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**The World of Miracles: Science, and Healing in  
Caesarius of Heisterbach's *Dialogus miraculorum* (ca.1240)  
in Competition with Magic**

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*This paper offers a close reading of some of the miracle tales dedicated to the Virgin Mary as contained in Caesarius of Heisterbach's *Dialogus miraculorum* (ca. 1240) in order to shed light on the fundamental narrative structures of this genre, the association between the narratives and their material background, and to build a case to argue that medieval miracle narratives actually shared much in common with the discourse on magic. After a critical examination of magic itself and its properties as imagined or realized in the Middle Ages, the analysis highlights the 'miraculous' or maybe even 'magical' features of Caesarius's tales. Those prove to be not only important narrative documents of the religious mentality of the late Middle Ages, they also reveal the extent to which they served as a complimentary discourse to or even substitute of the narrative of magic. As much as the latter was mostly repressed in the pre-modern world and also beyond, its presence can be observed particularly *ex negativo* where it seems to be completely absent, in the miracle tale.*

**Magic and Miracles in the Middle Ages:  
Complementary Phenomena or Hostile Opponents?**

Hardly any other fantastic or imaginary features in the Middle Ages have caught the attention of medieval contemporaries and modern audiences alike more than magic and miracles. The close analysis of the miracle narratives by the Cistercian author Caesarius of Heisterbach represents a unique opportunity to explore the shared fundamental principles underlying magic and miracles, each aiming at the transformation of material conditions through esoteric means. Magic is, as the adjective implies, magical, and transforms this concrete world into something different without a rational explanation available. The word has ancient Persian roots, 'magu,' which was then adopted into ancient Greek, and finally into Latin and then into

countless vernaculars.<sup>1</sup> But while magic was regarded with great respect in ancient times, Christianity consistently endeavored to distance itself from magic as a form of power associated with demons and the devil, hence as a kind of illusion to deceive the viewer.<sup>2</sup> Many people, both in the past and in the present, have always felt intrigued, yet then also scared by magic, and dreaded the power of the magicians, unless they called upon their help, as is documented by countless references to magic in medieval romances and other texts, both in Europe and elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> From the perspective of the Christian Church, magic was, of course, regularly associated with dark forces that they could not control effectively, or simply did not fully understand. Hence, already since antiquity, Christianity and magic have been competitors, each side trying to impress the audience as being authentic, true, being a real force, and not just deception or illusion. In the course of time, that actually led to many forms of facetious entertainment, far removed from demonology or the world of the devil because magicians succeeded in performing very similarly as so-called wondermakers in a religious context.<sup>4</sup> Magic disappeared, however, into the ‘underground’ or into obscurity because it was not predicated on a systematic, hierarchical, highly organized and well-publicized structure, such as the Christian Church.

Concomitantly, the role of miracles cannot be underestimated as to people’s needs to find solutions for existential predicaments, especially in the world of the Middle Ages, and they continue to matter for vast sections of contemporary society despite the huge role

1 For the history of this word in the English language, see <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/112186?rskey=7a2gXU&result=1#eid>; in German, the word ‘Magie’ also exists, but the much more relevant term, with an ancient pedigree, is ‘Zauber,’ see [http://woerterbuchnetz.de/cgi-bin/WBNetz/wbgui\\_py?sigle=DWB&mode=Vernetzung&lemid=GZ01529#XGZ01529](http://woerterbuchnetz.de/cgi-bin/WBNetz/wbgui_py?sigle=DWB&mode=Vernetzung&lemid=GZ01529#XGZ01529) (both last accessed on Jan. 14, 2019).

2 Bailey, “The Meanings of Magic,” 1–23, Bremmer, “The Birth of the Term Magic,” 1–12; Cunningham, *Religion and Magic*.

3 Maksymiuk, *The Court Magician*. Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural*. Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*.

4 Rollo, *Glamorous Sorcery*. Tuczay, “Medieval Magicians.”

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played by modern sciences and rationality.<sup>5</sup> General belief in the workings of miracles might have been stronger prior to the Protestant Reformation than it is today, but the public media and an infinite number of narratives continue to confirm the validity of miracles in the eye of the faithful,<sup>6</sup> such as the allegedly miraculous appearance of blood on a crucifix, on a painting, but also on tree trunks, and elsewhere, not to mention the numerous miraculous medical healings as a consequence of prayers, pilgrimages, or many types of religious rituals or donations.<sup>7</sup> Until today, the Catholic Church identifies some individuals as saints because of miracles that happened at their graves or at the sites where their relics are housed, such as the Belgian Pater Damien (1844-1889), who was canonized on October 11, 2009, or Saint Hildegard of Bingen (1089-1179), who was named Doctor of the Church on October 7, 2012.<sup>8</sup>

All religions know of or believe in miracles because they represent extraordinary experiences and connect the individual with the *numinous*, that is, the divine, or superior powers far beyond the human domain, or globally, beyond critical, rational thinking. We could thus speak of a hermeneutics or discourse of miracles, along with its correlated narrative, though it is much more repressed, the discourse focused on magic.<sup>9</sup> Both in paintings and in sculptures, both in literary texts and in sermons, and so also in medical and scientific treatises and didactic accounts do we hear of the devil and the demons,

5 Michel, "Miracles," cols. 1798-1859; Bynum, *Metamorphosis*, 37-75 and 88-92.

6 For a historically wide-ranging and critical study of this phenomenon, see Keller, *Der Streit um die Wunder: Cambridge Companion to Miracles*; for an eighteenth-century position, see Philohistoricus, *The history of miracles*. For the faith in miracles today, see, for instance, Gaede, *Der Glaube an Wunder*. There are many rather questionable publications on this topic; see, for instance, Libersat, *Miracles Today*. The experiences of a neurosurgeon regarding faith and miraculous healing are now captured very seriously and scientifically by Hamilton, *The Scalpel and the Soul*.

