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DIVINE OR DEMONIC? A SOCIAL APPROACH TO EPILEPSY FROM GRECO-ROMAN  
ANTIQUITY TO THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

by  
James Nicholas Sumrall

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College

Oxford, Mississippi  
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## ABSTRACT

JAMES NICHOLAS SUMRALL: Divine or Demonic? A Social Approach to Epilepsy from Greco-Roman Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages  
(Under the direction of Molly Pasco-Pranger)

This thesis seeks to evaluate how epilepsy was defined, perceived and understood in ancient Greece and Rome, as well as how these ideas were adapted and changed during the early centuries of Christianity. To this end, the thesis is divided into six parts. The Introduction briefly explains epilepsy and discusses how the social approach method can be applied to the disease. Chapter I introduces the Hippocratic understanding of epilepsy and outlines the Greco-Roman religious concepts of pollution and purification, which frequently informed ancient perceptions of epilepsy. The first chapter also analyzes the general relationship between disability, disease and divine selection in the ancient world, using Anchises as a model example. With these issues in mind, Chapter II examines Aristotle's notion of "great men" and contemplates how such leaders as Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar and Caligula may have used rumors of their epilepsy to gain prestige and connect themselves with the divine. Conversely, Chapter III considers the unfortunate realities of having epilepsy in ancient Rome based on its common Latin names and the writings of Pliny the Elder and Apuleius. Chapter IV furthers this line of inquiry, assessing how epilepsy and epileptics are portrayed in the Gospels and, in turn, considering how the Gospels directly influenced medieval stigmatizations of the disease. Ultimately, I conclude that epilepsy is still widely misunderstood in the developing and developed worlds based on several recent sociological studies and argue that increased funding, awareness and discussion of epilepsy might help dispel these millennia-old misconceptions.

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## **Introduction**

### **Misinformation and Disease from Today to Antiquity**

It all started with an extra week of Spring Break. Within one week of attending all in-person classes, eating out in restaurants, and socializing with friends, life in America changed fundamentally: universities closed their doors, restaurants and small businesses shut down, and people hardly even dared to leave their homes, let alone without wearing a protective face covering. When the initial weight of the COVID-19 pandemic fell upon the United States in March 2020, the ensuing lockdowns, supply shortages, and tragic deaths from the virus instilled a widespread sense of anxiety and panic in the general population. In this environment of fear, misinformation thrived on the scarcity of reliable scientific and medical data concerning the virus and its spread.

After more than a year of living life during the pandemic, scientific data on the spread and prevention of COVID-19 continues to be collected and refined by the CDC, WHO, and various governmental health departments around the globe, and vaccine doses against the virus are being administered to people across the country. Nevertheless, public trust in scientific research and government guidance has been relatively low throughout the pandemic: a Pew Research study published in December 2020 indicated that only 60% of surveyed Americans were willing to receive a vaccine dose, despite a success rate of over 90% in clinical trials. This number showed a decline from 72% who said they would receive the vaccine in May 2020. Interestingly, the same study showed that 40% of Americans in November 2020 professed a

“great deal of confidence” in medical scientists, down from 43% in April 2020.<sup>1</sup> With more reliable access to data in December 2020 than during the previous spring, why did the number of Americans who trust vaccination and medical science decrease?

Mistrust of medical guidance is not a new phenomenon, and neither is widespread medical misinformation. Since classical antiquity, certain diseases have been shrouded in mystery and misunderstanding due to a variety of factors, including lack of reliable medical knowledge, misguided religious interpretations, and popular myths. In the classical and medieval worlds, perhaps no widely recognized disease was so persistently shrouded in mystique and stigma as epilepsy. Its name in ancient Greek, ἡ ἱερός νόσος, or “the sacred disease,” must have been so prevalent among the people that Hippocrates wrote an entire treatise on the subject in the fourth century B.C., *On the Sacred Disease*, in order to dispel misconceptions of its divine character.<sup>2</sup> Even so, analogous terms for epilepsy appeared in Latin texts centuries later, along with *morbus maior* and *morbus comitialis*, “the great disease” and “the disease of the *comitia*.” In all of these cases, the various names ascribed to epilepsy indicate a thriving folk tradition independent of (and perhaps in opposition to) the more rationalized Hippocratic understanding.

How, then, was epilepsy understood in the ancient world? It seems that, as in the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the Greeks and Romans developed an array of folk beliefs, theories, and opinions on epilepsy, which often resulted in the stigmatization of epileptics and their affliction. Still, given their relatively limited medical knowledge, the ancients made great efforts to define, understand, and treat this enigmatic disease. As cultures changed and new religious doctrines

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<sup>1</sup> Cary Funk and Alec Tyson, “Intent to Get a COVID-19 Vaccine Rises to 60% as Confidence in Research and Development Process Increases,” *Pew Research Center*, December 3, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2020/12/03/intent-to-get-a-covid-19-vaccine-rises-to-60-as-confidence-in-research-and-development-process-increases/>.

<sup>2</sup> Hippocrates, *On the Sacred Disease*, in *Hippocrates II*, ed. E. Capps, T.E. Page, W.H.D. Rouse, trans. W.H.S. Jones, Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann, 1923), 139.



developed, people began to perceive epilepsy in diverse but interrelated ways. With the rise of Christianity in the centuries following the death of Christ, epileptics were routinely conflated with demoniacs in the public consciousness, frequently being depicted as sinister or even dangerous outcasts in contemporary literature. Regrettably, such misconceptions persist to this day: according to a 2018 survey of university students in Benghazi, Libya, for example, 37.5% of respondents believed that epilepsy was caused due to possession by evil forces.<sup>3</sup> In a world where increased medical knowledge is met with obstinance and willful ignorance, endeavoring to understand the social meaning and history of epilepsy is critical to combating the harmful stigmatization of epileptics that has likely persisted since before antiquity.

### **Defining a Social Approach to Epilepsy**

In order to better understand why and how epilepsy is so widely misconceived in the twenty-first century, this thesis draws upon Allan Brandt's model of approaching disease from a socio-historical perspective. In his groundbreaking 1987 analysis of the AIDS epidemic, "AIDS and Metaphor: Toward the Social Meaning of Epidemic Disease," Brandt asserts that disease is "socially constructed," arguing that "there are lessons in the way societies have responded to epidemic disease in the past that might inform and deepen our understandings of the AIDS crisis."<sup>4</sup> Brandt's analysis is not limited to AIDS, however, and can be applied to other diseases mistaken for epidemic illnesses, including epilepsy. As seen throughout this thesis, epilepsy has been wrongly interpreted as contagious across many different societies and cultures since antiquity, and such misconceptions continue to inform how epileptics are perceived and treated

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<sup>3</sup>Moftah H. Alhagamhmad and Nuri M. Shembesh, "Investigating the Awareness, Behavior, and Attitude Toward Epilepsy Among University Students in Benghazi, Libya," *Epilepsy & Behavior* 83 (2018): 22.

<sup>4</sup>Allan M. Brandt, "AIDS and Metaphor: Toward the Social Meaning of Epidemic," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 87.2 (Summer 2020): 390.

around the modern world. According to Brandt, “illnesses continue to attract the most powerful social and political meanings.” In light of these realities, cultural myths surrounding epilepsy reveal deeper biases endemic to human societies.

Disease terminology is a primary avenue for cultural biases and values to be expressed. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, previously unfamiliar terminology has entered everyday life: phrases like “social distancing,” “masking up,” “essential workers” and “new normal” have become commonplace in American households and are indicative of the social impact the virus has had. Likewise, the terms associated with epilepsy in our own language reveal western attitudes and biases concerning the disease. In order to effectively evaluate the complex social history of epilepsy in the ancient world, such terms must be understood in their modern medical and societal contexts. According to the Mayo Clinic, epilepsy is defined as “a central nervous system (neurological) disorder in which brain activity becomes abnormal, causing seizures or periods of unusual behavior, sensations, and sometimes loss of awareness.”<sup>5</sup> The first recorded use of the word “epilepsy” in English dates back to 1543, although the Middle English form *epilencie* is attested several centuries earlier.<sup>6</sup> Epilepsy is derived from the Latin word *epilepsia*, a transliteration of the Ancient Greek ἐπιληψία, from ἐπιλαμβάνω, “I lay hold of, seize, attack.”<sup>7</sup> The etymology of epilepsy reveals a millennia-old association between the disease and imagery of a violent attack, a seizure in both common and medical parlance. In general usage, the word “seizure” denotes “the act, action or process of seizing,” i.e., forcibly laying hold of someone or something; as a medical term, however,

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<sup>5</sup> “Epilepsy: Symptoms and Causes,” Mayo Clinic, last modified February 24, 2021, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/epilepsy/symptoms-causes/syc-20350093>.

<sup>6</sup> *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s.v. “Epilepsy,” accessed February 1, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/epilepsy#h1>.

<sup>7</sup> *Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. “ἐπιλαμβάνω.”

“seizure” carries a more metaphorical meaning, indicating “the physical manifestations (such as convulsions, sensory disturbances, or loss of consciousness) resulting from abnormal electrical discharges in the brain (as in epilepsy).”<sup>8</sup> Thus, it seems the two most common English terms describing what the Greeks and Romans called “the sacred disease” emphasize the disorder’s potentially violent nature.

While the fundamental association between epilepsy and violent seizure episodes is not unfounded, it has created a cultural stereotype of epilepsy as a mysterious or perhaps even frightening illness. Brandt argues that such stereotypes of disease reflect the values of the society that forms them, writing, “epidemic disease has constituted a natural experiment in how societies respond to disability, dependence, fear, and death.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, cultural stereotypes of disease are not unique to epilepsy and can be seen in societal responses to other illnesses and disorders throughout history. The social history of tuberculosis, for example, is steeped in a bizarre blend of romanticism and stigma that transcends its mainstream medical meaning. During the nineteenth century, the cultural associations of tuberculosis with literary talent, intelligence and even beauty had no basis in medicine and instead developed over decades and centuries as social perceptions of what is, in reality, an awful and often terminal illness.<sup>10</sup> As recently as the 1980s in the United States, misconceptions abounded during the AIDS epidemic; the negativity and stigma surrounding victims of AIDS prompted Brandt to conduct his socio-historical analysis of the disease. As he writes, “the manner in which a society responds [to a disease] reveals its most fundamental cultural, social and moral values.”<sup>11</sup> The initial fear of AIDS in the United States

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<sup>8</sup> *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s.v. “Seizure,” accessed February 1, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/seizure>.

<sup>9</sup> Brandt, “AIDS and Metaphor,” 390.

<sup>10</sup> Fukuda Mahito, “The Romantic Images of Tuberculosis: A Cultural History of a Disease,” *Academia Sinica* (2000): 2.

<sup>11</sup> Brandt, “AIDS and Metaphor,” 390.

was largely rooted in established moral and religious anxieties about sexually transmitted diseases and resulted in discrimination against and stigmatization of particular groups deemed subversive to the moral order, especially homosexual men.<sup>12</sup> According to Brandt's analysis, such negative treatment of AIDS victims reveals fundamental social, political and moral values of American culture during that period.

Just as tuberculosis and AIDS were defined as much by their societal perceptions as they were by contemporary medical literature, so has epilepsy been defined by its social understanding throughout history. As such, my definition of "social approach" as it is used in this thesis draws upon Brandt's analysis, particularly as he seeks to evaluate the culturally embedded stigmas, stereotypes and meanings surrounding disease. In this context, a social approach to epilepsy will evaluate how the disease was described, interpreted, and responded to in the cultural imagination of the Greeks and Romans, as well as in late antique and early medieval Christian societies. As Brandt clearly and eloquently states, "By drawing careful analogies, recognizing that specific diseases elicit particular responses at historically defined moments, we may come to understand the meaning of disease in our culture at a deeper level."<sup>13</sup> To this end, my analysis will draw upon a variety of primary sources from Greek, Latin and medieval literature that discuss epilepsy in spiritual, religious, magical and medical terms. Through this study, I hope to better understand how people in premodern Europe perceived epilepsy, as well as why people in the twenty-first century continue to define epilepsy and other diseases according to religion, folk traditions and even blatant misinformation.

