While setting aside the very real potential for food-borne illness, the danger associated with eating extends beyond

the earthly. Gregory the Great recalled a nun who failed to wash a cabbage before she ate it. Unfortunately for the sister, hiding in her meal was a small demon who then proceeded to possess her.⁷⁰ In this account, the vector of possession is clear, as is the concern about spiritual contamination via the mouth.

From the very earliest vitae, saints are praised for their endurance efforts, including fasting for long periods of time. While initially evoking the trials of Christ in the desert or the asceticism of John the Baptist, the importance of fasting grows over time—it illustrates the saint’s power over his or her body and a devotion to the spiritual world over the carnal, fleshly world.⁷¹ In keeping with established hagiographical tradition, several of the saints featured in Gregory’s text similarly are accorded ascetic practices and a proclivity for fasting. In his account of Lupicinus in the first chapter of the Vita patrum, Gregory records a rather unusual miraculous ability to the saint:

\[\text{Erat autem valde subrius et a cibo potuque abstenens, ita ut plerumque tertia die reficerit. Cum autem eum, sicut corporis humani deposit necessitas, sitis arriperet, vas cum aqua exhiberi faciebat, in qua manus inmersas diutius retenebat. Mirum dictu! Ita absorbebat caro eius auquam adposittam, ut putaurus eam per os eius adsumi; et sic ardor sitis extinguebatur.} \]

[Lupinicus] was very sober, and abstained from eating and drinking, so that often he took food only once every three days. And when the necessity of the human body caused him to be thirsty, he had brought to him a jar full of water, in which he immersed his hands for a long time. A marvelous thing! His flesh absorbed the water, so that you would have thought that he had swallowed it with his mouth: thus he quenched his thirst.⁷²

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⁷⁰ Caciola, Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages, 41-42.
⁷³ James, Gregory of Tours: Life of the Fathers, 6.
Although somewhat humorous when read in a modern context, the description of Lupicinus managing to drink without the use of his mouth allows the saint to defy the typical physical needs of a person while maintaining a body sealed against the world. In her essay “Eating Bodies in the Old English *Andreas,*” Fabienne L. Michelet writes, “Incorporation, and more specifically, the act of eating, means that something external to the body is ingested and assimilates: outside becomes part of the inside… blurs the dividing line between what pertains to the body and what lies beyond it, between eater and eaten, between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’.”

By not eating (or even drinking) often, Lupicinus reduces the amount of “blurring” and reduces any chance for contamination through eating. Rather, he is able miraculously to meet the needs of his mortal body without opening his body to external risk. This is consistent with what Giselle de Nie has observed in the *miracula* stories of Gregory: “For the notion of spiritual ‘purity’—interpreted as total severance from the body and its needs and drives—had become an ecclesiastical concern.”

Several of Gregory’s other subjects are similarly associated with fasting and ritual moderation, providing evidence for de Nie’s claims that restriction of bodily needs in the name of purity was an ecclesiastical concern.

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75 De Nie. *Lives and Miracles,* X.
When describing Ursus’s habits, Gregory writes:

Ursus was devoted to abstinence in food and drink, and ceaselessly urged his monks to turn their eyes and thoughts from any excess.  

_Erat enim abstenens a cibis et potu, interdicens monachis sine cessatione avertere oculum et cogitatione ab omni luxoria._

Ursus makes fasting a community priority, asking the other members of his religious house to adhere to guidelines regarding how much they should consume with regard to food and drink.

In its entailments, the devouring mouth, an aperture that consumes by nature, recalls the assessment made by Jaques Lacan (and echoed by other scholars):

…the complex unlocatable form, which also makes it into the primitive object par excellence the abyss of the feminine organ from which all life emerges, this gulf of the mouth, in which everything is swallowed up, and no less the image of death in which everything comes to its end.

Here we are returned to the grotesque body evoked by Bakhtin, where the mouth, as an aperture already open to the world, is by association with other bodily orifices evokes the generative power of the body, doubling its role in the image of the grotesque body. The mouth is an aperture capable of both devouring and of producing, a site of both generation and consumption. These two antonymic functions double the ways in which the mouth allows the border between the interior of the body and the external world to blend together.

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76 James, _Gregory of Tours: Life of the Fathers_, 115.
77 Krusch, _Gregorii Episcopi Turonensis Miracula et Opera Minora_, 734.
79 M. M. Bakhtin, _Rabelais and His World_. Translated by Hélène Iswolsky. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 27.
Speech and Possession

Another vital function of the mouth is, of course, speech. Like eating, speech (and related functions, like laughter) come under restriction by social and religious rules which dictate what is proper and appropriate for a given situation.

Peter Brown, in his book *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* writes of Clement the Christian’s views on laughter in a religious context:

Clement shrank from the coarse explosion of the laugh. Its sudden, instinctive release seemed like a deliberate attempt to sabotage the measured flow of conscious human words, that echoed, in controlled, intelligible sounds, the still, abiding order of the divine Word, of Christ, within the soul.80

For Clement, an outburst of laughter directly disturbed a controlled and moderated environment, becoming the unwelcome inverse to ordered and proper speech.