7 *Les Miracles, miroirs des corps*; Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*; Christian, Jr.,

8 Meier, *Handbuch der Heiligen*; for Damien, see, for instance, Eynikel, *Het zieke paradijs*; Stewart, *Leper Priest*; Couronne, *Petite vie de saint*. The literature on both saints is legion, of course.

9 See the scholarly treatment of miracles in the various religions, in dogmatic terms, and from a practical-theological perspective, written by various authors, "Wunder," *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, 378-415. Each sub-chapter accompanied by a solid bibliography.

and those are then contrasted with angels, saints, martyrs, and others who create ‘real miracles,’ and not just ‘illusions.’

For Christians, the world was deeply determined by fear of that uncanny otherworld, as Peter Dinzelbacher and Nancy Caciola have already illuminated at great length.<sup>10</sup> But not every magician was hence automatically evil, despite a consistent tenor throughout the pre-modern world condemning those powerful individuals. White magic was often carefully differentiated from black magic, but it operated, of course, on the same level, elucidating and invoking the ineffable powers, and all this by means of stunningly parallel elements: words, rituals, and gestures.

From early on in medieval literature, Merlin, just like Morgan le Fay, for instance, regularly emerged as a curiously hybrid creature, to be feared and to be revered, both able to exert power over other people by means of his magical skills, which were, however, not demonic in nature.<sup>11</sup> However, if we draw from any of the many collections of miracle accounts, such as by Gautier de Coincy (1177-1236),<sup>12</sup> we can easily discover striking parallels. Here, however, the focus will rest on those miracles told by Caesarius of Heisterbach, who also referred to Merlin twice (Distinction I, 34; VII, 16), with the intention of bringing to light the surprisingly shared narrative impetus and the parallel features in both discourses dealing with these two phenomena, even though this Cistercian monk did not address magic specifically, except in the case of heresies, for instance, or when the devil is trying to seduce people.

10 Dinzelbacher, *Angst im Mittelalter*; Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*.

11 For both figures, and many other uncanny characters, see *Verführer, Schurken Magier*; Campbell, *The Medieval Merlin*; see also the still valuable study by Weiss, *Merlin in German Literature*; cf. also, Larrington, *King Arthur's Enchantresses*; Hebert, *Morgan le Fay*. The literature on Merlin and also on Morgan le Fay is rather vast and does not need to be reviewed here.

12 For the critical edition, see Gautier de Coincy, *Les miracles de la Sainte Vierge*, ed. A[lexandre] Poquet (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1972); cf. now Albrecht Classen, “The Human Quest for Happiness and Meaning: Old and New Perspectives: Religious, Philosophical, and Literary Reflections from the Past as a Platform for Our Future: St. Augustine, Boethius, and Gautier de Coincy,” *Athens Journal of Humanities & Arts* 5.2 (2018): 179-206 (<http://www.athensjournals.gr/humanities/2018-5-2-3-Classen.pdf>); id., “The Challenges of the Humanities, Past, Present, and Future: Why the Middle Ages Mean So Much For Us Today and Tomorrow,” *Thallosis* 2 (2017): 191-217.

In the late Middle Ages, we do not only hear much about the workings of the Virgin Mary, but also about various magicians who even enjoy highest respect for their learnedness, confirmed by a university degree, such as Maugis or Malagis, who is, however, persecuted by Charlemagne out of a personal vendetta. In those Old French, Middle Dutch, and Low Middle German versions all closely related to each other we are confronted with a fascinating figure who is truly powerful as a magician, but never really pursues evil deeds with the help of magic. We admire him and laugh about his pranks performed in public, which gives us a very different perspective toward magic at that time.<sup>13</sup> As much as medieval theologians believed to have a clear notion of magicians and condemned them whenever possible, the available evidence concerning their appearance and operations sheds, however, quite a different light on them, complicating considerably the traditionally binary impression of magic and miracle.

If we think of the famous learned author Johannes Hartlieb (ca. 1400-1468) and his *puch aller verpoten kunst, ungeläubens und der zaubrey* (Book of All Forbidden Arts) from ca. 1450, who outlines virtually every possible facet of necromancy for his two ducal patrons in Bavaria, we face another remarkable example of the dialectics surrounding magic, especially in the late Middle Ages, being feared, rejected, sought after, delighted in, dreaded, studied, and closely observed for many different purposes, and this while the interest in miracles was equally high, as we will see below.<sup>14</sup> Finally, in 1587 the highly influential *Historia von D. Johann Fausten* appeared in print in Frankfurt (Johannes Spieß), where the deeply dissatisfied Dr. Faustus signs a pact with the devil and can thus finally learn many secrets of the world and beyond, can enjoy many hilarious moments, experience unknown pleasures, but ultimately becomes the devil's victim. This vastly popular narrative reveals, once again, a curiously dialectic approach to magic, being both condemned and

13 See now the contributions to *Magic and Magicians in the Middle*.

14 Hartlieb, *Das Buch aller verbotenen Künste*. For an English translation, see now *Hazards of the Dark*. The manuscript was copied down by the well-known female scribe, Clara Hätzlerin, in Augsburg. I have discussed Hartlieb and the relevant research at length in the Introduction to *Magic and Magicians* (see note 13), 47-56.

admired, regarded with great fear and as highly dangerous, and yet also with significant intrigue and curiosity.<sup>15</sup>

In short, to reemphasize and refine our initial observation, if there might be any topic with a significant impact on a vast section of the population at that time, which has continued to be highly influential from the Middle Ages until today, then it is first, the treatment of magic, regarded either as a danger to one's soul, or as a powerful instrument for learning, and second, the appearance of miracles. Magic stands out for its major appeal even in the twenty-first century, as documented, for instance, by the global success of the *Harry Potter* novels by J. K. Rowling (since 1997). If we think carefully about the very nature of magic, we would have to realize quickly that, translated into more general terms, it proves to be a universal phenomenon in which human reality, in its physical-rational properties, is transformed through some kind of external powers, whether the demons, the devil, or some other forces, such as God Himself.<sup>16</sup>