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<sup>12</sup> Brandt, "AIDS and Metaphor," 397; 402.

<sup>13</sup> Brandt, "AIDS and Metaphor," 393.

## **Chapter I: *Morbus Sacer* and Greco-Roman Religious Perspectives**

### ***On the Sacred Disease: the Hippocratic View of Epilepsy***

In order to effectively evaluate the development of cultural stigmas and misconceptions surrounding epilepsy, one must trace the earliest references to the disease in medical literature. The most complete and influential text on epilepsy from antiquity is *On the Sacred Disease*, a medical treatise dating to the early fourth century B.C. Although the book is traditionally attributed to the ancient Greek medical doctor Hippocrates and widely published under his name, its authorship is disputed and remains inconclusive.<sup>14</sup> The surviving Greek text is comprised of 608 lines divided into twenty-one chapters and offers an overview of how epilepsy was understood and treated in the ancient world.<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, the author's initial purpose in writing *On the Sacred Disease* is to dispel the very notion of its divinity: "It is not, in my opinion, any more divine or more sacred than other diseases, but has a natural cause, and its supposed divine origin is due to men's inexperience, and to their wonder at its particular character."<sup>16</sup> This argument appears to be a rebuttal of the prevailing cultural and religious views of the author's time; while his proposed etiology of epilepsy still bears signs of magico-religious influence, many facets of his medical treatise are remarkably accurate. More important to this thesis, however, is the author's attempt to divide medical fact from unfounded myth, an endeavor that continues in the study of epilepsy today.

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<sup>14</sup> The Hippocratic Corpus is comprised of more than sixty works on ancient Greek medicine. Many of the texts contain similar styles and content, but not all of them are believed to have been written by Hippocrates himself.

<sup>15</sup> Hippoc. *Morb. sacr.* I.1.

<sup>16</sup> Hippoc. *Morb. sacr.* I.2-6.

The author's argument against the societal understanding of epilepsy denies a sacred origin of the disease, but his point of view is far from irreligious. Indeed, his reason for rejecting the divinity of "the sacred disease" is rooted in religious principle. He believes that epilepsy was originally represented as sacred by "magicians, purifiers, charlatans and quacks" who cloaked their medical ignorance in superstition and rebranded dubious "cures" as purification rituals.<sup>17</sup> The author argues that these soothsayers do not even believe in the gods on account of their own impiety and deceitful nature.<sup>18</sup> From his perspective, identifying particular deities with symptoms of epilepsy (such as associating Hecate with night terrors during a seizure episode) is tantamount to saying that the gods themselves cause pollution in the human body, which is antithetical to the gods' divine nature. If epilepsy were a supernatural disease, epileptics ought to be brought to temples with supplications and sacrifices to the appropriate gods or goddesses rather than being ritually purified to remit pollution.<sup>19</sup> Despite the author's defense of piety, he concludes that the gods have no greater effect on epilepsy than the "charlatans."

The Hippocratic etiology of epilepsy lies not in its spiritual origin, but rather in its hereditary and humoral nature. According to the author of *On the Sacred Disease*, all diseases are caused by one's humoral disposition, which is passed from parent to child. If a phlegmatic parent who has epilepsy produces a phlegmatic child, then, from the Hippocratic point of view, that child is at risk for developing epilepsy congenitally.<sup>20</sup> The author asserts that the brain is the seat of all human emotions, intelligence, and "the more serious diseases generally," including epilepsy.<sup>21</sup> From his perspective, the root of the disease is rather simple: air is carried throughout

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<sup>17</sup> Hippoc. *Morb. sacr.* II.1-46.

<sup>18</sup> Hippoc. *Morb. sacr.* I.7-9.

<sup>19</sup> Hippoc. *Morb. sacr.* IV.1-61.

<sup>20</sup> Hippoc. *Morb. sacr.* V.7-14; VIII.1-4.

<sup>21</sup> Hippoc. *Morb. sacr.* VI.2; XVII.1-8.

the body by several large veins, and when this air is restricted from freely flowing to the brain by phlegm, the symptoms of epilepsy occur.<sup>22</sup> This viewpoint is perhaps a modification of an earlier medical observation expressed in the treatise *On Breaths*, another work in the Hippocratic corpus. Dated to the late fifth century B.C., approximately one generation prior to the production of *On the Sacred Disease*, *On Breaths* outlines the functions of air in the human body. The penultimate chapter focuses on “the disease called sacred” and its origin: here, the author argues that when too much air combines with blood in a person’s veins, the blood congeals in some places while remaining fluid in others and causes “irregularities” corresponding to irregular bodily movements (i.e., seizures).<sup>23</sup> This congestion of blood can only be relieved by exercise in order to heat the blood and restore calm to the body.<sup>24</sup> Although the author of this treatise does not necessarily connect epilepsy with heredity or the brain, the refinement of Hippocratic thought over several decades of studying epilepsy is clear.

Even though the author of *On the Sacred Disease* dispels notions of epilepsy’s divine origin and status, his extensive treatment of the disease and its alleged divinity indicates that there were extensive folk traditions surrounding “the sacred disease” during his lifetime. That the author of *On Breaths* chose to conclude his treatise with a discussion of the sacred disease is significant and implies that the medical community of fifth-century Greece was already attempting to dispel common social perceptions of epilepsy. While the concept of heredity expressed in *On the Sacred Disease* might seem strikingly advanced to modern audiences, Temkin notes that the author does not limit his theory of heredity to epilepsy; rather, he extends

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<sup>22</sup> Hippoc. *Morb. sacr.* X.1-10.

<sup>23</sup> Hippocrates, *On Breaths*, in *Hippocrates II*, ed. E. Capps, T.E. Page, W.H.D. Rouse, trans. W.H.S. Jones, Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann, 1923), 249-51.

<sup>24</sup> Hippoc. *On Breaths* XIV.55-64.

this notion to all diseases in order to refute claims by “magicians” of epilepsy’s divine origin.<sup>25</sup> Tellingly, the author of *On the Sacred Disease* concludes his treatise by stating that anyone who knows how to regulate bodily humors and temperature can cure epilepsy “without having recourse to purifications and magic.”<sup>26</sup> This final stab at the “magicians” and “charlatans” demonstrates that *On the Sacred Disease* is as much a polemic against magic and superstition as it is a medical treatise, revealing how prevalent and enduring such folk beliefs about epilepsy were.<sup>27</sup>

### **Religion, Pollution and Disease in the Greco-Roman World**

In order to evaluate the impact of religion on social perceptions of the sacred disease, it is important to understand the role of religion in Greek and Roman societies. While a western Christian today might view religion as a private, individualized relationship with God characterized by attending church, praying, and following Christ’s teachings, the Greek and Roman religions cannot be defined in such succinct terms. Various modes of religious practice existed across the ancient Mediterranean region, often in honor of localized deities.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, ancient peoples recognized a shared set of religious customs as a defining feature of a shared culture, as seen in the works of Herodotus, who described “Greekness” as “having

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<sup>25</sup> Owsei Temkin, *The Falling Sickness: A History of Epilepsy from the Greeks to the Beginnings of Modern Neurology*, Second Edition (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), 31.

<sup>26</sup> Hippoc. *Morb. sacr.* XXI.26.

<sup>27</sup> The prevalence of folk names for epilepsy in Greek and Roman societies demonstrates how influential these beliefs continued to be centuries after the writing of *On the Sacred Disease*. In addition to the term *sacer morbus*, which was translated into Latin directly from Greek medical texts, the Hippocratic corpus also uses the term “great disease” to refer to epilepsy, probably to eliminate any divine interpretations of the disease. This term made its way into Latin as *morbus maior* in Aulus Cornelius Celsus’ medical treatise, *De Medicina*, or “On Medicine.” Lucius Apuleius cites the name *divinus morbus* for the disease, which he considers a synonym for the Greek *ἱερός νόσος*. See Temkin, *The Falling Sickness*, 23; Celsus *Med.* III.23; and Apul. *Apol.* L.

<sup>28</sup> John Scheid, *An Introduction to Roman Religion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003), 2.



common temples and rituals (as well as common descent, language, and customs).”<sup>29</sup> Using this definition as a model, I define “religion” as the rituals and traditions, such as prayer and sacrifice, carried out by members of a common cultural group in order to intentionally interact with a divinity, i.e., a god or goddess. This understanding of religion in the Greek and Roman world will be used throughout this section, and, though perhaps incomplete or imprecise, it should be appropriate for the purposes of this analysis of epilepsy in antiquity.

In the context of Greco-Roman religion, disease was frequently perceived as a form of pollution. Although there is no clear definition of pollution from the ancient world, it is generally understood as a kind of metaphorical uncleanliness that prevented one from participating in divine or religious matters.<sup>30</sup> In Greek society, routine life events such as birth and death were believed to bring μίαισμα (pollution) upon an individual, as did sex, murder, sacrilege, and certain diseases.<sup>31</sup> From a modern medical perspective, avoiding activities that expose an individual to blood and other bodily fluids makes sense due to the risk of infection, especially for groups of people gathered at public sacrifices or festivals; such physical “uncleanliness” carried religious significance in Greek and Roman culture because it “signaled disorder in the *pax deorum*, and so became pollution.”<sup>32</sup> The classical concept of pollution stems partially from a fundamental belief of Greco-Roman religion: humans and divinities share a reciprocal relationship. According to John Gould, “any action will be met with a matching and balancing reaction” in Greek and Roman religion, meaning that when a human does something to please or

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<sup>29</sup>*The Oxford Dictionary of Classical Myth and Religion*, s.v. “Greek religion”; Herodotus, *Histories*, trans. A.D. Godley (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1920), Perseus Digital Library, VIII.144.2.

<sup>30</sup> Sarah Iles Johnston, *Ancient Religions* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 2007), 72.

<sup>31</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of Classical Myth and Religion*, s.v. “pollution, the Greek concept of.”

<sup>32</sup> Jack L. Lennon, *Pollution and Religion in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 193.

displease a deity, the latter will “respond in kind.”<sup>33</sup> This notion of being punished for transgressing a god or goddess is critical to ancient understandings of epilepsy and will be revisited several times throughout this analysis.

If pollution offends the gods and disturbs one’s proper relationship with the divine, how, then, can it be remedied? As observed in various ancient Mediterranean cultures, pollution in Greek and Roman society could usually be mitigated by rituals of purification.<sup>34</sup> Greek purification rites took diverse forms and could be applied to most routine physical and moral pollutions; concerning disease, the author of *On the Sacred Disease* states that “magicians” would often perform purification rituals to heal epileptics and appease the god or goddess whose wrath had caused their affliction.<sup>35</sup> To this end, healing cults were widespread across the ancient Mediterranean region and honored such gods as Apollo, Asclepius, and other divinities associated with fertility, medicine and purification.<sup>36</sup> Animal sacrifices were made to the appropriate deity during rituals of purification or lustration,<sup>37</sup> which were often accompanied by prayers. Unlike the common Christian practice of silent prayer, Greek and Roman prayer was often a public event that accompanied ritual actions. Although the Greek and Roman religions had no prayer book or liturgy, the language employed in prayers was highly formalized and exact.<sup>38</sup> According to John Scheid, prayer “simply expressed [ritual] in words;” as a precise, performative complement to ritual actions, prayers could not be repeated or corrected without

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<sup>33</sup> John Gould, “On Making Sense of Greek Religion,” in *Greek Religion and Society*, ed. P.E. Easterling and J.V. Muir (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 15.