With the blending of the functions of the mouth, speech was connected in later periods with the sense of taste,81 linking the two functions of the mouth.

Similarly, Linda Coon notes that language and eating could be joined together in metaphor, noting that some of the strictures of the Benedictine Rule were developed to prevent actions unbecoming to brothers. She writes, “Virile monks, however, possess the ‘teeth’ with which to masticate the Word and chew on its mysteries. Dangerously, these same men potentially may use their teeth to engage in ‘symbolic cannibalism,’ that is, the mastication of their brothers through

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81 Woolgar, *The Senses in Late Medieval England*, 111. For discussion on taste as a subset of the sense of touch, see Schnapp, Jeffrey T. "Touch and Transport in the Middle Ages." *MLN* 124, no. 5 Supplement (2009): 115-36.
slanderous speech." Here, improper and libelous speech is characterized as damaging its subject, which, beyond the taboo implied in such a description, would divide the community and spread discontent among the brothers. This, along with Clement’s distaste for uproarious laughter, underscores the need for control and moderation with speech and speech like functions because of their potential deleterious effects on both the individual and the group.

In the *Vita patrum*, speech can be both a tool of the exorcist and a symptom of the possessed. Nicetius of the Trevari encounters a man, who is possessed in the presence of a large congregation. This particular event is sparked by the entrance of the king with a group of people that the bishop had previously excommunicated into the church. In his possessed state, the man cries out the sins of King Theudebert, rebuking the ruler, while simultaneously attesting to the power of the saint. When Theudebert orders the demoniac escorted out of the church, the body of the possessed man becomes exceptionally heavy and they are unable to remove him. Shocked by this supernatural display, the king allows Nicetius to approach the possessed man. The saint makes the sign of the cross and the man is freed. Here, the demonic speech accorded to the afflicted acts as both evidence of the possession and allows the sanctity of Nicetius to be publicly affirmed. Gregory recounts:

...subito exclamat unus de populo, arreptus a daemone puer iuvenis, coepitque voce valida inter supplicia torturae suae et sancti virtutes et regis crimina confiteri. Dicebatque episcopum castum, regem adulterum; hunc timore Christi humilem, illum gloria regni superbam...Quibus expulses, iussit sacerdos daemoniacum foris extrahi. Sed cum,

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... suddenly a young man in the congregation, seized by a demon, cries out and begins to confess in a loud voice, in the midst of the pains of his torment, both the virtues of the saint and the crimes of the king. He said the bishop was chaste and the king was an adulterer, that the former was humble in his fear of Christ and the latter was proud in his royal glory... [After the removal of those condemned by Nicetius] the bishop ordered the demoniac to be expelled also. But he clung to a column, and ten men could not drag him away from it. Then the saint of God made the sign of the cross (under his vestments, lest he attract vainglory to himself), and commanded the demon to free him. Immediately the man fell to the ground together with those who were pulling him with all their strength, and after a little while he stood up, cured.84

In Gregory’s telling, the alleged demon’s speech is beneficial to the saint—revealing the sins of the king for the wider public, while giving the bishop an opportunity to display his power. Beyond the mysterious knowledge granted by the demon, the heavy body of the demoniac is the primary evidence of his possession. Once the king acquiesces to Nicetius’s directions, the demon is successfully driven from the man’s body. The ability of demons to provide the possessed with supernatural knowledge or prescient information was attested to even in the alleged etymology of “daemonas”. Valerie Flint notes that Isidore “...asserts, like Macrobius and perhaps depending on him, that ‘daemonas’ were so named by the Greeks for their foreknowledge...”85 The speech of the demoniac and his apparent knowledge of the king’s sins takes a central role in this particular

84 James, Gregory of Tours: Life of the Fathers, 107-108.
miracle narrative. The capacity of the demon(s) to speak through a person attests to both its power and its nature.

While speech can be evidence of the veracity of a possession, it is often integrated into the practice of exorcism and key to resolving possession, according to Gregory’s accounts the *Vita patrum*. At the tomb of Gregory of Langres, demoniacs, who are occasionally transfixed to a nearby wall, call out the name of the saint and are subsequently cured:

*Sed inergumini eum confitentes ad eius sepulchrum saepe purgantur. Nam pleurumque vidimus post eius transitum virgule, cui supra meminimus, quam manu gerebat, per parietes ita cos adfixos, ut putares illos validis atque acutissimis sudibus reteneri.*  

The demoniacs too, when they confess the name of the saint at his tomb, are often purified. And several times since his death we have seen these men transfixed to the wall by the stock which he used to carry in his hand…just as if they were held there by stakes sharpened at the end.