The same, however, basically applies to miracles as well, if not even much more so, brought about by the Virgin Mary, a saint, a martyr, or by Christ, once a devout individual has formulated a prayer or given a donation. This general definition connecting, if not aligning, both phenomena in an unintended fashion allows us to move to a higher plane where we can gain a better understanding of medieval mentality at large, especially if we include the world of wonders and miracles, superstition, and demonology. Superstition also belongs to the larger field to be examined here, but the term itself implies a modern rational criticism that does not bear much fruit for a thorough study of the specific medieval topic that I want to examine here.<sup>17</sup> Both miracles and magic represent one side of the same coin,

15 *The Faustian Century*; for the history of research, particularly focusing on the *Historia*, see Classen, *The German Volksbuch*, 213–43. I quote the text from *Romane des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts*, most valuable proves to be the extensive commentary, 1319–1430.

16 See now Miles, *The Devil's Mortal Weapons*; cf. also Michael Bailey, *Battling Demons: Witchcraft, Heresy, and Reform in the Late Middle Ages*; id., *Magic and Superstition in Europe*; id., *Magic and Witchcraft*; id., *Magic*.

17 Harmening, *Superstitio*.

the first being admired and sought after, the latter also regarded with fascination, but then also feared and condemned. For most people in the Middle Ages, miracles and magic were part of the reality they were confronted with every day by the clergy, either as an ideal or as a danger for their souls.<sup>18</sup>

### **Magic and Miracles – Partners or Opponents?**

In essence, a central question quickly rises when we examine the large corpus of miracle tales from the Middle Ages, that is, what the true difference might be between miracles and magic. Something magical happens in either event, something which the ordinary person cannot understand, and yet accepts as a reality that has transformed the material existence. Whether miracles are imagined or not, faithful people have always responded to them with amazement, jubilation, fascination, and credulity. In other words, without any doubt, miracles, and by the same token, magic, belong to the core of the history of medieval mentality and must be reckoned with as an essential component of everyday culture, as the rich body of scholarship has already documented. As Daniel E. O’Sullivan now summarizes,

Cultural historians have read tracts of medieval miracle narratives as evidence of cultural attitudes held in regard to various sectors of society, especially children—often the victims in need of miraculous intervention—and Jews—often the accused perpetrators who are the victimizers. . . . Literary scholars, on the other hand, have studied miracle narratives, in both Latin and the vernaculars, for their literary merit and often folkloric qualities.<sup>19</sup>

Miracles fulfilled basic needs for people who were desperate and could no longer help themselves. Miracles served the clergy to strengthen their authority since they built direct connections between this world and the divine. Miracles inspired and enthused people, and made them do many things they normally would not

18 Dinzelbacher, *Lebenswelten*, 414-24.

19 O’Sullivan, “Miracle Narratives,” 1911. He offers an excellent survey of the relevant research literature.

be prepared or willing to do. Witnessing or personally experiencing miracles had a transformative power and created new community bonds, helping the ecclesiastics, of course, to maintain their authority position, even though the direct workings of a saint or of the Virgin Mary emphasized, at the same time, the clerics' 'only' representative function.

Many medieval theologians and philosophers were involved in the public discourse on miracles, or the miraculous, such as Anselm of Canterbury, Abelard, Thierry of Chartres, Adelard of Bath, or William of St-Thierry, not to forget such intellectual giants as Augustine, Gregory the Great, Gregory of Tours, Thomas Aquinas, and Albertus Magnus. Little wonder that accounts of miracles were soon regarded as essential for sermon literature, such as Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda aurea* (ca. 1260). This also led to a proliferation of technical terms for this phenomenon: *prodigium*, *signum*, *miraculum*, *virtus*, or *mirabilia*.<sup>20</sup> In short, the medieval world was abuzz with and about miracles, some dismissed as fake, many others regarded with greatest respect, which, not surprisingly, also explains the ubiquitous nature of magic, although that was viewed with great distrust and even fear.<sup>21</sup> Miracles and magical feats created narratives, which could be related, dispersed, dilated, translated, and passed on, whether we want to regard those accounts as literary or not.<sup>22</sup> If we applied a comparative lens, in essence, magic and magicians triggered rather similar responses compared to those produced by individuals who related miracles, although the Church was always adamantly opposed to them because the Church rightly regarded them as dangerous, perhaps rather attractive, competitors to its own teaching.<sup>23</sup>

20 Heinzlmann and Herbets, "Zur Einführung," 9-21. See Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs*.

21 Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind*; Daston, "Marvelous Facts," 93-124; *Things That Talk*; Goodich, *Miracles and Wonders*; Bynum, "Medieval Miracles as Evidence," 55-61.

22 See now Waters, "What's the Use?" 15-34; the other contributors to *Medieval Literary* expand on this discussion in other areas of medieval culture and textuality.

23 Galle, "Zum Umgang mit Zauberern," 231-57.

The narrative property of all miracle stories invites us to take into consideration the fact that all accounts about magic fall into the same conceptual category. As Christa A. Tuczay now informs us, “Miracles are worked both by God and by demons, but there are three categories of wonderworkers: firstly[,] magicians who have summoned demons and entered into pacts with them; secondly[,] good Christians who depend on God’s help to work miracles; and thirdly[,] evil Christians and heretics who rely on God but are not followers of Christ.”<sup>24</sup>

### Caesarius of Heisterbach

When we turn to the countless miracle stories told by the Cistercian monk and novice master Caesarius of Heisterbach (ca. 1180-ca. 1240) in his *Dialogus miraculorum*, we face a most valuable opportunity to examine this phenomenon through a truly kaleidoscopic lens. Subsequently, we can then raise the question, once again, what the fundamental difference to magic might be, if any, apart from the evaluation of each, as our analysis of those popular miracle stories will illustrate.