<sup>34</sup> Johnston, *Ancient Religions*, 75.

<sup>35</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of Classical Myth and Religion*, s.v. “purification, the Greek concept of.”; Hippoc *Morb. sacr.* IV.20-34.

<sup>36</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of Classical Myth and Religion*, s.v. “healing gods.”

<sup>37</sup> *Lustratio* was a Roman form of ritual purification where the polluted individual would be circled three times by attendants bearing torches and leading animals, which would be sacrificed at the end of the ceremony; see *The Oxford Dictionary of Classical Myth and Religion*, s.v. “lustration.”

<sup>38</sup> Gould, “Greek Religion,” 14-16.

restarting the entire ritual, nor could they be made to more than one deity at a time.<sup>39</sup> Given how meticulous the celebrant's prayers needed to be, it is not surprising that epileptics might have sought the supposed expertise of the "charlatans" of Hippocrates' day, men who claimed to know not only which gods had caused epilepsy, but how to properly address them in ritual as well.

The aforementioned concepts of Greco-Roman religion, pollution, purification, and prayer provide cultural context for the term "sacred disease." While the Greek word *ιερός* roughly translates to "divine" or "holy" in English, its analogous term in Latin, *sacer*, has a more complicated meaning. *Sacer* denotes any human or object consecrated to the gods through ritual, divine selection, or pollution, to the effect that the term could carry positive and negative connotations.<sup>40</sup> From a Roman religious perspective, an individual deemed *sacer* might be either protected by religious principle or else labeled a public enemy: in the latter case, the practice of legally marginalizing *homines sacri* was a Roman custom applied to those who broke vows made before the gods.<sup>41</sup> According to Lennon, *homines sacri* were "victims of a 'double exclusion,'" separated from human and divine law on account of their pollution.<sup>42</sup> In his *Commentary on the Aeneid of Vergil*, Servius traces this distinct meaning of *sacer* back to Gallic custom: when plague struck the town of Massilia, a man was chosen to assume the evils of the entire population before being declared *sacer* and banished from society.<sup>43</sup> Considering the legal and religious weight of the term *sacer* in ancient Rome, one can imagine that the *morbus sacer* might have carried similar connotations in the popular mind. Greco-Roman cultural understandings of

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<sup>39</sup> Scheid, *Roman Religion*, 97-99.

<sup>40</sup> Scheid, *Roman Religion*, 22-24.

<sup>41</sup> Lennon, *Pollution and Religion*, 49-50, 52; Scheid, *Roman Religion*, 24.

<sup>42</sup> Lennon, *Pollution and Religion*, 52.

<sup>43</sup> Servius, *Commentary on the Aeneid of Vergil*, ed. Georgius Thilo (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1881), Perseus Digital Library, III.57.

pollution, reciprocity and the sacred ultimately had social ramifications for epileptics, often connecting them with the divine.

### **Touched by the Gods? Divine Selection and Disease in Ancient Greece and Rome**

Disease can be understood as a form of disorder that disrupts the human body's health and normal mode of function. Physical manifestations of illness are perhaps the most obvious effects of disease on the human body, and these are the symptoms most frequently discussed in ancient medical texts, particularly with regard to epilepsy. In more recent decades, our understanding of disease has evolved, however, and doctors and the general public are keenly aware of the additional mental, emotional and social impacts that illnesses and disabilities have on individuals. While a distinction is often made between religious and scientific interpretations of disease in the twenty-first century, a social understanding of a particular disease in ancient Greece and Rome could not be complete without evaluating its religious significance. Disability, disease and natural phenomena were tightly interwoven in the classical world as portentous signs of a divinity's pleasure or displeasure in an individual or community; this paradigm would have distinguished epileptics, like other diseased individuals, from society as a whole.

As a motif, physical disability appears in many works of world literature, often to exaggeratedly highlight the disabled character's sinister and antagonistic qualities (such as Shakespeare's Richard III and R.L. Stevenson's Long John Silver). Disability, however, can be a marker of divine favor in other cases, such as when the mythical Greek prophet Tiresias is granted the gift of prophecy by Jupiter in exchange for his sight.<sup>44</sup> In the case of Anchises, father of Aeneas in Greek and Roman myth, his disability serves a similar purpose: unable to walk (or

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<sup>44</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Brooks More (Boston: Cornhill Publishing Company, 1922), Perseus Digital Library, III.316-40.

in some versions, blind), he is physically and permanently marked as the one-time lover of the goddess Aphrodite. Their amorous escapade is most explicitly described in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, where the goddess appears to Anchises in mortal form and seduces him. Her lust for Anchises was inspired by Zeus, who “into the heart of Aphrodite herself / ...Cast sweet longing to lie in love with a man, / That not even she should escape the marriage bed of a mortal.”<sup>45</sup> Zeus’ actions in this hymn seem to reflect the aforementioned Greek belief in reciprocity, i.e., he arouses lust for a mortal man in her heart because she, as the goddess of love, first aroused lust for mortal women in his heart.

After having sex with Anchises, Aphrodite lulls him to sleep, and when she awakens him to reveal her true, immortal form, he fearfully begs that he not become impotent from the affair. Before departing, Aphrodite reassures him by saying, “Curb your tongue, and never mention my name. / And with awe and reverence fear the wrath of the gods.”<sup>46</sup> Based on Anchises’ fear, it seems that an association between human “impotence” and contact with divinity already existed in Greek literature, but Aphrodite graciously allows him to avoid this fate as long as he keeps his promise. Predictably, this arrangement does not last. Vergil depicts Anchises as unable to walk during the events of the *Aeneid*, and in Book II, Anchises briefly recounts the cause of his disability, saying “I tarry in this world / a useless burden, since that fatal hour / when Jove... / his lightnings o’er me breathed and blasting fire.”<sup>47</sup> This depiction of Jupiter’s wrath once again demonstrates the principle of reciprocity, now in a Roman cultural context: Anchises broke his vow to Venus, so Jupiter exacts fitting revenge upon him.

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<sup>45</sup> *The Homeric Hymns*, trans. Thelma Sargent (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1973), 47.

<sup>46</sup> *Hymn. Hom. Ven.* V.277-293.

<sup>47</sup> Vergil, *Aeneid*, trans. Theodore C. Williams (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1900), Perseus Digital Library, II.647-649.

Interestingly, the incident of Anchises' punishment is not his only encounter with thunder and lightning in the *Aeneid*. During the destruction of Troy, Anchises does not wish to leave the burning city with Aeneas, preferring instead to die with his countrymen. Just as Aeneas is about to depart, a divine flame appears on Ascanius' head that does not harm or burn him. Discerning this as an omen from the gods, Anchises cries out, "O Father, lend us aid, / and ratify the omen thou hast given," and immediately "with a deafening thunder-peal... / a meteor-star in trailing splendor ran, / exceeding bright."<sup>48</sup> Whereas Jupiter once used lightning to disable Anchises and exact divine justice, he now sends thunder as a sign of Anchises' importance to Aeneas' forthcoming journey. Upon receiving the second omen, Anchises thanks the gods and agrees to accompany his son, who carries the lame old man out of Troy on his shoulders. Despite the negative impact of his disability, Anchises' two encounters with thunder and lightning demonstrate that he has been differentiated from the rest of society by the gods and selected for a greater purpose than the average mortal is destined to fulfill. His disability is a permanent and visible marker of this differentiation.

Thunder and lightning were among several natural phenomena commonly mentioned by Greek and Roman authors as divine portents. Ultimately, the religious significance of thunder and lightning to Roman culture can be traced back to the Etruscan influence: Cicero, Seneca, and Pliny the Elder note that the Etruscans had used thunder and lightning for divination for centuries, and Diodorus Siculus even states that the Romans trusted Etruscan diviners for this very purpose.<sup>49</sup> In Greek mythology, Zeus frequently hurled lightning bolts as a means of punishment, but also as bypath to deification, as in the cases of Asclepius and Semele.<sup>50</sup> In

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<sup>48</sup> Verg. *A. II.* 689-694.

<sup>49</sup> Jean MacIntosh Turfa, *Divining the Etruscan World: The Brontoscopic Calendar and Religious Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 51-53.

<sup>50</sup> Turfa, *Etruscan World*, 59.

Roman religion, earth struck by lightning was deemed *sacer* and consecrated by sacrifice, and Plutarch indicates that victims of lightning strikes were believed to not decompose after death.<sup>51</sup> It seems that popular opinion in Rome viewed lightning as an opportunity to interact with the divine and lightning strikes as a sign of the gods' attention, whether for good or ill.

The portentous nature of lightning in Greco-Roman religion shows that it was understood as a means by which deities distinguished certain humans from mortal society in order to confer punishment, favor and sanctity upon them. What could this mean, then, for epileptics? In his seminal work *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius draws a unique, fascinating comparison between an epileptic and someone who has been struck by lightning: "Moreover, we have often seen someone constrained...by the violence of disease who, as if struck by a thunderbolt, falls to the ground, foams at the mouth, groans and shudders, raves, grows rigid, twists, pants irregularly, out-wearies himself with contortions...because the spirit...is in turmoil and foams."<sup>52</sup> Although epilepsy is not explicitly named, Lucretius' description of the individual foaming at the mouth, twisting, and suffering contortions undoubtedly refers to an epileptic seizure. That the poet chooses to compare an epileptic seizure with lightning of all natural phenomena is intriguing to say the least. Other passages in Lucretius' work indicate that he viewed portentous lightning with skepticism,<sup>53</sup> but regardless of his personal opinions, he was aware of the religious connotations that lightning carried in Roman culture and the effect that his comparison of lightning and epilepsy might have had on his audience. Charles Segal suggests that Lucretius' brief description of epilepsy is partially modeled upon Hippocrates' *On Breaths*, and he supports this theory with

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<sup>51</sup> Plutarch, *Quaestiones Convivales*, ed. William W. Goodwin (Cambridge: Press of John Wilson and Son, 1874), Perseus Digital Library, IV.2.3.

<sup>52</sup> Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, ed. E. Capps, T.E. Page, W.H.D. Rouse, trans. W.H.D. Rouse, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1924), III.485-493.

<sup>53</sup> See Lucr. VI.379-422.

multiple parallel passages from each text.<sup>54</sup> If Lucretius did subscribe to the Hippocratic understanding of epilepsy, then the lightning simile for epilepsy in *De Rerum Natura*, while noteworthy, seems contradictory to Hippocrates' views on the sacred disease.

As I have touched upon throughout this section, the Greeks and Romans saw disability, disease, and natural phenomena as markers of both divine punishment and divine selection. The Greek belief in divine retribution against mortal transgressors was prevalent to such an extent during Hippocrates' lifetime that he (derisively) lists the various gods who were blamed for epilepsy in *On the Sacred Disease*. Rhea, Poseidon, Enodia, Apollo Nomius, Ares and Hecate are all named as alleged sources of the disease, and each of them is linked with epilepsy by a specific symptom.<sup>55</sup> Of all these deities, Hecate is particularly significant due to her association with goats and the moon. Several works of Greek and Roman medical literature, even *On the Sacred Disease*, purport that goats transmit epilepsy, and Temkin believes this association is due to the goat being sacred to Hecate.<sup>56</sup> The moon is also commonly blamed as a source of epilepsy:<sup>57</sup> Galen theorized that the moon governed epileptic seizure activity, and Aretaeus believed epilepsy is called sacred because "it is supposed that it is an infliction on persons who have sinned against the Moon."<sup>58</sup> Temkin presumes this line refers to sinning against Selene, another Greek goddess associated with the moon.<sup>59</sup>

Whatever the true source of the illness, medical and literary evidence indicates that epilepsy was perceived as a disease that could fundamentally alter one's social standing and

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<sup>54</sup> Charles Segal, "Lucretius, Epilepsy and the Hippocratic *On Breaths*," *Classical Philology* 65.3 (July 1970): 180-182.