While the earlier example in Gregory’s chapter on Nicetius recalls the description of the demoniac by Cyril, the latter accords speech with a remarkable healing power. By speaking the name of the saint at his tomb, the possessed are relieved of their spiritual torment and restored to health. In the absence of the actual saint, the name of Gregory of Langres is granted an active role in the cure of the spiritual and physical afflictions. The role of the tomb or the relic in this type of exorcism is heavily predicated upon the idea that the body of a saint can stand as a renewable concentration of divine or holy presence. Brown writes, “The shrine containing a grave or, more frequently, a fragmentary relic, was very often called

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86 Krusch, *Gregorii Episcopi Turonensis Miracula et Opera Minora*, 690.
87 James, *Gregory of Tours: Life of the Fathers*, 48.
quite simply ‘the place’: *loca sanctorum*.…It was a place where the normal laws of the grave were held to be suspended.\(^8\) Once they are in the presence of the relics of Gregory of Langres, his name uttered by the demoniacs was enough to drive out the possessing force and to return the demoniac to safety. Giselle de Nie writes, “As for ‘interior’ and ‘exterior’ reality, we see in his stories that thinking or saying the name of Christ or a saint was experienced as actually making him invisibly present; even written words about Christ or a saint made him present, for the word was regarded as spiritually connected to its referent."\(^8\) This invocation of the holy person drives out the demon by recalling the authority of the referent over the possessing forces.

While the incident at the tomb of Gregory of Langres relies on the demoniacs themselves speaking the name of the saint, it is far more common across the genre to have the command of a living saint drive out demons. In the chapter on Saint Venantius, the saint is confronted by demons who have traveled to assail him. Gregory writes:

*Quibus ille: ‘Abscedite’, inquit, ‘detestabiles et nolite accedere ad locum in quo nomen Domini invocatur’. Haec eo dicente, sicut fumus evanuerunt.*\(^9\)

And he said to them “Withdraw, detestable creatures, and do not approach a place in which the name of God is invoked!” At these words, the demons vanished like smoke.\(^9\)

By Venantius’ direct command, the demons are driven away from the saint, vanishing into the air. His invocation of God forces the unholy antagonists to

\(^9\) De Nie. *Lives and Miracles*, XV.
\(^9\) Krusch, *Gregorii Episcopi Turonensis Miracula et Opera Minora*, 734.
\(^9\) James, *Gregory of Tours: Life of the Fathers*, 103.
depart in the face the power of the divine. But words were not the only thing that Gregory recorded as being able to ward off demons. Regarding Saint Ursus, he writes:

\[Dedit autem ei Dominus et gratiam curationis, ita ut, insufflatis inerguminis, protinus daemonia eiecerentur a corporibus obsessis; sed et alias per eum Dominus dignatus est operare virtutes.\]

The Lord granted [Ursus] the grace of healing, so that with the breath of his mouth alone he chased demons from the bodies of the possessed.

With his breath alone, Ursus is able to exile demons from the bodies of the possessed. The implication here is not only the thorough holiness of Ursus’s body, but also that even at the suggestion of speech—it’s very beginning in the form of breath—evil forces take flight before the power of the saint.

**The Liminal and the Transformation of the Possessed**

The demoniac is a figure that both highlights period anxieties about physical and spiritual weaknesses at the limits of the body and occupies a liminal space in its own right in regard to ritual practice. In anthropological approaches to ritual, “liminality” arose with the literature of Victor Turner, who was applying the earlier model of Arold Van Gennep’s *rites de passage* to his assessment of African rituals. In this context, Turner used the concepts developed by Van Gennep specifically to address rites of passage. Turner connected the liminal and those individuals in the process of completing a ritual rite of passage with both

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92 Krusch, *Gregorii Episcopi Turonensis Miracula et Opera Minora*, 734.
93 James, *Gregory of Tours: Life of the Fathers*, 115.
contamination and with grotesqueness.\textsuperscript{95} Under Turner’s model, these rites are marked by three stages: the separation from society of the individual; the “intervening liminal period” where the individual defies classification under the strictures of a given society; and finally, a reintegration of the individual into society, often with increased social standing.\textsuperscript{96} In the case of the sixth-century possessions recorded by Gregory, the possessed person is transitioned from a state of sin (which would have allowed the possession to take places), to a state of abjection and contamination (active possession), to a final state of purification and the resultant glorification of existing ritual spaces and actors.

While possessed, the demoniac is forced to the very edge of society, becoming a sort of grotesque hybrid of fleshly and spiritual contamination. Of this middle state, Turner writes:

As well as the betwixt-and-between state of liminality there is the state of outsiderhood, referring to the condition of being either permanently and by ascription set outside the structural arrangements of a given social system…\textsuperscript{97}

This “outsiderhood” is characteristic of the demoniac’s place in society, even as he or she is used to support the beliefs of the church. In his book \textit{Possession and Exorcism in the New Testament and Early Christianity}, Eric Sorenson observes that the demoniacs of the New Testament are closely tied to both concepts of foreignness and societal marginality.\textsuperscript{98} The possessed man met by Christ in Mark 5 has been relegated to the very margins of society, seeking out the \textit{monumentis}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{95} Turner. \textit{Blazing the Trail: Way Marks in the Exploration of Symbols}, 55-56.
\bibitem{97} Turner, \textit{Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors; Symbolic Action in Human Society}, 233.
\end{thebibliography}
and the *montibus*—leading his terrible existence alternately in the wilderness and among the dead in the tombs. This marginalization—whether geographic or a result of the demoniac’s behavior—was to be remedied by exorcism. As Michael Goodich has noted in his book *Other Middle Ages*:

> The aim is to restore a marginalized person to both mental health and the community of the faithful. The victim finds herself or himself in a liminal situation, becoming the vehicle for the transmission of certain shared values.\(^99\)

The return of the formerly possessed person to society marks not only his or her purification and the reunification of a marginal figure with the larger group, but also serves to support the institution of the church and the cult of saints.