As an author, Caesarius of Heisterbach is best known as the compiler of a book of religious tales, the *Dialogus miraculorum* (ca. 1219-1223), a collection of 746 miracle stories grouped into twelve distinctions or thematic categories relevant for the teachings of Christianity and the essential approaches to be taken by the faithful. The tales are told in the form of dialogues between an experienced and learned monk, a master, and a novice, and because of their almost folksy style relying on a rather simple form of Latin they were highly sought after by preachers in need of material for sermons in the late Middle Ages. Apart from Jacobus de Voragine’s *Legenda aurea*, the *Dialogus miraculorum* was one of the most popular works prior to 1500 all over Europe, as the vast number of manuscripts in Latin indicates (ca. 100). The *Dialogus* was also translated twice into German and once into Dutch, and we have been able to

24 Tuczay, “Magic and Divination,” 941.

identify many other collections of sermons and other narratives that drew directly from Caesarius's *Dialogus miraculorum*.<sup>25</sup> Although Caesarius lived most of his life in the monastery of Heisterbach near Bonn, Germany, he often accompanied his abbots, first Gevard and then Heinrich, on their visitations of other monasteries, such as in Aachen and Hadamar in Nassau, then in the area of the river Moselle, in Eberbach, Utrecht, Groningen (Holland), Marburg, and elsewhere.<sup>26</sup>

The major topics of the twelve distinctions are: 1. the external conversion of individuals as a preparation for joining a monastery; 2. the internal conversion (*contritio*); 3. confession; 4. temptations; 5. demons; 6. the simplicity of the heart; 7. Marian miracles; 8. diverse visionary experiences; 9. the Eucharist; 10. again, miracles. While all these exempla served for religious illumination, their essential purpose was always didactic and instructive, teaching the novice the fundamental aspects of the life of a good monk, his temptations, his contrition, his service and performance, and his faith. The majority of accounts introduce events involving people from all social classes, gender, age, and level of education. They normally take place in the areas of Cologne and Heisterbach, in the Rhineland, and the Netherlands, and they are mostly derived from oral sources, chronicles, and many different kinds of narratives. Scholars have been able to identify, as written sources, the *Vitas patrum*, the *Dialogi* by Gregory the Great, Herbert of Clairvaux's *Liber miraculorum*, Bernard of Clairvaux's *Vita*, and Thomas Oliver's *Historica Damiatana*. Caesarius also drew from the Church Fathers, Ambrosius and Augustine, and from the biblical text, of course.

Wherever possible, the author constantly strove to authenticate his accounts, providing concrete names of people and locales, the time of an event reported about, or the names of those who had related

25 <http://www.handschriftencensus.de/werke/6373>; <http://www.handschriftencensus.de/werke/2869> (both last accessed on Jan. 12, 2019).

26 von Heisterbach, *Dialogus miraculorum*. See also the English trans., *The Dialogue on Miracles*. Here, however, I have created my own translations.

a story to him. He was so concerned about veracity that he sometimes breaks off an account because it seems to be too inconclusive or unreliable. At the same time, Caesarius never questions what he has heard from others and relates as truth what would be really a fairy tale or a legendary account (vol. VIII, 59, VII 34, V 27). For him, miracles happened everywhere since the life of all people was determined by them.<sup>27</sup> It is worth noting here that the great authority on magic, the fifteenth-century medical doctor and scholar Johann Hartlieb, translated the chapters VII-XII of the *Dialogus miraculorum* into German ca. 1460, which clearly indicates that magic and miracles were regarded with very similar interest.<sup>28</sup>

### **Miracles According to Caesarius of Heisterbach**

In the introduction to the seventh distinction, Caesarius explains himself that the workings of the Virgin Mary transcend all natural laws: “supra naturam fuit” (vol. III, p. 1276), which finds its explanation in the fact that she descended from the Tree of Jesse. There is no question, of course, that the author fully admires the Virgin and would never associate her with magic, but we will observe striking parallels between this discourse on miracles and the discourse on magic. As to be expected, Caesarius sings an extraordinary paean on Mary and describes her as a most saintly person who stands beyond all worldly matter and elates everyone who believes in her and is then graced with a vision of herself (p. 1278). He also characterizes her as a helping and loving mother who can always be called upon in all situations of suffering, emergency, pain, danger, sickness, death, and then as well in natural disasters. All this is very much in line with common tropes for the Virgin Mary in medieval and early modern Europe.<sup>29</sup>

27 Langosch, “Caesarius von Heisterbach,” 1152-68.

28 Wagner, “Caesarius von Heisterbach,” 1363-66; for a detailed study on Hartlieb, see *Johann Hartliebs Übersetzung; Caesarius von Heisterbach, Dialogus Miraculorum* (see note 26), vol. 1, 87.

29 *Maria, Abbild oder Vorbild; Oakes, Ora pro nobis; Maria in Hymnus und Sequenz*. The literature on this topic is legion.

The first two miracle tales reflect on this topic with great intensity, the first dealing with massive thunderstorms and rainfall, the second with a major flooding in northern Germany. Each time, Mary became involved on behalf of people and saved them. In the first case, this becomes visible through the appearance of drops of sweat on the “*imago Dei Genitricis*” (p. 1280), which amazes everyone and finds its explanation by an individual whom the narrator calls “*obsessus*” (p. 1282), or lunatic. According to him, Christ had already intended to strike the earth and destroy it, as indicated by the mighty storms, but His mother held his hand back and so saved the world.<sup>30</sup> Her great effort, however, made her perspire, which thus would explain the drops on her image.