<sup>55</sup> Hippoc. *Morb. sacr.* IV.20-34.

<sup>56</sup> Temkin, *The Falling Sickness*, 11; Hippoc. *Morb. sacr.* II.31-46.

<sup>57</sup> Although this theory is one of many surrounding the etiology of epilepsy, it is particularly relevant to the discussion of Gaius Caligula and his epilepsy in the next section of this thesis.

<sup>58</sup> Aretaeus, *De Causis et Signis Acutorum Morborum*, in *The Extant Works of Aretaeus, The Cappadocian*, trans. Francis Adams (Boston: Milford House, 1856), Perseus Digital Library, I.4.

<sup>59</sup> Temkin, *The Falling Sickness*, 7.



reputation. As with other divine portents, Greco-Roman authors ascribed positive and negative characteristics to epilepsy and its related omens directly and indirectly. The association of epilepsy and other diseases with pollution, lightning, and divine selection suggests that everyday Greeks and Romans were largely unaware of or untouched by the Hippocratic etiology, and that they instead embraced religious and folk understandings of the disease. How and why this complex interpretation of the sacred disease might have been exploited by Greek and Roman heroes, authors, and rulers is discussed in the following section.

## Chapter II: *Morbus Maior* and the Favor of the Gods

### Epilepsy and Great Men in Aristotle's *Problemata*

In spite of its name, the *morbus maior*, or “great disease,” is not a common illness. According to a 2006 study by the National Institutes of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, the prevalence of epilepsy in the United States is approximately 7.1 per 1,000 individuals, a small portion of the general population.<sup>60</sup> Despite its relatively low prevalence, many prominent Greek and Roman authors wrote on the disease, and numerous theories, myths and legends about epilepsy circulated in the ancient world. Many great men of Greece and Rome are rumored to have had epilepsy, including Heracles, Hannibal, Alexander the Great, and Julius Caesar; yet, if epilepsy is a rare illness, how and why did it become popularly associated with so many important, powerful men? Some of the legends have no basis in classical literature, like those that suggest Aristotle or Hannibal had epilepsy.<sup>61</sup> These legends likely developed during later centuries or else were not considered credible by contemporary authors. Conversely, legends of Heracles, Alexander, and Caesar having epilepsy were attested by various philosophers and biographers and might have substantially influenced how ancient people understood the disease; this understanding may have then encouraged the identification of further “great men” as epileptic.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Deborah Hirtz, D.J. Thurman, K. Gwinn-Hardy, M. Mohamed, A.R. Chaudhuri, and R. Zlatusky, “How Common Are the “Common” Neurologic Disorders?” *Neurology* 68.5 (2007): 326.

<sup>61</sup> J.R. Hughes, “Did All Those Famous People Really Have Epilepsy?” *Epilepsy & Behavior* 6 (2005): 115-16.

<sup>62</sup> For the purpose of this thesis, whether any of these historical figures actually had epilepsy is irrelevant. As per the social approach, the fact that these men were *said* to have epilepsy is critical to understanding how their influence might have shaped popular perceptions of the disease in antiquity.

One of the earliest figures to be connected with epilepsy in ancient literature is the Greek demigod Heracles. In his philosophical text Προβλήματα, or *Problems*, Aristotle states that Heracles “appears to have been of this [melancholic] nature, wherefore epileptic afflictions were called by the ancients ‘the sacred disease’ after him.”<sup>63</sup> Indeed, Greek doctors of the Hippocratic tradition used the term νόσος Ἡρακλείη, “Herculean disease,” to refer to epilepsy, which Aristotle mentions in his broader discussion of black bile and the atrabilious personality type.<sup>64</sup> From his perspective, the atrabilious temperament is prone to fury and “eruptions of sores,” both of which afflictions Heracles experienced in myth after being struck mad by Hera.<sup>65</sup> Thus, Aristotle links both madness and epilepsy to a common humoral nature that is prone to violent outbursts. Still, he was not the first Greek author to associate madness with the sacred disease: in his fifth-century B.C. Ἱστορίαι, or *Histories*, Herodotus characterizes the Persian king Cambyses II as a mad epileptic. Herodotus describes Cambyses’ murder of his brother and pregnant wife before stating that these “mad acts” were committed because the king “is said to have been afflicted from birth with that grievous disease which some call ‘sacred.’”<sup>66</sup> Herodotus concludes that “it is not unlikely then that when his body was grievously afflicted, his mind too should be diseased.”<sup>67</sup> To Aristotle and Herodotus, madness and epilepsy frequently went hand in hand.

It is unclear whether the Greek playwright Euripides shared this viewpoint. In the late fifth century B.C., Euripides wrote the play Ἡρακλῆς μαινόμενος, or *Herakles Raging*, which portrays Heracles’ slaughter of his wife and three children during a bout of madness.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Aristotle, *Problemata*, in *The Works of Aristotle*, vol. VII, ed. W.D. Ross, trans. E.S. Forster (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), XXX.1.

<sup>64</sup> Temkin, *The Falling Sickness*, 20.

<sup>65</sup> Arist. *Pr.* XXX.1.

<sup>66</sup> Hdt. III.30-33.

<sup>67</sup> Hdt. III.33.

<sup>68</sup> Euripides, *Herakles*, trans. E.P. Coleridge (New York: Random House, 1938), Perseus Digital Library, v. 950-1085.

Interestingly, since Herodotus indicates that Cambyses' wife was pregnant when he killed her, an association between epileptic madness and familicide could have potentially existed during this period of Greek social history. Michael Trimble and Dale Hesdorffer suggest that Euripides must have been familiar with the Hippocratic view of epilepsy and would have considered "the madness of epilepsy" part of the greater tragedy of the play.<sup>69</sup> On the contrary, Temkin acknowledges such claims but says that there is insufficient evidence to indicate that Euripides depicts Heracles as an epileptic.<sup>70</sup> Whether Herodotus, Euripides and Aristotle themselves believed madness and epilepsy to be related, their allusions to the sacred disease demonstrate what must have been a prevailing social viewpoint during the period.

Heracles is not the only man mentioned in Book XXX of Aristotle's *Problems*. Aristotle names other atrabilious men of renown, including Lysander the Lacedaemonian, Ajax, Bellerophon, Plato and even Socrates among "numerous other well-known men, and most of the poets."<sup>71</sup> Clearly, the author believes that being atrabilious (i.e., melancholic) contributes to one's intellectual, artistic and social capabilities, an idea that is most articulately expressed in the book's opening question: "Why is it that those who have become eminent in philosophy or politics or poetry or the arts are clearly of an atrabilious temperament, and some of them to such an extent as to be affected by diseases caused by black bile, as is said to have happened to Heracles among the heroes?"<sup>72</sup> The very next sentence describes Heracles' association with the sacred disease, which appears to be an intentional progression of thought. While Temkin firmly argues that Aristotle is not saying that the aforementioned men had epilepsy, the close

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<sup>69</sup> Michael Trimble and Dale Hesdorffer, "Representations of Epilepsy on the Stage: From the Greeks to the 20th Century," *Epilepsy & Behavior* 57 (2016): 239-240.

<sup>70</sup> Temkin, *The Falling Sickness*, 20.

<sup>71</sup> Arist. *Pr.* XXX.1.

<sup>72</sup> Arist. *Pr.* XXX.1.

connection of Heracles' malady to the list suggests that Aristotle believed that great men were more likely to have epilepsy than the general population on account of their melancholic natures.<sup>73</sup> Implicit to the Aristotelian viewpoint, then, is the concept that epilepsy and eminence are indirectly linked. For Aristotle, great men like Heracles, Socrates, and Ajax were melancholic, and, therefore, had a greater chance of being epileptic, too.

By logical extension, Aristotle's idea that renowned, melancholic individuals might be pre-disposed to epilepsy is culturally predictive: all great people belonging to later generations should be more likely to be epileptic, too. This concept is particularly relevant to ancient and modern analyses of the life and death of perhaps the most famous of all ancient rulers: Alexander the Great. While Alexander was not known to exhibit explicit symptoms of epilepsy, several passages from Plutarch's *Life of Alexander* have been interpreted as evidence to the contrary. During his campaign against Darius in 333 B.C., Alexander fell incredibly ill and was administered medicine by Philip the Acarnanian, a friend and doctor. Despite warnings that the draught could contain poison, Alexander drank it, and immediately "his voice failed, he fell into a swoon and became almost wholly unconscious."<sup>74</sup> In the 1960s, epileptologist W.G. Lennox theorized that this incident may have been an epileptic seizure, though many scholars, including J.R. Hughes, reject this idea and believe that the medicine itself caused his swoon rather than epilepsy.<sup>75</sup> It is conceivable that the medicine could have aggravated a pre-existing epileptic condition in Alexander, but, once again, this theory is purely speculative.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Temkin, *The Falling Sickness*, 21.

<sup>74</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1919), Perseus Digital Library, XIX.1-5.

<sup>75</sup> J.R. Hughes, "Alexander of Macedon, the Greatest Warrior of All Times: Did He Have Seizures?" *Epilepsy & Behavior*, 5 (2004): 766.

<sup>76</sup> Suetonius writes that Caesonia may have given Caligula an aphrodisiac that drove him mad (Suet. *Cal.* L.4), possibly by exacerbating temporal lobe epilepsy; see Benediktson 1989. If one were to speculate about the possibility of Alexander suffering from epilepsy, it is possible that, like Caligula, a medicinal remedy could have further exacerbated such a condition.

In addition to this episode, the circumstances of Alexander's death could have suggested a link to epilepsy to ancient audiences. According to Diodorus Siculus, Alexander drank copious amounts of unmixed wine "in commemoration of the death of Heracles" before slipping into a coma on the eve of his own death.<sup>77</sup> In his *Problems*, Aristotle (notably, Alexander's own tutor) states that "wine...if taken in large quantities appears to produce such qualities as we attribute to the atrabilious...whereas no such results are produced by honey or milk or water or anything similar."<sup>78</sup> Aristotle even states that "wine and the atrabilious temperament are similar in nature."<sup>79</sup> In modern medical literature, the consumption of alcohol in large quantities is a well-established contraindication of epilepsy and can lead to heightened seizure activity.<sup>80</sup> If Alexander suffered from epilepsy, his excessive consumption of alcohol on the eve of his death could have potentially contributed to a lethal seizure episode. One could assume that, even if the details of this incident are, as Plutarch says, "invented," Alexander's imbibement serves as a tragic symbol of his atrabilious nature.<sup>81</sup> When one considers Alexander's drinking of wine, his great accomplishments and the correlation between his death and that of his paternal "ancestor," Heracles, the parallels are striking, especially within the context of the Aristotelian view of epilepsy. Based on the circumstances surrounding his death and his (mythical) connection to Heracles, it is conceivable that ancient audiences might have assumed Alexander the Great had epilepsy, a belief that, in turn, may well have influenced the greatest political dynasty of the Roman Empire.

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<sup>77</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Library*, trans. C.H. Oldfather (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989), Perseus Digital Library, XVII.117.1-5.

<sup>78</sup> Arist. *Pr.* XXX.1.

<sup>79</sup> Arist. *Pr.* XXX.1.

<sup>80</sup> Michael Hamerle, Leyli Ghaeni, Alexander Kowski, Florian Weissinger and Martin Holtkamp, "Alcohol Use and Alcohol-Related Seizures in Patients with Epilepsy," *Frontiers in Neurology* 9 (2018): 6-7.

<sup>81</sup> Plutarch *Vit. Alex.* LXXV.1-4.