A possessed person was necessarily relegated to the margins of society—even while participating in a spectacle that was both repulsed and attracted the audience. Even today, the lure of the car crash, the breakdown, and the outburst provide a spectacle that demands the attention of the public while turning the people at the center of this drama into objects of both pity and entertainment. Possessed persons, who might be the subject of various spiritual interventions, become the center of a manifestation of the spiritual battle between good and evil. In this way, they are reduced to a type of religious visual aid. This emphasis on the power of the saint and their actions, rather than his or her human subject was not a new invention or focus of the sixth-century. In his discussion of New Testament exorcisms, Eric Sorenson writes, “The evangelists have composed their stories in a manner that reveals their primary interest in the exorcist, and to some extent also in the possessing demon, rather than in the demoniac. They

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\(^99\) Goodich, *Other Middle Ages: Witnesses at the Margins of Medieval Society*, 152.
serve primarily both to exalt those who perform the exorcisms and to proclaim the
divinity from which they draw their authority.”

The exorcisms recorded by Gregory are similar—beyond the identification of the emperor’s daughter, no
specific biographical details are given of the remaining possessed people. Rather,
they are rendered props in the spiritual drama: their contaminated, unwell bodies
become a foil to that of the whole and holy saints.

From time to time, historians and other commentators look back upon the
demoniacs of the medieval period and diagnose them with modern illnesses—
ranging from seizure disorders to evidence of emotional or personality disorders.
These retrospective diagnoses are interesting, but seem to be void of any real
consequences, given that the observation of the “patient” is only done in
retrospect, filtered through a number of accounts of varying accuracy.

While it may not be ultimately productive to award the names of modern illnesses to pre-
modern people on the basis of roughly contemporary accounts, these
proclamations do frame the condition of the demoniac in an illness narrative and
highlights the location of the possessed person on the margins of society. They
may be players in a manifestation of the invisible spiritual world, but they are also
cast as undesirables whose perceived uncleanness separates them from society in
their actions and state, compelling them to seek a remedy via the holy man or
woman.

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100 Sorensen, Possession and Exorcism in the New Testament and Early Christianity, 118.
101 A simple search of related materials easily brings up studies which focus on identifying
medical roots of medieval demoniacs according to modern medical standards. See: Barbara
Newman, "Possessed by the Spirit: Devout Women, Demoniacs, and the Apostolic Life in the
The Location of Possession in the Body

Giselle de Nie writes, “Holy and evil power were experienced everywhere; they had to be constantly respected or guarded against by ritual gestures and practices, such as the sign of the cross and unceasing prayer.”102 In the world of Gregory, evil forces, unseen demons of the air,103 permeated the environment, requiring both consistent vigilance against corruption and a commitment to warding off such evil. Exorcism miracles make the invisible conflict visible and prove the power of the divine on earth.

In discussing the anxiety caused by the perceived ubiquity of demons, Robert Bartlett turns to Lactantius’s (240-320 CE) concerns that when they desired, demons could “penetrate the bodies of human beings and work secretly in their entrails, undermining strength, exciting sickness, terrifying the mind with dreams and shaking the understanding with frenzy.”104 But if a demon can enter into the body of a person and take control, where exactly would such a being take up residence?

While modern culture has preserved the notion of the possessing demon assailing his victim from the inside out, this was certainly not a given in earlier periods. In fact, as Eric Sorenson notes, “It is in the New Testament literature that the notion of indwelling possession begins to dominate the perception of humanity’s interaction with demonic and divine spiritual forces.”105 Thus it was established that demons might enter a body and injure their unfortunate host in

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102 De Nie. Lives and Miracles, xi.
103 Flint, The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe, 146.
104 Bartlett, Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?: Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation, 384.
this way and subsequently, the model of an internal possession persists long after the medieval period.

The question of where a possession might be located persists through the many years in which exorcisms were so performed. As with “natural” illnesses, those seeking to find and root out the cause of the affliction wished to discern where it might be located within the body.\(^\text{106}\) While it should be noted that this issue was addressed over an extended period of time, with the investigators of such phenomena coming to various conclusions, demons were most often thought to inhabit the digestive system, especially living in the entrails of their victims.\(^\text{107}\)

The mouth, as the opening to this biological system, was nevertheless complicated by persistent imagery (in art and literature) which visualized death as a spirit passing out of the mouth\(^\text{108}\)—a motif which parallels images and suggestions that exorcism expels a demon via the mouth. Nancy Caciola in her book *Discerning Spirits*, notes that “From the mouth was, of course, the entrance to two distinct physiological systems: the spiritual system, centered in the heart; and the digestive system, with all its gross impurities…. To wit, demonic spirits most often entered the bowels or viscera, while only the Holy Spirit could enter

\(^{106}\) Gregory distinguishes between natural illness, a result of humors, and spiritual afflictions. See de Nie. *Lives and Miracles*, xv.