In the second tale, we hear of a major flooding of the land facing the North Sea affecting Frisia above all in 1218.<sup>31</sup> Here we find a perfect example of Caesarius’s constant effort to be as concrete and specific as possible, which then allows him to embed the miracle tale within a highly realistic framework. As he tells his student, more than 100.000 people died, and the floods almost extended as far south as Cologne. However, finally, the water receded again because Christ ordered it to do so, but only once His mother had pleaded with him (p. 1284). Behind all miracle stories or accounts about magic rests a deep desire to understand the reasons for certain phenomena happening in this world which humans either cannot comprehend or which cause them much suffering and confusion. The story offered here contains a complex account of a drunken man who had tried to hurt a priest but only hit his chalice with the wafers for the Eucharist, the pyxis. As a punishment, the provincial deacon later excommunicated him until he accepted his guilt and went on a crusade (fifth crusade; Damietta, Egypt, c. 1217-1221) to repent his sins, and he died there, together with the priest who had accompanied him.

30 There would be a contradiction here since God had promised people after the deluge to spare them ever since, and Christ would not have reneged His Father’s pledge (Gen 9: 9-11). But Caesarius does not consider this problem.

31 The history of natural catastrophes in the Middle Ages still has to be written, but see Jacques Berlioz, *Catastrophes naturelles*.

Nevertheless, subsequently the flood hit Frisia, and a devout woman received a vision from the Virgin who informed her that the flood was a punishment for the knight's misdeeds that he had not fully repented. In fact, he had been sent to hell, as Mary informed the woman, and, as we can deduce from the following events, all of Frisia was also guilty since they had not built a church on the spot where the wafers had been scattered on the ground. That happened only later, after a second flooding had hit the land, which resulted again in the death of thousands of people (p. 1288). Apparently, following this account, despite the appeal by the Bishop Theoderic of Münster to the population to carry out a global repentance, all actions done against God found a direct response here on earth. Returning to the introductory remarks, the rescue then followed only because Mary created a miracle and convinced her son to stop the water. She could as well have worked as a magician and spoken a charm to achieve the same effect, but Christian authors would never admit that their beliefs in miracles strongly resembled the belief in magic.

Cause and effect are hard to understand here, and Caesarius makes only a feeble attempt to connect the influence the Virgin has upon her son with the receding of the flooding. Divine retribution is swift and affects a massive number of people all over Frisia although they had nothing to do with the drunken knight and his attack against the priest. In fact, the narrator himself admits that all the best efforts by the Frisians to do penance collectively were not enough to satisfy God, which triggered the second flooding (p. 1288). He also has trouble aligning the report by the Prior Theoderic, according to which the knight had demonstrated honest contrition for his evil deed, with the comments by the Virgin granted to the devout woman, according to which the knight had ended up in hell for his sins (p. 1286). At any rate, a miracle happened at the end, as far as we can tell, because the third flooding did not occur. Causing damage to the host, hence to the body of Christ, results in punishment affecting the entire country: “Propter iniuriam filii mei . . . , submersa est Frisia” (p. 1286). Indirectly, hence, the Virgin can control the forces of nature; she only has to request her son's help, who thus proves to be the greatest magician of them all, so to speak.

We encounter a very different projection of the Virgin Mary in the sixth chapter that deals with a severe conflict between the entire Order of the Cistercians whom Pope Innocent III ordered to hand over the 40th part of all of its movable properties to the Church for the preparation of the fourth crusade. The Cistercians refused to submit, however, pointing out that they had been exempted from such a heavy burden by privileges issued by various previous popes. This resistance enraged Innocent so much that he invited the worldly lords to take all the properties owned by the Order in a violent fashion, offering them even indulgences as a reward for their action. Undaunted, the Cistercians turned to prayer, appealing to the Virgin for help in that matter, especially because she was the patroness of the Order.

They had success with their request since Mary then appeared in a vision to the pope's confessor, Renerio, warning the pope with severe consequences: "ego te et omnem potestatem tuam conteram" (p. 1298). Since Innocent believed what his confessor told him, he immediately repented and reversed course entirely, submitting under this powerful and aggressive threat by the mother of God. For the Cistercians, this turnout represented a miracle and underscored, once again, the power of prayers.

Some of the miracles told represent highly complex cases of legal wrangling involving many different parties fighting over property handed over to the Church for the erection of a monastery (ch. 7). Numerous nobles struggled hard to regain those lands and their money by means of the courts, or violently. The Virgin, however, identified as the patroness of the monastery, knew how to defend herself effectively, and had most of the nobles suffering terrible defeat, bad physical injuries, or even death. One of them simply burst apart: "in via crepuit medius" (p. 1300). In a vision, the Virgin informs the recipient that she would go to see her son and ask for his actions punishing the perpetrators (p. 1304). After all, as Caesarius is not tired of emphasizing, anything done against the monastery was actually committed against the Virgin herself, who thus was

forced to take specific actions. Thus, praying to her was tantamount to calling upon the most powerful entity in the other world and requesting assistance in a most difficult case. Extreme dangers or desperate situations are regularly coped with by means of the Virgin's direct involvement, which proves to be intriguingly parallel to the workings of a magician, such as in the case of Boccaccio's ninth story of the tenth day in his *Decameron* (ca. 1440) or in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Franklin's Tale* (ca. 1400).<sup>32</sup>

Many miracle stories relate of individuals who fall sick or are about to die when they have visions of the Virgin and then feel contrition, quickly repent their sins they had committed a long time, confess, and then either recover or die in the hope that their soul will be saved, all this closely following the standard model of countless other medieval miracles. Other accounts relate of various types of visions, of Mary blessing some individuals, helping others, often against evil demons—especially in Distinction V—so we are constantly exposed to the narrative struggle between miracle and magic, as the working of the demons is described in this context. There we also learn about magical charms and magical rituals, which, however, achieve only temporary solutions, drawing upon the devil, for instance, who then kills the individual who had tried to gain power through those means. For Caesarius, like all other authors of miracle tales, the devil only deceives his victims and makes them believe that they have gained riches, influence, official posts, love, and the like, but they are all exposed and then condemned (see, e.g., Distinction V, p. 16).