## **Epilepsy in the Julio-Claudian Dynasty: In Imitation of Hellenistic Kings?**

No political family in the classical world is more famous than the Julio-Claudian dynasty. From the rise of Julius Caesar to the fall of Nero, the Julio-Claudians centralized political and religious power in Rome and firmly established the Roman Empire as the dominant socio-political power of Europe, North Africa and the Near East for the next four centuries. Yet, despite the mild temperaments of Julius, Augustus and Claudius, other members of the dynasty were characterized by megalomaniacal and even bizarre behavior, some of which cannot be explained rationally.<sup>82</sup> While nearly every member of the Julio-Claudian dynasty has been retrospectively diagnosed with various mental disorders (often speculatively), the two men who are of interest to this thesis are Gaius Julius Caesar and Gaius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, known informally as Caligula. Both Julius Caesar and Caligula were understood as epileptic by Roman historians, and both of them may have exploited the social perception of their condition to increase their prestige and *auctoritas* in the eyes of the Roman people.

Born between 102 and 100 B.C. into the patrician Julii family of Rome, Julius Caesar is remembered as one of the most famous military leaders and politicians of all time. In addition to his military exploits in Gaul and Spain, Caesar is widely known for his assassination on the Ides of March in 44 B.C. and also for his alleged epilepsy, both of which were dramatized for premodern and modern audiences by William Shakespeare in *Julius Caesar*. While lines such as “He hath the falling sickness” and “’Tis true, this god did shake” have entered the English vernacular and cultural memory and paint a sensational image of Caesar consistent with Shakespeare’s narrative, they are also given some small support by Roman historical writers.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Gerald R. Moss, “The Mentality and Personality of the Julio-Claudian Emperors,” *Medical History* 7.2 (1963): 167.

<sup>83</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*, in *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), I.2.

Among the extant Greco-Roman sources, Plutarch and Suetonius wrote closest to Caesar's own lifetime, with their biographies having been written less than two centuries after their subject's death.<sup>84</sup> The information that they provide on Caesar's condition is brief and has been scrutinized by various modern scholars and doctors.<sup>85</sup> Nevertheless, their accounts confirm that Caesar's own contemporaries and the ensuing generations of Romans suspected him of having epilepsy.

Most ancient historians describe Caesar's epilepsy in the context of his military campaigns in Spain and Africa. In Chapter XLV of his *Divus Iulius*, Suetonius writes that "his health was sound...but he twice had epileptic fits while on campaign," noting also that he was prone to "sudden fainting spells" in his later years.<sup>86</sup> Given the outward similarity between fainting and a tonic-clonic seizure, it is possible that these "sudden fainting spells" were actually mischaracterized seizure episodes. In a similar vein, Plutarch writes that "[Caesar] was subject to epileptic fits, a trouble which first attacked him, we are told, in Corduba."<sup>87</sup> Understood in the context of Suetonius' account, this epileptic attack at Corduba must have been his first while on campaign; in Chapter LIII, Plutarch describes another (presumably, the second) attack during the African campaign. Here, he writes that some witnesses at the Battle of Thapsus claimed that Caesar left the battlefield because he felt a seizure coming on and "before his already wavering senses were altogether confounded and overpowered by the malady, [he] was carried to a neighboring tower, where he stayed quietly during the battle."<sup>88</sup> Interestingly, Plutarch and the

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<sup>84</sup> Plutarch was born in AD 46 and wrote his *Bíoi Παράλληλοι* in the early second century; Suetonius was born in AD 69 and completed his *De Vita Caesarum* in 121.

<sup>85</sup> Terrence Cawthorne, "Julius Caesar and the Falling Sickness," *The Laryngoscope* 68.8 (1958): 1450; J.R. Hughes, "Dictator Perpetuus: Julius Caesar—Did He Have Seizures? If So, What was the Etiology?" *Epilepsy & Behavior* 5 (2004): 758.

<sup>86</sup> Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, trans. Robert Graves (New York: Penguin Books, 1957), XLV.2.

<sup>87</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Caesar*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1919), Perseus Digital Library, XVII.1.

<sup>88</sup> Plutarch *Vit. Caes.* LIII.3.



witnesses he makes reference to do not remark negatively about Caesar's absence from battle or condemn him for being incapacitated.

In contrast to these two episodes while on campaign, Plutarch's final reference to Caesar's epilepsy indicates that it could also have negative social consequences. In Chapter LX, Plutarch states that the senate voted to bestow numerous extravagant honors upon Caesar following his victory over Pompey, probably around 46 B.C. Soon after the vote, when Caesar was sitting above the rostra, he did not rise from his seat upon the arrival of the senate and consuls, much to their anger and personal insult. Upon realizing his mistake, Caesar blamed an epileptic attack as the reason he had not risen, reasoning that "the senses of those who are thus afflicted do not usually remain steady when they address a multitude standing, but are speedily shaken and whirled about, bringing on giddiness and insensibility."<sup>89</sup> Other reasons beyond epilepsy have been proposed for his remaining seated: Dio Cassius records a bizarre claim that Caesar had diarrhea in the seat and would not rise from embarrassment (conceivably due to a seizure), while Plutarch himself says that a friend, Cornelius Balbus, advised him against standing since he was "a superior."<sup>90</sup> Whatever the true cause, Plutarch's biography indicates that Caesar's epilepsy was common knowledge, that Caesar himself was aware of this reality, and that Caesar attempted to use his illness on at least one occasion to justify his actions and influence the opinion of the Roman public.

Julius Caesar has often been compared with Alexander the Great. Both were great military leaders who conquered foreign territories, both were surrounded by mysterious and portentous signs of their greatness, and both died untimely deaths at the peak of their earthly

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<sup>89</sup> Plutarch *Vit. Caes.* LX.3-4.

<sup>90</sup> Cassius Dio, *Historia Romana*, trans. Earnest Cary (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1914), Perseus Digital Library, XLIV.8.1-3; Plutarch *Vit. Caes.* LX.5.

power. Even in antiquity, Plutarch saw enough similarities between the two figures that he paired them in one set of his *Parallel Lives*. Ancient sources show that Caesar was conscious of their parallels and wished to emulate his Hellenistic counterpart. According to the first-century Roman poet Statius, Caesar ordered that an equestrian statue of Alexander by Lysippus be moved to the Roman forum, although with one alteration: Alexander's head had been replaced with an image of his own.<sup>91</sup> Perhaps the most salient link between Caesar and Alexander is described by the Roman poet Lucan in his epic *Pharsalia*; in the opening lines of Book X, the poet narrates Caesar's visit to Alexander's tomb in Alexandria, Egypt. This contemplative moment comes just after Pompey's murder, a turning point in the Civil War. According to Lucan, Caesar "is not taken in by anything's charm, / not by gold or the reverent care of the gods, / ...eagerly he descends / into the cave hollowed out for a tomb."<sup>92</sup> Lucan's characterization of Caesar in this episode sheds light upon Caesar's public image in the first century AD: he was, effectively, the Roman Alexander. Is it possible, then, that the Roman people (and even Caesar himself) took rumors of both men's epilepsy as another sign of their similarity and divine favor? Interestingly, Lucan uses lightning as a metaphor to describe both leaders. In Book X, the poet describes Alexander as "a bolt of lightning / that struck all peoples alike;" almost identically, Caesar's conquering spirit is compared to "when...a lightning / bolt / ...flashes, cracks the day, and people shudder in / terror."<sup>93</sup> Writing during the rule of Nero, Lucan was almost certainly aware of Lucretius' comparison of epilepsy to a bolt of lightning, let alone potential rumors of Alexander and Caesar having the sacred disease; as such, for Lucan's Roman readership,

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<sup>91</sup> Statius, *Silvae*, Perseus Digital Library, I.84-88.

<sup>92</sup> Lucan, *Civil War*, trans. Matthew Fox (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), X.21-24.

<sup>93</sup> Luc. X.42-3; I.166-9.

imagining both men as lightning bolts may have symbolized not only their strength, but also their purported epilepsy.

Although Caesar admired Alexander the Great, emphasized his descent from Alban kings and allowed his statue to be placed beside those of the kings of Rome, Elizabeth Rawson argues that he was not necessarily aiming for kingship of Rome. From her perspective, Caesar may have wished to walk the fine line between two conflicting Roman views of kingship: one where the king is seen as a noble, grand, and supremely good ruler, and the other where the king is viewed as a tyrant antithetical to republican values.<sup>94</sup> Perhaps Caesar did not necessarily wish to emulate or become a king like Alexander had been, but he may still have viewed himself as a sort of spiritual successor to Alexander's military, political and kingly prestige in all but formal title. To this end, Caesar's epilepsy and its public perception may have linked the *dictator perpetuus* more closely to his Hellenistic spiritual predecessor.

While Julius Caesar's epilepsy is briefly alluded to by Roman biographers, Caligula's epilepsy is more widely discussed as a reflection of his character. In his biography of Caligula, Suetonius states that he had experienced epilepsy since boyhood and could scarcely walk, stand or think rationally on certain occasions.<sup>95</sup> Caligula's struggle with epilepsy may have even influenced his own behavior: throughout much of his infamous rule as Roman emperor, Caligula displayed a level of cruelty and erratic conduct unprecedented among his imperial predecessors. Tiberius, Caligula's own adoptive grandfather, said that "to allow Gaius [Caligula] to live would prove the ruin of himself and of all men."<sup>96</sup> Though Caligula has long been remembered for his opulent lifestyle, flamboyance, and delusional nature, the potential connection between these

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<sup>94</sup> Elizabeth Rawson, "Caesar's Heritage: Hellenistic Kings and Their Roman Equals," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 65 (1975): 149.

<sup>95</sup> Suet. *Cal.* L.3.

<sup>96</sup> Suet. *Cal.* XI.2.

traits and the emperor's epilepsy has only been researched in recent decades. In the late twentieth century, Thomas Benediktson connected Suetonius' description of Caligula's epilepsy to the postictal phase of a tonic-clonic seizure, and he theorized that the emperor's aggressiveness, cruelty and decline in personality may correspond to temporal lobe epilepsy.<sup>97</sup> Modern retrodiagnoses aside, the accounts of Suetonius and other ancient historians indicate that Caligula's epilepsy was well known among the Roman public and that he may have taken advantage of his illness to emphasize his own divinity and greatness.

Whether or not he consciously connected his epilepsy with divine status, Caligula was keen to project an image of his own godhood to the Roman people. According to Suetonius and Cassius Dio, Caligula commissioned temples in his own honor and demanded that sacrifices of flamingoes, peacocks and pheasants be made in his honor.<sup>98</sup> To further establish his supreme divinity, he even ordered that the head of the statue of Jupiter at Olympia be replaced with his own image, although this task was not completed before his death. Additionally, Suetonius reports that some devotees venerated Caligula as *Iuppiter Latiaris*, a name for Jupiter as god of the Latins who was worshipped on the Alban mount.<sup>99</sup> In one sense, Caligula was simply modifying a tradition of "divine" Julio-Claudian emperors whose mythical ancestry extended back to the goddess Venus; however, in light of Caligula's documented epilepsy, his decision to imitate the god of thunder and lightning may have even been connected to his illness. Like his ancestor Julius, Caligula admired Alexander the Great, such that he wished to move the imperial capital from Rome to Alexandria.<sup>100</sup> Occasionally, Caligula even wore Alexander's own

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<sup>97</sup> D. Thomas Benediktson, "Caligula's Madness: Madness or Interictal Temporal Lobe Epilepsy?" *The Classical World* 82.5 (May-June 1989): 370-1; 373-4.

<sup>98</sup> Cass. Dio LIX.4.4; Suet. *Cal.* XXII.3.

<sup>99</sup> Suet. *Cal.* XXII.3.