\(^{107}\) Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages*, 191

\(^{108}\) See Massimo Leone, “Signs of the Soul: Toward a Semiotics of Religious Subjectivity.” *Signs and Society* 1, no. 1 (2013): 115-59. 136. Leone writes, “Finally, there emerges the idea of a body wrapping outlined by precise borders, going beyond which, either autonomously or rather surrendering to the action of the demons, psyché abandons the body and determines ipso facto its status as a corpse. The point of no return of this crossing between the living and the dead body is the mouth according to the Homeric indication in the ninth canto of the *Iliad*: “but the life of a man cannot come back, it cannot be uplifted or captured by force, once the frontier of teeth has been crossed.”
the heart, seat of human spirit and soul.” Ultimately, the conflation of the two systems is disambiguated by the distinction set between where the soul might be located (the heart) and where a possessing demon might inhabit (the bowels).

New Testament Possessions and Gregory’s Models

While many of the early vitae include the presence of demons and exorcism (see Sulpicius Severus’s Vita Sancti Martini), New Testament would have likely proved most influential for Gregory when he was writing his stories of imitatio Christi. While there are at least eight narrative exorcisms in the New Testament, the most famous story is no doubt the example drawn from Mark 5.1-20. Upon arriving in Gerasens, Christ comes across a man who is possessed. The man “had his dwelling in the tombs, and no man could now bind him, not even with chains.” Spending his life among the dead and in the wilderness, he cried and cut himself with stones. Faced with such a pathetic person, Christ approaches him and is met with the possessing forces causing the

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109 Caciola, Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages, 191
110 De Nie. Lives and Miracles, xii and xvi.
112 These events are also detailed in Matthew 8:28 and Luke 8:26-39.
113 Mark 5:2-5: And they came over the strait of the sea into the country of the Gerasens. And as he went out of the ship, immediately there met him out of the monuments a man with an unclean spirit, Who had his dwelling in the tombs, and no man now could bind him, not even with chains. For having been often bound with fetters and chains, he had burst the chains, and broken the fetters in pieces, and no one could tame him. And he was always day and night in the monuments and in the mountains, crying and cutting himself with stones. Et venerunt trans fretum maris in regionem Gerasenorum. Et exeunti ei de navi, statim occurrunt de monumentis homo in spiritu immundo. Qui domicilium habebat in monumentis, et neque catenis jam quisquam poterat eum ligare: Quoniam saepe compedibus et catenis vinctus, dirupisset catenas, et compedes comminisset, et nemo poterat eum domare: Et semper die ac nocte in monumentis, et in montibus erat, clamans, et concidens se lapidibus. Edgar Swift and Angela M. Kinney. The Vulgate Bible: Douay-Rheims Translation. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).
man such suffering. One of the most well known exorcism exchanges follows (Mark 5:1-13) as the demon addresses Christ:

*Et clamans voce magna dixit: Quid mihi et tibi, Jesu Fili Dei altissimi? adjuro te per Deum, ne me torqueas.*

*Dicebat enim illi: Exi spiritus immunde ab homine.*

*Et interrogabat eum: Quod tibi nomen est? Et dicit ei: Legio mihi nomen est, quia multi sumus.*

*Et deprecabatur eum multum, ne se expelleret extra regionem.*

*Erat autem ibi circa montem grex porcorum magnus, pascens.*

*Et deprecabantur eum spiritus, dicentes: Mitte nos in porcos ut in eos introeamus.*

*Et concessit eis statim Jesus. Et exeuntes spiritus immundi introierunt in porcos: et magno impetu grex praecipitatus est in mare ad duo millia, et suffocati sunt in mari.*

And crying with a loud voice, he said: What have I to do with thee, Jesus the Son of the most high God? I adjure thee by God that thou torment me not.

For he said unto him: Go out of the man, thou unclean spirit.

And he asked him: What is thy name? And he saith to him: My name is Legion, for we are many.

And he besought him much, that he would not drive him away out of the country.

And there was there near the mountain a great herd of swine, feeding.

And the spirits besought him, saying: Send us into the swine, that we may enter into them.

And Jesus immediately gave them leave. And the unclean spirits going out, entered into the swine: and the herd with great violence was carried headlong into the sea, being about two thousand, and were stifled in the sea.114

This particular exorcism not only includes a demoniac driven to seclusion and self-harm, but accords him supernatural powers—features of demonic possession that persist as characteristic qualities through the Middle Ages.115

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115 See Levak, *The Devil Within: Possession & Exorcism in the Christian West*, 37-38. Levak writes: "The demoniacs cured by Christ did not manifest the full range of symptoms in early modern European possessions. The only symptoms identified in the five exorcism stories were temporary loss of speech, hearing, or sight; convulsions that in one instance involved foaming at the mouth and grinding of the teeth; the demonstration of preternatural strength and anatomical rigidity; and violent self abuse.”
speak through him, addressing Christ and recognizing his divinity while pleading that they be allowed to take up residence in a new host: the adjacent herd of pigs. While the incident primarily supports the power of Christ and the effects of possession, it also proves as an episode that illustrates the desire that the demons have for an earthly vessel to inhabit. The possessed man, located at the very edges of society, is a figure who in his actions and his habits is forced from the organized society.