When we consider the nineteenth chapter (pp. 1344-46), we come across a different encounter between the Virgin Mary and a monk, who is invited by her to read what is written on her crown. This requires three attempts, with angels lifting him up and letting him

32 Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 764-83. In other tales, Boccaccio takes a rather skeptical, sarcastic position regarding magicians, such as in II, 1, III, 8, VI, 10, VIII, 3, VIII, 7, and VIII, 9. The fifth story of day ten was obviously the basis for Chaucer's *The Franklin's Tale*. See Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*. Sec. ed. by Robert Boenig and Andrew Taylor (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Editions, 2012), 243-58.

down again, where he has to do his special prayers, until he is finally able to read and understand the words. However, he is then obliged not to reveal to anyone what he had read (“ne scripturam ulli hominum proderet,” p. 1344). Caesarius knows about this monk’s vision, but he cannot tell the novice anything else because the monk had observed the Virgin’s order and kept the words a secret. Again, this proves to be a direct parallel with the purpose and function of magical charms that have to be kept a secret serving the inductees only.<sup>33</sup> Throughout the Middle Ages, the various mystics had similar experiences, facing great difficulties to come to terms with the divine message, not knowing how to translate the apophatic into ordinary language. Moreover, numerous poets included comments about mysterious texts that carried religious or other meanings that were only intended for chosen individuals.<sup>34</sup>

Both there and in many medieval and early modern grimoires, and so here as well in Caesarius’s miracle tales, the same phenomenon comes to the surface, the profound struggle to overcome the epistemological difference between the human and the spiritual dimension, and thus to control the conditions here on earth, especially when they appear as desperate and devastating. Secrets always remained in place, though the miracle account builds already concrete bridges between the ordinary person and the Virgin Mary. The author here confirms this by way of citing a passage in the New Testament, 1 Corinthian 2, 9: “quae oculus non vidit, nec auris audivit, nec in cor hominis ascenderunt” (“The eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man what things God hath prepared for them that love him”).<sup>35</sup> The Virgin Mary thus emerges as the critical communicator between the faithful and Christ, conveying His messages and informing Him about people’s needs, and at times asking her son to intervene and to protect or to punish some.

33 Daxelmüller, *Zauberpraktiken*; Rider, *Magic and Religion*; Benati, “Painted Eyes,” 149-218. As to the magical function of written texts, see the contributions to *The Book and the Magic of Reading*.

34 “Spiritual and Existential Meanings of the Word,” 221-39; see now also Amsler, *Affective Literacies*.

35 *The Vulgate Bible*. Vol. VI, 871.

As the monk then adds, the Virgin could also appear in a quiet vision and bless a devout nun, for instance. But even under those circumstances, a magical moment happens, and the individual is taken out of the ordinary and graced with a miraculous experience. For Caesarius and his audience, and for countless other Christians, those miracles had to be believed and had a high and very positive reality value. Accounts of magic, though regularly demonized, in a literal sense, operate virtually in the same way, make the impossible possible, and transform the physical dimension to the advantage of those who practice magic. However, since magic was regularly associated with demons and the devil, it was rejected, at least by the Church authorities.

The literary evidence, by contrast, often spoke a different language, if we think of magic practiced in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* (ca. 1205), in Konrad von Würzburg's *Partonopier und Meliur* (ca. 1290), or in the anonymous *Perceforest* (ca. 1330-1340), to name a few. There we read not simply of demonic forces, which are actually absent, but of highly skilled practitioners of superior skills that amount to magic, but are not derived from the devil or any of his companions.<sup>36</sup> Unfortunately, magic did not succeed in becoming the fully-fledged focus of medieval narratives and always remained, quite understandably, at the margin as something uncanny and incomprehensible. Nevertheless, there is magic in many medieval and also early modern narrative accounts, and despite many efforts by religious authors to denigrate and eliminate it, magic continued to prove its astounding mainstay power, at least in narrative terms, and this very parallel to the genre of miracle tales.

Gestures, rituals, performances with words and objects gain miraculous power, just as in cases of magical incantations. In the twentieth chapter (pp. 1346-56), a quadriplegic young woman experiences a vision in which her soul is taken to heaven, and once it has returned, she still clutches to the lower part of a candle in her hand. The narra-

<sup>36</sup> Tuczay, *Magie und Magier*, 105–20; see also Tuczay, “Medieval Magicians as Entertainers.”

tor emphasizes that it holds miraculous power, such as when water is poured over it and then given to sick people, they would immediately regain their health (p. 1352). Caesarius does not question this and simply presents this account as something that he has heard and believes, and the novice is supposed to follow this model. Since this ‘miracle’ is associated with the teachings of the Church, it is, indeed, a miracle; otherwise, it would be regarded as magic, considering the basic elements contained in the narrative: visionary experience, external power or creature, exchange of objects, ritual, and subsequent healing.

The twenty-third chapter relates of a vicious attack by some Albigensians (Cathars) against two Catholic clerics, one of whom they torture by cutting out his tongue. He survives, however, and is taken to Cluny, where he receives all possible help in such a desperate situation. At night, he suddenly urges with all his might the hospital staff to take him to the altar in the church, where he experiences a vision of the Virgin Mary, who places a new tongue into his mouth. Overjoyed about this miracle, he joins the monastery and can demonstrate to anyone interested in getting proof for the Virgin’s working that the new tongue is of a lighter color than the other flesh at the root, separated by a scar: “adhuc cycatricem in loco praecisionis servans” (p. 1368).

Intensive faith, ritualistic prayer, and the visitation of the holy space before the altar make this miracle possible, and so the impossible actually happens, which can be verified, as the narrator emphasizes, through the physical signs. Again, reality is transformed through the intervention of outside forces, here the Virgin Mary, but it could also have been any other power, as practiced by, or resorted to, magicians, although their efforts were commonly identified as necromancy, hence as evil. Nevertheless, the interest in both aspects was great throughout the entire Middle Ages, often because individuals suffered from illness or severe sickness which no medical doctor could heal.