<sup>100</sup> Suet. *Cal.* XLIX.5.

breastplate, which, in characteristic fashion, he had personally looted from Alexander's tomb.<sup>101</sup> More so than with previous emperors, the Roman public could conceivably have identified Caligula with both Julius Caesar and Alexander on account of legends of their epilepsy; in this case, Caligula probably capitalized on this perception of his grandeur by presenting himself as a god incarnate.

In line with his personality, Caligula's projection of divinity is marked by inconsistency and peculiarity. According to Suetonius, Caligula was irrationally afraid of thunder, to such an extent that he often hid under his bed when lightning struck near his palace.<sup>102</sup> This phobia makes Caligula's persona of *Iuppiter Latiaris* particularly ironic, though he may have mimicked Jupiter as an apotropaic method of warding off thunder and even epileptic seizures. Perhaps the most bizarre connection between Caligula's epilepsy and divinity, however, lies in his claim to have had sex with the moon, which Cassius Dio says he mentioned often.<sup>103</sup> According to Suetonius, Caligula did not merely invite the moon to his bed once; rather, he extended the invitation "constantly" when the moon was "full and radiant."<sup>104</sup> Suetonius' insistence on the moon being full is particularly interesting since, in antiquity, epilepsy was widely believed to be influenced by lunar phases.<sup>105</sup> From Caligula's perspective, courting the moon might have been a demonstration of the gods' favor upon him, but the Roman public may have instead associated his antics with the established folk belief that epilepsy was caused by sinning against the moon goddess.<sup>106</sup> Thus, a sickness that Caligula perceived as a sign of divine favor might have alternatively been interpreted as a divine punishment, one that had long been expressed through

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<sup>101</sup> Suet. *Cal.* LII.4.

<sup>102</sup> Suet. *Cal.* LI.2.

<sup>103</sup> Cass. Dio LIX; XXVI.3.

<sup>104</sup> Suet. *Cal.* XXII.4.

<sup>105</sup> D. Thomas Benediktson, "Caligula's Phobias and Philias: Fear of Seizure?" *The Classical Journal* 87.2 (Dec. 1991 – Jan. 1992): 161.

<sup>106</sup> Temkin, *The Falling Sickness*, 7.

his unpredictable personality and culminated in his assassination less than four years into his rule as emperor.

As seen throughout this chapter, the portentous nature of epilepsy meant that it could be interpreted in various ways. Thanks, in part, to Aristotle's *Problems*, it is easy to imagine how epilepsy might have come to be associated with great men of history and myth, and Greco-Roman authors seem to have drawn upon this Aristotelian theme for centuries. These writers do not explicitly ignore the negative qualities of the disease (e.g., the associations of Heracles and Caligula with madness and cruelty), but because epilepsy indicates both greatness and divine selection, it is portrayed in a more neutral or even positive sense when ascribed to rulers, philosophers, and conquerors. As such, Julius Caesar and Caligula endeavored to use this cultural perspective to their advantage, reinforcing their own godhood and authority with an illness that, had they been ordinary individuals, would otherwise have stigmatized them and inspired fear and ire in the Roman people.

### **Chapter III: *Morbus Comitialis* and Its Social Reality in Rome**

Since “great men” constituted only a tiny fraction of the Greek and Roman populations, the vast majority of people in the ancient world would not have fit Aristotle’s criteria for greatness. Great men were certainly non-ordinary people, distinguished from the masses by aristocratic ancestry, wealth, accomplishment and even disease, which continued to be a marker of high breeding into the twentieth century.<sup>107</sup> Epileptics, on the other hand, were a very different type of non-ordinary people, though perhaps just as rare, and only when these two groups overlapped could epilepsy have been considered a positive characteristic. In nearly all extant references from the Greco-Roman world, it seems that epilepsy carried a neutral or negative connotation, stamping the sufferer with lifelong stigma and drawing ridicule from the public. The negative connotations of epilepsy can be seen in Roman remedies and metaphors for the disease, as well as the words most frequently used to describe it. Based on their characterization in written accounts alone, it is difficult to imagine non-aristocratic epileptics seeing their illness as anything but a curse, let alone as something sacred or great; such stigmatization, as Brandt might suggest, reveals some cultural, social and moral values deeply embedded in Roman society.

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<sup>107</sup> Hemophilia has been called “the royal disease” due to its prominence among European royal families of the nineteenth century. Considering how life-threatening hemophilia was and continues to be without prompt medical treatment, its role as a social status symbol is bizarre and can be compared to ancient associations of epilepsy with the Caesars.

## Etymology of the Roman Terms for Epilepsy

One of the Roman names for epilepsy, *morbis comitialis*, or the “disease of the *comitia*,” is uncertain in origin but imbued with negative connotations. This phrase is unique to the Romans, and, interestingly, it is the most commonly used Latin name for epilepsy in antiquity. Authors such as Pliny, Tacitus, Suetonius and Apuleius overwhelmingly used *morbis comitialis* to refer to epilepsy, and despite proposed etymologies of the phrase, its linguistic origin remains elusive. The most notable etymology comes from the second-century Roman grammarian Festus, who alleges that the name *morbis comitialis* is owed to the practice that if someone had a seizure during the *comitia*, the episode would be considered an ill omen and the day’s agenda would be postponed.<sup>108</sup> While this origin for the term is dubious at best, the third century A.D. poet Quintus Serenus echoed Festus’ explanation, writing that “the name has clung because it prohibits votes from being carried out lawfully: often a dreadful fall has delayed the people’s council, when members fell in unfortunate weakness.”<sup>109</sup> Bad omens were known to cause public gatherings, votes and ceremonies to be adjourned or canceled, a cultural phenomenon that Pompey the Great exploited for political gain in 52 B.C. when he dissolved the assembly to declare Vatinius praetor rather than Cato.<sup>110</sup> Perhaps the *morbis comitialis* was viewed as one of numerous bad omens that could cause public gatherings to adjourn, though this explanation does not adequately address why a disease that causes the *comitia* to be canceled would be considered “of the *comitia*.” While the name and etymology seem paradoxical, they reflect the Roman public’s fear of epileptics and the consequences that public seizures could have on those present.

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<sup>108</sup> Temkin, *The Falling Sickness*, 8.

<sup>109</sup> Quintus Serenus *Liber Medicinalis* LVI.1006-1009.

<sup>110</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Pompey*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1917), Perseus Digital Library, LII.2.



Whether or not the origin of the term *morbus comitialis* actually had anything to do with the *comitia*, the name's negative connotations persist. Alongside *morbus comitialis*, another negative term that sometimes appears in Roman literature is *morbus soticus*, or “serious disease.” Lewis and Short’s Dictionary defines *morbus soticus* as “a serious disorder that excuses one from duty,”<sup>111</sup> and while this definition does not explicitly reference epilepsy, Pliny the Elder seems to use the two terms interchangeably. In the one instance where *morbus soticus* occurs in his *Natural History*, Pliny says that “the fumes of *gagantes*, burnt...detect a tendency also to [the *morbus soticus*].”<sup>112</sup> In Roman medical literature, burning *gagantes*, or jet, was a highly popular method of detecting epilepsy, such that Apuleius in his *Apologia* states, “Why should I use charms when, as I am told by writers on natural history, the burning of the stone named *gagantes* is an equally sure and easy proof of the disease?”<sup>113</sup> Indeed, one of the “writers on natural history” to whom Apuleius refers may be Pliny himself, meaning that *morbus soticus* was commonly understood to mean epilepsy in Roman parlance.

Associations between the *morbus comitialis* and *morbus soticus* may have dated back long before Pliny. Quoting the second-century B.C. Roman annalist Cincius, Aulus Gellius writes in his *Attic Nights* that “in ancient times”<sup>114</sup> Roman soldiers would be ordered to appear before the consul to take an oath of loyalty. He then provides a list of six conditions that would excuse a soldier from making this oath: pollution from contact with the dead; an omen requiring expiatory rites; an anniversary sacrifice requiring his presence; enemy attack; an appointed day

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<sup>111</sup> *A Latin Dictionary*, ed. Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), s.v. “*soticus*.”

<sup>112</sup> Pliny, *Historia Naturalis*, trans. John Bostock (London: Taylor and Francis, 1855), Perseus Digital Library, XXXVI.34.

<sup>113</sup> Apuleius, *Apologia*, trans. H.E. Butler (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909), Project Gutenberg, XLV.

<sup>114</sup> Presumably, around the time of the Second Punic War.

with foreigners; and a *morbis soticus*.<sup>115</sup> Nearly all of these excuses are forms of religious pollution, but since virtually all diseases were considered pollutive in Roman culture, Cincius could have simply cited the general term *morbis* rather than *morbis soticus*. His use of this particular phrase indicates that he is referring to a specific disease, most likely the *morbis comitialis* based on Pliny's usage of the term. If so, then Cincius' mention of the *morbis soticus* may constitute the oldest surviving reference to epilepsy in Roman literature, making its association with pollution all the more salient. Regardless of the true origins of *morbis comitialis* and *morbis soticus*, the disease itself represented a disruption to civic order and responsibility that rendered people ineffective members of the Roman state. Additionally, perceptions of epilepsy as a form of pollution may well have figured into the popular use of these names; as a result, an association between epilepsy and contagion emerged in Roman society and persisted for centuries in public and scholarly memory.

### **Pliny's Various Remedies and Social Commentary on Epilepsy**

Among all the Roman authors whose works survive, none of them focuses on the contagious nature of epilepsy more intensely than Pliny the Elder. In his encyclopedic *Historia Naturalis*, Pliny lists hundreds of folk remedies for a wide variety of diseases, and epilepsy is mentioned over sixty times. Considering how rarely epilepsy occurs in the general population, this appears to be a particularly high frequency of mention. Still, one must remember that in the Greco-Roman world, epilepsy was understood as a contagious disease that anyone could catch, and Pliny certainly believes this to be true. In an oft-quoted passage from Book XXVIII, Pliny states, "We are in the habit of spitting, for instance, as a preservative from epilepsy, or in other

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<sup>115</sup> Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae*, trans. John C. Rolfe (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1927), XVI.4.

words, we repel contagion thereby.”<sup>116</sup> The Roman practice of spitting on epileptics reveals much about their social status and perception by the general public. On one hand, spitting is an apotropaic act meant to ward off disease, pollution and evil, but it could also be interpreted as demeaning and insulting, especially to a person in the midst of an epileptic seizure.

From a modern perspective, Pliny’s numerous remedies for the *morbus comitialis* range from insightful to downright bizarre. Some of the strangest treatments listed include lion gall, dried camel brains and dung, weasel ashes, and the testicles of bears, boars, donkeys and rams.<sup>117</sup> It is doubtful whether these various remedies were particularly efficacious, but Pliny is careful to differentiate between treatments, cures and dubious remedies. Many of Pliny’s remedies apply to multiple diseases, and, intriguingly, there appears to be a relationship between epilepsy and the menstrual cycle in the Roman cultural mind. Approximately one-sixth of the remedies for the *morbus comitialis* also address conditions of the female reproductive system, including uterine problems, “suffocation of the womb,” miscarriages, abortions, excessive menstruation and conception. Pennyroyal seed, for example, is said to rouse epileptics from seizures, while when mixed with honey and vinegar, the leaf is supposed to “modify menstrual discharge and restore the uterus.”<sup>118</sup> Mixed with barley, Pliny recommends anise for pregnant women and babies with epilepsy; furthermore, he says that, according to Pythagoras, anyone who holds anise in their hand “will never be attacked with epilepsy” and that it should be planted abundantly around one’s house.<sup>119</sup> Although he decries the practice as “superstitious,” Pliny even reports that mistletoe can cure epilepsy and promote conception in females if it has not touched the

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<sup>116</sup> Plin. *H.N.* XXVIII.7.

<sup>117</sup> Plin. *H.N.* XXVIII.25; XXVIII.26; XXVIII.63; XXX.27.