The Body as a Vessel

Understanding the body as a vessel or container would not have been a new concept during the Merovingian period, indeed, the body as a container is a metaphor that encompasses periods both before and after the sixth-century.116 Indeed, the idea of the self as a vessel extends from biblical sources to the poetry of Gregory’s contemporary Fortunatus.117

In the eighth century, Emperor Constantine V would describe the Virgin’s body as a purse—valuable when the coin (Christ) was inside, but empty and valueless once the coin is removed. Although this might strike a modern reader as incredibly callous, at such an early date and before the great explosions of Marian devotion that would occur in later years, Constantine V is emphasizing the role of Mary as a simple container for Christ. While the comment was specifically intended to reflect on the nature of Mary’s body, it casts her as vessel for Christ in

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a way that resonates with biblical precedent. Similar sentiments about the body, emphasizing its capacity as a container, can be found in I Corinthians 6:19:

An nescitis quoniam membra vestra, templum sunt Spiritus Sancti, qui in vobis est, quem habetis a Deo, et non estis vestri?

Or know you not, that your members are the temple of the Holy Ghost, who is in you, whom you have from God; and you are not your own?\footnote{Edgar Swift and Angela M. Kinney. The Vulgate Bible: Douay-Rheims Translation. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 884-885.}

In this passage, Paul not only emphasizes the true originator of a given body (God) and discourages an individualistic approach to the body, but also casts the body as a space inhabitable by the Holy Spirit. Here the body is rendered a sacred edifice for the Spiritus Sanctus and, as such, any given individual should be sure to maintain a level of purity appropriate to such holy contents. Paul means to encourage “moral” behavior that would ensure the safety and purity of the body.

I Corinthians 6 is by no means the only New Testament chapter which casts the body as a container. I Thessalonians 4:3-8 echoes not only the “body as vessel” characterization, but also the need for the individual to abstain from behavior that is not conducive to maintaining a pure body:

Haec est enim voluntas Dei, sanctificatio vestra: ut abstineatis vos a fornicatione,
Ut sciat unusquisque vestrum vas suum possidere in sanctificatione, et honore:
Non in passione desiderii, sicut et gentes, quae ignorant Deum:
Et ne quis supergrediatur, neque circumveniat in negotio fratrem suum:
quoniam vindex est Dominus de his omnibus, sicut praediximus vobis, et testificati sumus.
Non enim vocavit nos Deus in immunditiam, sed in sanctificationem.
Itaque qui haec spernit, non hominem spernit, sed Deum: qui etiam dedit Spiritum suum Sanctum in nobis.
For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that you should abstain from fornication; 
That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour: 
Not in the passion of lust, like the Gentiles that know not God: 
And that no man overreach, nor circumven his brother in business: because the Lord is the avenger of all these things, as we have told you before, and have testified. 
For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto sanctification. 
Therefore, he that despiseth these things, despiseth not man, but God, who also hath given his Holy Spirit in us.  

Here, Paul instructs that the vas should be kept in accordance with the behavioral guidelines that promote ritual cleanliness and prevent a soiling of the body. The adherent should be sure to avoid uncleanliness and dishonor—the latter category interestingly including the matter of ethical business practices with one’s peers in the equation. In the second to last verse of this passage, Paul reminds the reader “For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto sanctification.” During an exorcism, the saint (or, in the case of Mark 5, Christ) restores the vas of the body to a state that could aspire to ritual cleanliness, a body unoccupied by the forces of a demon. This of course, recalls the language surrounding the exorcisms performed by Quintianus and Patroclus covered above—Gregory frames both saints as returning the possessed person to a safe, purified state.  

Contamination and Matthew 15

While there were certainly anxieties about what might be ingested and the associated risk of contamination, the advent of Christianity brought the loosening\(^{120}\) of dietary rules. In Matthew 15:10-20, Christ emphasizes the importance not of what goes into the body (thereby downplaying the fascination with rules that occupied the Pharisees), but what issues forth—shifting the weight of worries about spiritual contamination from the intake of external materials to the actions of an individual.