This is impressively illustrated in the account of a boy who suffers from festering eczema on his head that smells so badly that not one of his peers wants to sit next to him in class. But one night, while he is going to church, being in error about the correct time, meaning that the church is still locked, he suddenly finds it open and encounters the Virgin Mary, who blesses him and grants him recovery from his wounds with the help of some natural remedy (“fructus ligni fusilis,” p. 1370, ch. 24). The combination of prayer, deep faith, and the subsequent ritual, washing his head with resin-filled water, actually brings about complete healing.

For the master narrator, this proves to be not surprising because she was the mother of the divine physician, ‘Christus medicus,’ “Ipsa medicum genuit, ipsa medicinam generis humani ex se produxit” (p. 1372), a common medieval and early modern trope, which is rooted, however, in the Old Testament (Ecclesiasticus, Sir 38, 4), which Caesarius quotes here appropriately.<sup>37</sup> He actually extrapolates this further and identifies Mary as the Earth and Jesus as the Savior, meaning the physician. In a further variation, he goes so far as to call the Virgin a garden of aromas, “hortus est aromatum” (p. 1372). Despite such a poetic expression, the narrator here also proves to be grounded in reality since he knows not only of pilgrimage sites such as Rocamadour north of Cahors or Vaux-de-Cernay, southwest of Versailles, both dedicated to Mary, but also of the medical school of Montpellier, where the physicians have become jealous of the many miracles that the Virgin has worked in a special church for which she is the patron. The medical doctors refuse to treat the poor patients and mockingly refer them to that church, and yet just there they receive miraculous healing after having pledged to fast for a specific amount of time on her behalf (p. 1374). While Caesarius does not refer to magicians in this context, he specifically emphasizes that healing could happen in several ways, either through a learned, practical treatment in return for money, or simply through

<sup>37</sup> Eijkenboom, “Het Christus-Medicusmotief;”; Steiger, *Medizinische Theologie*; Volmer, “Sünde – Krankheit;” 261-86.

faith. The third option, here not mentioned, thus would be to resort to magic, that is, incantations or charms, but all these approaches aimed, of course, at the same goal. And, in essence, the religious strategy easily proves to be very similar to the magical one.

No collection of miracle stories would be complete without references to the devil, against whom a prayer to the Virgin Mary always proves to be effective, as we learn in some of the following chapters (chs. 25-26). Then, however, Caesarius also reflects on the miraculous power of an ‘Ave Maria’ spoken in the right moment when a knight is trying to rape a lady and suddenly loses all of his strength (ch. 27).<sup>38</sup> Another knight is miraculously freed from very strong iron shackles after he has prayed to the Virgin, who also protects him in his flight from the castle, although many servants try to catch him while pursuing the escapee (p. 1382). A priest survives a mighty thunderstorm and is then freed from his fright through the appearance of the Virgin (ch. 29).

The pattern is always the same: the individual persecuted by others, suffering from physical tortures, or in danger of losing his or her life only has to formulate a prayer, sing an antiphone or a sequence, and thereby express deep faith, whereupon the Virgin Mary appears and solves the issue. Magical words, as we could almost say, ritualistic behavior, and a strong faith represent the perfect combination to bring about the miracle, as this entire distinction illustrates through many other examples. Of course, all these narratives remain firmly within the Christian framework, and Caesarius himself would strongly object to any attempt to recognize parallels between magical charms and prayers to the Virgin Mary, but both the performance of the faithful and the actual outcome then prove to be very similar. Could we then call magic perhaps simply an alternative religion? Caesarius also did not feel any hesitation to regale his audience with rather sensuous tales that result in the rescue of the individual

<sup>38</sup> Rape was a topic of intense interest in medieval law, theology, and literature; see now Classen, *Sexual Violence*.

tortured by erotic desires for a married woman, for instance (chs. 32-34). Faith alone suffices, and since the various protagonists ultimately turn to the Virgin Mary, they are always rescued, that is, they cool down and lose their sexual passion, and this regularly after they have experienced a vision. Both the miracle account and the magical narrative rely heavily on the transformation of the physical reality by means of non-material beings or forces that come to the rescue in human affairs after certain conditions have been met beforehand. Both the magician and the faithful Christian resort to specific words, to rituals, and to gestures in order to achieve the desired goal of regaining one's health or being rescued from a life-threatening danger, or to realize a personal goal of great importance.

Most importantly, as chapter fifty-one illustrates, the Virgin Mary comes to the assistance of those who are faithful and are about to die. She serves as a helper and as an intermediary between heaven and earth, and particularly in the last hours of life, either defending the individual against the attack by demons, or simply by taking the soul of the deceased up to heaven. Even those who are identified as having been criminals and tyrants on earth suddenly receive grace in the last minute before they are executed because they demonstrate contrition, repent, and entrust their soul to the virgin (ch. 57).

Most curiously, even the worst robbers can find help with the Virgin Mary, as is the case with the captain of a gang of robbers near Trieste, in Italy. Although he has committed countless acts of violence and even murder, he had started to fast one day a week in honor of the mother of God, as a Cistercian monk had encouraged him to do (ch. 58, p. 1494). Later, by accident, he is apprehended and executed, and then buried outside of the city. At night, however, the Virgin arrives with four other women, retrieves the body, re-attaches the head, and carries the corpse to the city gate where she orders the men to inform the bishop to bury her own chaplain, "capellanus meum" (p. 1498), as she now calls him, honorably in the church, which then also happens. As much as the novice questions how this one day of fasting could have secured the robber the Virgin's grace,

as much the master assures him that “per finalem contritionem factus est filius gloriae” (p. 1498), leaving the audience with a curious conundrum that worldly law would not be able to solve.