<sup>118</sup> Plin. *H.N.* XX.54.

<sup>119</sup> Plin. *H.N.* XX.73.

ground.<sup>120</sup> The connection between epilepsy and menstruation throughout Pliny's text may not have been mere coincidence, for it seems to align with the modern diagnosis of catamenial epilepsy, a type of epilepsy defined as "a pattern of seizures that changes in severity during particular phases of the menstrual cycle."<sup>121</sup> Although the Romans were not familiar with this diagnosis, they may have associated both menstruation and epilepsy with the lunar cycle, and, therefore, with each other.

The most shocking and macabre remedies listed in Pliny's *Historia Naturalis* relate to the uses of human blood in healing epileptics. Pliny devotes an entire chapter of Book XXVIII to the "Remedies Derived from the Human Blood," which include smearing blood on a seizing epileptic's mouth or pricking the big toe during a seizure and applying the blood to the patient's face.<sup>122</sup> The most graphic of all of Pliny's cures for epilepsy, however, comes in the form of gladiator blood. Pliny makes his stance on the practice clear: "Epileptic patients are in the habit of drinking the blood even of gladiators, draughts teeming with life, as it were; a thing that, when we see it done by the wild beasts even, upon the same arena, inspires us with horror at the spectacle! And yet these persons, forsooth, consider it a most effectual cure for their disease, to quaff the warm, breathing blood from man himself, and, as they apply their mouth to the wound, to draw forth his very life; and this, though it is regarded as an act of impiety to apply the human lips to the wound even of a wild beast!"<sup>123</sup> From Pliny's perspective, epileptics who practice this form of healing are morally beneath the "wild beasts" of the arena; in fact, their impiety makes them as reprehensible as the horrific deed itself.

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<sup>120</sup> Plin. *H.N.* XXIV.6.

<sup>121</sup> Alberto Verrotti, Claudia D'Egidio, Sergio Agostinelli, Carla Verrotti, and Piero Pavone, "Diagnosis and Management of Catamenial Seizures: A Review," *International Journal of Women's Health*, 4 (2012): 1.

<sup>122</sup> Plin. *H.N.* XXVIII.10.

<sup>123</sup> Plin. *H.N.* XXVIII.2.

Pliny is not the first Roman author to cite this macabre practice; his description follows those of Aulus Cornelius Celsus and Scribonius Largus, the latter of whom even suggests that, in some cases, drinking gladiator blood does cure the disease.<sup>124</sup> According to Ferdinand Moog and Axel Karenberg, the specificity of the blood coming from a gladiator's wound may originally have been adapted from Etruscan civilization. When noble Etruscans were buried, gladiatorial fights were held with the intent of "pacifying death;" this practice was likely transmitted to Roman civilization around the third century B.C., where a dead gladiator's blood could be used as a remedy since they were technically a "victim in a funeral."<sup>125</sup> Although this potential meaning behind the "cure" was lost by Pliny's lifetime, such blood remedies were (allegedly) practiced in the first century AD and earned epileptics one of several stigmas of barbarity and witchcraft.

### **Epilepsy and Magic in the *Apologia* of Apuleius**

No text from antiquity addresses the complex social roles of epilepsy and magic like Apuleius' *Apologia*. Living in the second century AD, Apuleius was a wealthy, well-regarded author of many literary works, most notably the *Metamorphoses*, commonly called *The Golden Ass*. Around AD 158, Apuleius was accused of witchcraft by a man named Aemilianus, and the *Apologia* is the author's written version of his defense against the latter's claims. Among the many charges of black magic asserted by Aemilianus, Apuleius was said to have bewitched a slave boy named Thallus, as well as an unnamed woman who approached him for medical

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<sup>124</sup> Ferdinand Peter Moog and Axel Karenberg, "Between Horror and Hope: Gladiator's Blood as a Cure for Epileptics in Ancient Medicine," *Journal of the History of the Neurosciences* 12.2 (2003): 138.

<sup>125</sup> Moog and Karenberg, "Horror and Hope," 141.

advice. Apuleius, however, refutes the charges of witchcraft and instead argues that both Thallus and the woman were afflicted with epilepsy.<sup>126</sup>

Interestingly, Apuleius includes a lengthy description of epilepsy as an integral part of his defense, noting that “Men of our race have styled it not only the ‘great sickness’ and the ‘comitial sickness,’ but also the ‘divine sickness’” and concluding that “The name is just; for this sickness does outrage to the rational part of the soul, which is by far the most holy.”<sup>127</sup> While Apuleius does not offer an alternative origin for the term *morbus comitialis*, unfortunately, his explanation for the term *divinus morbus* differs significantly from Hippocrates’ own explanation centuries before. Whereas Hippocrates traced the name “sacred disease” to the magicians who claimed to cure epilepsy, Apuleius gives agency to the disease itself, blaming it for polluting the holiest part of the human body. This change in thought may seem minor, but when considering how epileptics were treated through centuries of ancient civilization, it is a significant development that foreshadows the Christian stigma against epilepsy in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages.

Throughout the *Apologia*, Apuleius repeatedly describes epilepsy in negative terms. Fascinatingly, during one of his appeals to the proconsul, Claudius Maximus, he makes explicit reference to Aristotle’s *Problems* in a list of philosophical works that he had read on the subjects of anatomy and biology.<sup>128</sup> Since he read the *Problems*, Apuleius was almost certainly familiar with Aristotle’s views on great men, the melancholic personality, and epilepsy, so his denigration of the disease is revealing of the changing social understanding of the *morbus comitialis*. In his description of Thallus, the epileptic slave, Apuleius says that “his face is ulcerous, his head is

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<sup>126</sup> Apul. *Apol.* XLII; XLIX.

<sup>127</sup> Apul. *Apol.* L.

<sup>128</sup> Apul. *Apol.* XXXVI.

bruised in front and behind, his eyes are dull, his nostrils distended, and his feet stumbling,” thus painting a very unflattering image of the suffering boy.<sup>129</sup> Furthermore, Apuleius relates that Thallus’ fellow slaves were accustomed to spitting on him (presumably to ward off the contagion, as Pliny recommended), and no one would eat or drink after him for fear of catching epilepsy. Eventually, Thallus was sent to a distant farm, “far from the sight of all of them...for fear he should infect the household.”<sup>130</sup> Although these lines are meant to support Apuleius’ defense against being a magician, his words reveal the distrust and mistreatment of epileptics endemic to second-century AD Roman society.

In perhaps his most intriguing metaphor for epilepsy, Apuleius criticizes Aemilianus’ skills as a lawyer in terms of epilepsy. Up to this point in the text, Apuleius has attacked Aemilianus several times, notably referring to his “ugly deformity of a face” and “repulsive” morals.<sup>131</sup> In Part LII, however, Apuleius takes the *ad hominem* attacks to a distinct level, declaring that “you are the real sufferer from the falling sickness, so often have your false accusations failed and cast you helpless to the ground.”<sup>132</sup> Apuleius carries the metaphor further, claiming that Aemilianus and Thallus frenzy in similar ways, except the former’s frenzy is directed at others rather than himself.<sup>133</sup> In a final jab, Apuleius says, “you, wretch, commit your crimes with full knowledge and with your eyes open, such is the vehemence of disease that inspires your actions,” indicating that while epileptics are at least unconscious of their potential harm during a seizure episode, Aemilianus is conscious of his wrongdoing and willfully harms those around him for personal gain.<sup>134</sup> Later in the *Apologia*, Apuleius continues to attack

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<sup>129</sup> Apul. *Apol.* XLIII.

<sup>130</sup> Apul. *Apol.* XLIV.

<sup>131</sup> Apul. *Apol.* XXV.

<sup>132</sup> Apul. *Apol.* LII.

<sup>133</sup> Apul. *Apol.* LII.

<sup>134</sup> Apul. *Apol.* LII.

Aemilianus, and he makes clear the place and perception of epileptics in his society. In chapter LXIV, the defendant wishes death and damnation upon his enemy, indicating that Aemilianus both hates the gods and should be punished by them.<sup>135</sup> As an isolated insult, saying that Aemilianus hates the gods and is, in turn, hated by them is a mere rhetorical jab; however, in the context of the derogatory language of epilepsy that Apuleius has already used to demean Aemilianus, this declaration of the gods' hatred may very well be connected to the downtrodden status of epileptics in second-century Roman society.

Although maligning epileptics may not have been Apuleius' foremost goal, his argument denotes a marked contrast from the *morbis maior* of the Caesars who used the disease as a sign of their divine selection. As a physician, Apuleius would have certainly been familiar with the Hippocratic corpus and *On the Sacred Disease*, which he seems to echo when he says that Thallus "needs a doctor rather than a magician."<sup>136</sup> Yet, in spite of his medical expertise, Apuleius overwhelmingly expresses demeaning, superstitious views of epilepsy that contradict the rational Hippocratic approach to the "so-called sacred disease" established centuries earlier. In fact, Apuleius' negative characterization of epileptics follows a centuries-old trend reflected in the names *morbis comitialis* and *morbis soticus*. His views, as well as Pliny's numerous remedies, do not reflect the grandeur of Alexander or Caesar; instead, they represent the hardship and struggle that epileptics endured on a daily basis in Roman society, a plight that would only continue to worsen under Christian hegemony.

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<sup>135</sup> Apul. *Apol.* LXIV.

<sup>136</sup> Apul. *Apol.* LXIII.



## Chapter IV: *Lunatici* and Stigma in Early Christianity

### Epilepsy and Demons in the Gospels

Even more so than they had under Roman rule, epileptics faced increased scrutiny and ridicule in the early days of the Christian movement. The most significant early Christian reference to epilepsy comes from the New Testament, where Jesus heals the boy afflicted by an evil spirit. Mark, widely believed to be the earliest of the four canonical Gospels, gives the most complete account of the episode: after the Transfiguration, Jesus approaches his disciples who are surrounded by a crowd of people, and when he asks what they are doing, a man from the crowd responds, “Master, I have brought unto thee my son, which hath a dumb spirit; and wheresoever he taketh him, he teareth him: and he foameth, and gnasheth with his teeth, and pineth away.”<sup>137</sup> When he is brought before Jesus, the boy begins to convulse and foam at the mouth. His father states that he has been afflicted by such episodes since childhood, “and oftentimes it hath cast him into the fire, and into the waters, to destroy him.”<sup>138</sup> Upon the father’s profession of faith, Jesus casts the spirit out of his son, proclaiming, “Thou dumb and deaf spirit, I charge thee, come out of him, and enter no more into him.”<sup>139</sup> Once the boy is healed, Jesus lifts him from the ground and continues about his day. A shorter form of this story is repeated in Luke, though it still emphasizes how frequently the spirit attacks the boy and makes him foam at the mouth.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Mark 9:14-18 *KJV*.

<sup>138</sup> Mark 9:20-22 *KJV*.

<sup>139</sup> Mark 9:23-26 *KJV*.

<sup>140</sup> Luke 9:39 *KJV*.