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Et convocatis ad se turbis, dixit eis: Audite, et intelligite.
Non quod intrat in os, coinquinat hominem: sed quod procedit ex ore, hoc coinquinat hominem.
Tunc accedentes discipuli ejus, dixerunt ei: Scis quia pharisaei audito verbo hoc, scandalizati sunt?
At ille respondens ait: Omnis plantatio, quam non plantavit Pater meus caelestis, eradicabitur.
Sinite illos: caeci sunt, et duces caecorum; caecus autem si caeco ducatum praestet, ambo in foveam cadunt.
Respondens autem Petrus dixit ei: Edissere nobis parabolam istam.
At ille dixit: Adhuc et vos sine intellectu estis?
Non intelligitis quia omne quod in os intrat, in ventrem vadit, et in secessum emititur?
Quae autem procedunt de ore, de corde exunt, et ea coinquinant hominem:
De corde enim exunt cogitationes mala, homicidia, adulteria, fornicationes, iurta, falsa testimonia, blasphemiae:
Haec sunt, quae coinquinant hominem. Non lotis autem manibus manducare, non coinquinat hominem.

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And having called together the multitudes unto him, he said to them: Hear ye and understand.
Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man: but what cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man.
Then came his disciples, and said to him: Dost thou know that the Pharisees, when they heard this word, were scandalized?
But he answering them, said: Every plant which my heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up.
Let them alone: they are blind, and leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into the pit.
And Peter answering, said to him: Expound to us this parable.
But he said: Are you also yet without understanding?
Do you not understand, that whatsoever entereth into the mouth, goeth into the belly, and is cast out into the privy?
But the things which proceed out of the mouth, come forth from the heart, and those things defile a man.
For from the heart come forth evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false testimonies, blasphemies.
These are the things that defile a man. But to eat with unwashed hands doth not defile a man. 121

This exchange also appears in a condensed form in Mark 7:15:

*Nihil est extra hominem introiens in eum, quod possit eum coinquare, sed quae de homine procedunt illa sunt quae communicat hominem.*

There is nothing from without a man that entering into him, can defile him. But the things which come from a man, those are they that defile a man. 122

This particular statement of Christ is credited with the lifting of food and purity laws and indeed that is the conclusion that is drawn in Mark 7:19.123 The ten verses of Matthew 15:10-20 challenge existing restrictions on behavior, not by discounting them entirely (indeed, many other verses of the New Testament may be found to encourage the believer to adhere to a variety of different behaviors),

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but by weighting the generative capacity of the body (in this instance, speech) over its consuming capacity. Christ explains that nourishment will be cast out of the body all the same, but that the blasphemies (*cogitationes malae*) which proceed from one’s mouth are what truly defile the body. This might seem to contradict directly our conclusions on anxieties about contamination via ingestion, but it is not a complete negation of these concerns, but rather shifts the emphasis from concerns about biblical food practices to the active, productive choices of the individual. Yair Furstenberg, in his article “Defilement Penetrating the Body: A New Understanding of Contamination,” indicates that Christ is distinguishing between “two different possible modes of defilement…‘what enters a person’... and ‘what comes out of a person’.”124 Although Furstenberg uses quite general terms, it should be clear that the exit and entrance point identified in Matthew 15 and Mark 7 is the mouth. In the examples provided by Gregory, efforts to heal a demoniac and the evidence of the exorcism uses the same route, allowing the passage of the mouth to be utilized for both the defiling forces of the demon and the curative power of the saint.

**The Sealed Body of the Saint**

Turning from the New Testament models that Gregory would have studied quite closely, let us return to the sixth-century text. The opposite of the grotesque body, a body which is both devouring and generative, is the sealed body. It does not take in earthly or spiritual pollution, but resists such contamination. To

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124 Furstenberg, "Defilement Penetrating the Body: A New Understanding of Contamination in Mark 7.15." 177.
combat the natural porousness of the body, ritual practices arise to seal the body and protect it against corruption. In both Eastern and Western medieval baptismal rites, the anointing of the mouth and variously the eyes, nostrils, and ears, creating a ritual seal of the earthly body.\textsuperscript{125} This body would be rendered impenetrable by, or at the very least resistant to, evil forces seeking to corrupt the individual.

The body of the saint, although the body of a mortal person, is nonetheless a locus of the holy and is often portrayed as either unassailable or as “sealed” in a manner that renders him or her better defended against the attacks of demons. Nancy Caciola, in her article \textit{Mystics, Demoniacs, and the Physiology of Spirit Possession in Medieval Europe}, recounts an especially illuminating anecdote that was printed in later medieval preaching handbooks. The story recounts a saint’s attempt to exorcise a young woman. When the demon asks where it should flee to (not unlike the famous “Legion”), the saint concedes his own body, offering it as an alternative to the person who was then afflicted.\textsuperscript{126} However, once the demon leaves the young woman, it finds that it cannot enter the saint, perceiving the holy body as sealed against it. The genders of the characters in this particular tale do not go unnoticed by Caciola, who further connects the perception of the demon with concerns about particularly female bodily integrity and concerns with contamination. She writes that “…many practices that are particularly characteristic of feminine piety, such as the cult of virginity or extended fasting,

might be read as attempts to ‘seal’ the body.”¹²⁷ This connection between the sealed body and the leaking, porous body is echoed in the research of Carolyn Walker Bynum on the fasting practices of female mystics as they attempt to create bodies far less “moist” than the perceived state of women’s bodies, as well as reducing contamination by earthly materials.¹²⁸