Surprisingly, we also encounter miracle tales involving the devil who carries out everything his ‘victim’ wants him to, but then he never hurts him or robs his soul. The knight Everhard from Amel falls into a serious brain sickness and suddenly rages against his wife whom he had loved dearly before. One night, the devil appears in a human shape and offers him to fulfill all of his wishes without requesting any commitment in return. First, he takes him to Rome to see the pope who grants him a dispensation from his marriage. Then, he transports him to Jerusalem where he can visit the church of the Holy Sepulcher and other famous Christian sites and say his prayers, and this in the presence of the demon. Subsequently, he is allowed to visit the military camp of the Sultan Saladin, then returns home, can warn in time one of his own merchant of the imminent danger as prophesied by the demon, and finally witnesses a military attack against his territory, which in reality was then to happen.

The entire travel, however, is undertaken only by the knight’s soul, and yet, once it has returned to the body, which then recovers from its coma, he can relate all the details of his journey in great precision, which others can authenticate (Distinction V, ch. 37). There are no further comments by the narrator, but the novice remarks that he has heard that sometimes demons torture their victims, but do not allow them to commit any serious sin: “sed eosdem criminaliter peccare non sinant” (p. 1086). This is then confirmed through the next chapter where a demon does not allow an obsessed person to eat because the food derives from a calf that had been born from a cow that, five generations ago, had been robbed from someone (ch. 38).

### **Conclusion**

Let us conclude here and state, first of all, that the *Dialogus miraculorum* proves to be a treasure trove for the entire history of mentality and the history of everyday life in the Middle Ages. This body of

texts is actually very similar to the huge corpus of texts contained in the papal Penitentiary in which countless people related their personal concerns, worries, fear, anxieties, and even terrors in order to regain their social status or rank.<sup>39</sup> However, Caesarius projected miracles, that is, accounts about the most improbable transformation of people, about the realization that a spiritual approach to material problems can solve the issue, and narratives about how sick or desperate individuals could gain salvation despite a person's sinfulness. Miracles are much about grace and mercy, whereas magic brings about change in material conditions by means of powerful forces beyond the human reach.

Irrespective of how we might want to evaluate the *Dialogus miraculorum*, here we face a narrative world where religious events take place that would seem highly impossible to a realistically and rationally thinking individual. Nevertheless, faith underscores all those events related here, and because of that the Virgin is always willing to intervene and help, even in desperate situations. At the same time, whenever we learn about magicians operating by themselves to bring about marvelous changes, such as in the works of Wolfram, Boccaccio, or Chaucer, we recognize that the fundamental conditions are the same. The individual is in terrible conditions and needs rapid and mysterious help to solve the problem. Prayers or charms serve as the narrative medium to reach out to the higher being, and consistent and regular rituals help to bring about the miraculous change. There is little wonder that the representatives of the Christian Church consistently argued against magic because it was one of its greatest competitors.

The *Dialogus miraculorum* mirrors the world of Christian miracles exclusively, so it seems, but the close reading also sheds significant light on the hidden discourse, based on magic, behind the scene. Ironically, as we might claim, even though the discourse on miracles certainly won over the discourse on magic, at least in the Middle

<sup>39</sup> Esch, *Die Lebenswelt des europäischen Spätmittelalters*. Previous scholarship on Caesarius has already confirmed this observation; see Caesarius von Heisterbach, *Dialogus Miraculorum*, ed. Nösges and Schneider, vol. I, 57-59.

Ages, in the modern world the very opposite seems to have been the case, with magic appealing primarily to the contemporary audiences, while the genre of Christian miracles attracts only a subordinate interest by religiously devout people. Nevertheless, as our analysis can now confirm, despite the predominantly religious orientation in all of these miracle tales, a close reading reveals everywhere the same narrative strategy as in the discourse on magic, as much as the authors of miracles tried hard to dismiss the latter as thoroughly as possible and to claim the very same power as offered by the spirits, demons, or even the devil for themselves.<sup>40</sup>

The very opposition to magic, which appears to be the benchmark for many of the miracles and the entire dominant discourse by the Church, supports the actual impact which magic truly had on pre-modern society, even though it hardly ever gained a major role in pre-modern narratives because of the supremacy of the Christian framework, here disregarding curious but significant connection points between both domains.<sup>41</sup> While the focus of this study has rested on Caesarius's miracle tales, the real conclusion underscores the significant parallels between both worlds and encourages us to investigate much more closely the anthropologically and mental-historically shared common ground of miracles and magic, which finds some of its best expressions in the large corpus of magical charms and then also prayers.<sup>42</sup>

For Caesarius, and like him for most of his contemporaries within the Christian fold, the individual possessed free will and could choose between the good and the evil. The devil, however, knows, according to our author's own statements, how to utilize the weakness of

40 Peters, *The Magician*; see now also, for modern perspectives, Subbotshy, *Science and Magic*.

41 L' "Ars notoria" au Moyen Âge; Subbotshy, "Magic, Theurgy," 37–78; Page, *Magic in the Cloister*, and Page "Uplifting Souls, 79–112; Fanger, *Rewriting Magic*. We are still far away from fully understanding the complete extent to which magic was practiced and studied by the learned intellectuals in the pre-modern world. I have not been able to see the latest publication on this topic: *The Routledge History of Medieval Magic*.

42 Classen, "Zaubersprüche, Beschwörungen," 231–39; Classen, "Old High German Missionary Activities," 77–88; Benati, "Charms and Blessings," 115–43; Benati, "*Swa breðel seo*," (forthcoming); Ciaran Arthur, Ciaran, "Charms", *Liturgies, and Secret Rites*.

the human flesh and the seductive power of this world to convince the individual foolishly to select the evil and thus to lose his or her soul (Distinction VIII, ch. 44). Nevertheless, the miraculous involvement of the Virgin Mary provided much protection, especially for the faithful. Those on the other side of the divide, relying on magic, would have easily agreed if the name had been replaced by a magical power. We are facing, thus, a major feature both of Christianity and medieval culture at large, the constant, though often rather muted or even repressed, competition of the official Church with the representatives of magic and other powers. While the miracle tales were predicated on a general level of belief among the faithful, the tales about magic represented a dimension that was systematically repressed and yet did not disappear altogether throughout the ages.

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