No doubt, the popularity of the virgin saint has an association with this desire for being sealed against contamination. While the saints of the *Vita patrum* are not all virgins, those who are virgins are accorded extra praise for their abstinence.¹²⁹ According to Gregory, Saint Gallus remained a virgin and, as a result, preserved his lovely singing voice.¹³⁰ Even at this early period in medieval history, the virginal body is regarded as less porous and prone to pollution, although it should be noted that in Gregory’s time, clerical celibacy not yet totally mandated by the church.¹³¹ In her essay “Chastity as a Third Gender in the History and Hagiography of Gregory of Tours,” Jo Ann McNamara writes, “Instead [Gregory] espoused a more complex system in which sexually active women and men were firmly separated into two discrete genders and all persons who renounced sexuality were grouped together as a third gender.”¹³² By adhering to certain standards of abstinence, there was an opportunity to separate

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¹²⁷ Caciola, "Mystics, Demoniacs, and the Physiology of Spirit Possession in Medieval Europe." 290.
¹³⁰ James, *Gregory of Tours: Life of the Fathers*, 33-34
¹³² McNamara, "Chastity as a Third Gender in the History and Hagiography of Gregory of Tours,” 200.
oneself from others in a manner that emphasizes a removal from earthly concerns and builds a connection with older examples of purity that emphasize a sort of “apartness” or separation from the profane. Whether expressed through abstinence or other types of moderation, the purification of the body was bolstered by a fear that a failure to be concerned with the avoiding sin would lead to spiritual contamination, even possession. As de Nie notes, “Sin or impurity was a state of … emptiness that attracted the invasion of ‘corrupting’ evil spirits…” Under this assumption, closing one’s self against evil forces requires vigilance against “emptiness” or making room for such impurities.

**Contamination Anxiety and the Mouth**

In 1995, a group of University of Pennsylvania and Arizona State University researchers, Paul Rozin, Carol Nemeroff, Matthew Horowitz, Bonnie Gordon, and Wendy Voet, published a study entitled, “The Borders of the Self: Contamination Sensitivity and Potency of the Body Apertures and Other Body Parts.” Surveying undergraduate students, they tested their tolerance for perceived contamination, asking subjects to imagine that small objects (poker chips, q-tips) had been exposed to various body parts of a stranger and then were going to be touched to the student. Researches found that the mouth and the vagina were the “most contamination sensitive points on the body,” concluding that “In general, the more susceptible an aperture is to contamination, the more

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potent it is as a contaminant for other person,” noting that “with the mouth, the sense of offensiveness of an intruding object increases with both physical contact (especially of the tongue) and the sense of ‘inclusion,’ that is, being within the mouth cavity even in the absence of contact.” The focus on bodily “apertures,” especially the mouth, confirms the continuance of concern about bodily boundaries and contamination. Although medieval people may have conceived of contamination differently, worries about contamination and the boundaries of the body held by modern people resonate clearly with the beliefs and anxieties of their pre-modern predecessors.

I argue that these anxieties and worries about bodily contamination are imbedded in culture, which necessarily has boundaries to define the spaces that compose it. For Mary Douglas, the idea of society and its bounds is a powerful force:

The idea of society is a powerful image... This image has from it has external boundaries, margins, internal structure. Its outlines contain power to reward conformity and repulse attack. There is energy in its margins and unstructured areas. For symbols of society any human experience of structures, margins or boundaries is ready to hand.135

Taking up Douglas’s assertion, the bounds of society and the expectations of any group of people structure the religious and social worlds of a given society. The possession is tied not only to societal liminality, but also engages with the liminal spaces of the body, which demand attention.

At the core of all of the anxieties about the body and its porousness that can be detected in the examples of exorcism is a deep concern about the

corruptibility of the body and the risk of contamination that is associated directly with the flesh and fleshliness. Ultimately, the mouth is a break in the surface of the body and through it, there is the potential for contamination. Here, at one crucial locus, worries about the nature of the body and both its weaknesses and its vital requirements meet in form a singularly fraught space. As much as this investigation has highlighted the mouth’s function as a passage, it is at its core a discussion of notions of purity and control that are reflected in the bodies constructed in Gregory’s prose.

The body, when cast as a container, presupposes an interior and an exterior or at the very least a differentiation between the inside and the outside. The support for this metaphorical framework in the early medieval period is abundant, even if the framework for such a conclusion is, in its essence, an obvious one: the body holds consumed water and food, entrails, and the alleged seats of spiritual and ethereal forces. Only recently has medical technology allow humans to peer inside a living body with any measure of clarity. Although the earthly, fleshly body is subjugated by the soul (the most definite, enduring, and important part of an individual) its persistence as an early container allows the possibility of both contamination and of breach. The intensity with which impurity is feared, not only in regard to risk of illness, but also spiritual "uncleanness", is heightened by the perceived risk of violation. The unexplored interior body, full of messy, dark stickiness, represents a warm and fleshly abyss, full of delicate and moist structures which are necessary for the body to function, but in so many ways have resisted human understanding and intervention for most of history.
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