At first glance, these passages merely describe one of the numerous exorcisms that Jesus performs throughout his ministry. After all, there are six other major exorcism episodes found in the Synoptic Gospels, such as when Jesus casts the demon “Legion” out of the Gerasene demoniac in Mark 5:1-20, or when he exorcises the blind man in Matthew 12:22-32. The case of the demoniac boy remains unique, however, as this is the only instance where the symptoms of possession are described in great detail. In fact, the boy’s symptoms differ from those mentioned in routine depictions of demoniacs in the Gospels and are more similar to ancient accounts of epilepsy, particularly his uncontrollable falling and foaming at the mouth.<sup>141</sup> If Mark and Luke seem to be conflating epilepsy with demonic possession, then Matthew leaves no doubt in this regard. In the original Greek text, Matthew succinctly presents the father’s plea: Κύριε, ἐλέησόν μου τὸν υἱόν, ὅτι σεληνιαάζεται καὶ κακῶς ἔχει, πολλάκις γὰρ πίπτει εἰς τὸ πῦρ καὶ πολλάκις εἰς τὸ ὕδωρ.<sup>142</sup> The verse has been rendered in English as, “Lord, have mercy on my son: for he is lunatick, and sore vexed: for oftentimes he falleth into the fire, and oft into the water.”<sup>143</sup> Although this version does not reference the boy foaming at the mouth, Matthew’s word choice is striking, particularly his calling the boy a lunatic. The Greek verb σεληνιαάζεται means “he is moonstruck” and became a common term for epilepsy after its use in the Gospel of Matthew.<sup>144</sup>

Besides this instance, this notion appears only one other time in the New Testament, once again in Matthew, during a description of Jesus’ miracles in Syria: καὶ προσήνεγκαν αὐτῷ πάντας τοὺς κακῶς ἔχοντας ποικίλαις νόσοις καὶ βασάνοις συνεχομένους, δαιμονιζομένους καὶ σεληνιαζομένους καὶ παραλυτικούς, καὶ ἐθεράπευσεν αὐτούς, translated as “and they brought

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<sup>141</sup> Foaming at the mouth was a commonly cited symptom of epileptic seizures in ancient medical and literary texts; for example, see Apul. *Apol.* XLIV and Lucr. III.485-493.

<sup>142</sup> Matt. 17:15 *WH*.

<sup>143</sup> Matt. 17:15 *KJV*.

<sup>144</sup> Temkin, *The Falling Sickness*, 92-3.

unto him all sick people that were taken with divers diseases and torments, and those which were possessed with devils, and those which were lunatick, and those that had the palsy; and he healed them.”<sup>145</sup> In this verse, Matthew makes a clear distinction between the δαίμονιζομένους, “demoniacs,” and the σεληνιαζομένους, “lunatics,” or epileptics, which implies that he understands the two conditions to be separate from each other. However, when Jesus heals the lunatic boy in 17:18, Matthew says that he casts τὸ δαιμόνιον, “the demon,” out of him. Matthew’s nuanced use of these two terms may seem contradictory, but considering how epilepsy was popularly understood in the early Christian era, he expresses two critical ideas: first, in Chapter 4, that being “moonstruck” distinctively means being epileptic rather than simply being demon possessed, and second, in Chapter 17, that being epileptic and being demon possessed go hand in hand. Read as one composite episode, the three versions of this story found in the Synoptic Gospels reflect what would soon become a foundational understanding of epilepsy in the emerging Christian worldview.

The Matthean view of epilepsy would take several centuries to fully manifest and developed concurrently with early Christian understandings of demons. According to Carlos and Fernando Espí Forcén, the Christian concept of demons was informed by Greek cultural traditions surrounding δαίμονες, which, unlike their Christian derivatives, were not inherently evil.<sup>146</sup> Indeed, the word δαίμων originally denoted a being who operates in human lives and “appears to correspond to supernatural power in its unpredictable, anonymous, and often frightful manifestations.”<sup>147</sup> As such, the term usually carried a neutral meaning in Greek usage. In his *Apologia*, Plato characterizes Socrates as being guided by a δαιμόνιον, a related term that

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<sup>145</sup> Matt. 4:24 *WH*; Matt. 4:24 *KJV*.

<sup>146</sup> Carlos Espí Forcén and Fernando Espí Forcén, “Demonic Possessions and Mental Illness: Discussion of Selected Cases in Late Medieval Hagiographical Literature,” *Early Science and Medicine* 19.3 (2014): 260.

<sup>147</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of Classical Myth and Religion*, s.v. “daimōn.”

he describes as “something divine and spiritual [that] comes to me...a sort of voice that comes to me, and when it comes it always holds me back from what I am thinking of doing, but never urges me forward.”<sup>148</sup> In its capacity to influence his life in a relatively neutral or even positive way, Socrates’ δαιμόνιον resembles the traditionally defined δαίμων. Eventually, Platonists adopted the notion that good and evil δαίμονες existed, a philosophy that would ultimately inform the Christian understanding of demons as “both the embodiment and the cause of evil and sin against the will of God.”<sup>149</sup> By the time the Gospels were written down in the late first century A.D., this negative conception of δαίμονες had firmly rooted itself in Christian theology and philosophy.

As Christians reinterpreted classical culture to inform their own worldview, they also redefined ideas expressed in the canonical Gospels to better understand the relationship between demons and epilepsy. Lucian demonstrated what Temkin believes to be a prevailing demonological belief in his satire, *The Liar*: when a certain Syrian Palestinian exorcist would cast demons out of people, he would ask the spirit where it came from, and “the patient says not a word, but the spirit in him makes answer, in Greek or in some foreign tongue as the case may be, stating where it comes from, and how it entered into him.”<sup>150</sup> Demons speaking through possessed individuals is a common feature of New Testament exorcisms and happens several times throughout Jesus’ and his followers’ ministries, as when a demon in the Book of Acts notoriously says to the sons of Sceva, “Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are ye?”<sup>151</sup> Epileptics, unlike demoniacs, were believed to remain silent during seizure episodes; thus, the

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<sup>148</sup> Plato, *Apologia*, trans. Harold North Fowler, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1966), Perseus Digital Library, XXXId.

<sup>149</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of Classical Myth and Religion*, s.v. “daimōn.”

<sup>150</sup> Lucian, *The Liar*, trans. H.W. Fowler and F.G. Fowler, III.XVI. <https://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/luc/wl3/wl315.htm#> (accessed March 24, 2021); Temkin, *The Falling Sickness*, 90-1.

<sup>151</sup> Acts 19:14-15 *KJV*.

two afflictions remained closely related but distinct.<sup>152</sup> In his *Commentary on Matthew*, however, Origen of Alexandria decisively transformed the established Christian concept of demon possession based solely on Jesus' encounter with the lunatic boy that I discussed earlier. In response to Matthew's statement that the spirit was "dumb and deaf," Origen states that "as for us, [we] also believe the Gospel that this sickness is viewed as having been effected by an impure dumb and deaf spirit in those who suffer it."<sup>153</sup> In other words, Origen is arguing that demons do not have to speak through individuals while possessing them, and that epilepsy is caused by such "dumb and deaf" demons. According to Temkin, this "decisive break" with the Greco-Roman understandings of epilepsy and demonic activity influenced many Church Fathers throughout the proceeding centuries and constituted a "popular belief, which in epileptics...saw nothing but demoniacs."<sup>154</sup> Once seen as outcasts from Roman society worthy to be spat upon, epileptics were now directly associated with Satan and his malevolent spirits in the Christian popular mind, a humiliating and highly stigmatizing reputation to bear.

### **The Medieval Names of Epilepsy**

As seen in the Gospels and commentary of Origen, new terminology to describe epilepsy arose in late antiquity to reflect increasingly negative social perceptions of the disease. The Latin term *lunaticus* is cognate to the term *σεληνιακός* used by Origen, who himself was likely inspired by Matthew's use of *σεληνιαζομαι* and its participial form, *σεληνιαζόμενος*. The notion of being "moonstruck" is not unique to the Christian worldview of epilepsy, as I have discussed in previous chapters; epilepsy had been associated with sinning against the moon in

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<sup>152</sup> Temkin, *The Falling Sickness*, 91.

<sup>153</sup> Origen, *Commentary on Matthew*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, vol. IX, ed. Allan Menzies (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1899), XIII.5.

<sup>154</sup> Temkin, *The Falling Sickness*, 92.

Greco-Roman folklore, a belief that Caligula exploited to gain prestige. While the moon still greatly influenced popular understandings of epilepsy in the Greco-Roman world, Christians were opposed to such astrological interpretations of disease; Origen, for example, denounced these ideas because if God created all stars, planets and the universe, none of the heavenly bodies can be inherently evil. Instead, he asserts that demons “work at certain phases of the rest of the stars” and that “every form of madness and demoniacal possession [is linked] to the phases of the moon.”<sup>155</sup> Rather than scrap the ancient lunar beliefs on epilepsy, early Christians simply modified them to suit their theological perspective.

The emerging Christian names for epilepsy proved to be popular with later authors who adopted and modified them. Isidore of Seville, who lived and wrote in the sixth and seventh centuries A.D., writes in his *Etymologiae*, *Hos etiam vulgus lunaticos vocant, quod per lunae cursum comitetur eos insidia daemonum*, which translates as, “In truth, the masses call them lunatics, because the insidious plots of demons attend them during the course of the moon.”<sup>156</sup> According to Temkin, an association existed between the words *caducus* and *demoniacus* by the seventh century A.D., with the former having been used by non-Christian Roman authors like Apuleius to describe epilepsy.<sup>157</sup> Isidore of Seville also defined epilepsy in such terms, saying, *Haec passio et caduca vocatur, eo quod cadens aeger spasmos patiatur*, or, “This disease is also called the falling sickness because the patient suffers spasms after falling.”<sup>158</sup> Augustine of Hippo coined the term *caducarii*, “falling ones,” to discuss epileptics, and both he and Isidore of Seville still made reference to the common Roman name, *morbis comitialis*, which continued to

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<sup>155</sup> Origen, *Commentary*, XIII.6.

<sup>156</sup> Isidorus, *Etymologiae*, IV.7.6. <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/isidore/4.shtml> (accessed March 25, 2021).

<sup>157</sup> Temkin, *The Falling Sickness*, 86.

<sup>158</sup> Isid. *Etym.* IV.7.5.

be pondered in medieval times as it was in antiquity.<sup>159</sup> Unlike in antiquity, however, the names that had once distinguished epilepsy as an extraordinary illness, such as *morbus sacer* and *morbus maior*, had been replaced with ones that carried more negative spiritual and social connotations.

### **Early Medieval Remedies for Epilepsy**

Just as in the classical world, there was a proliferation of remedies for epilepsy during the millennial span of the Middle Ages. Many of these cures seem to have retained elements from classical tradition, though many more began to resemble exorcisms due to the evolving perceptions of epilepsy and demonic possession in the medieval world. In the early Christian period of late antiquity, however, remedies for epilepsy remained largely unchanged from Greco-Roman culture. Jesus' treatment of the epileptic boy in the Synoptic Gospels provided an entirely new framework within which to heal epileptics for Christians, but, in reality, many Christians appear to have trusted a modified version of the classical tradition that incorporated their burgeoning faith. One such continued practice from pagan antiquity was the use of amulets to ward off illness.<sup>160</sup> Throughout the ancient world, amulets were carried or worn by individuals due to their perceived magical or apotropaic characteristics; typically, they were made out of materials like stone, metal, and precious gems, and they often bore engraved deities or messages meant to protect the user.<sup>161</sup>

A surviving, potentially Christian example of an apotropaic amulet against epilepsy is located in the Getty Museum. Around 1980, the museum acquired a small gold amulet inscribed

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<sup>159</sup> Temkin, *The Falling Sickness*, 85.

<sup>160</sup> Temkin, *The Falling Sickness*, 102.

<sup>161</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of Classical Myth and Religion*, s.v. "amulets."

with a thirty-line Greek prayer meant to protect its wearer, Aurelia, from “every seizure.”<sup>162</sup> The amulet dates to approximately the third century A.D., and the inscribed prayer contains a mixture of nonsense magical words, or *vores magicae*, and invocations of the Abrahamic God, which indicate that it is of Jewish or early Christian origin.<sup>163</sup> Translated, the invocation begins, “The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, our God,” which is a popular formula in Christian and Jewish magical texts; several other words and phrases, including the verb ῥύομαι, “to protect,” and two symbols resembling the first two letters of Χριστός, strongly indicate an early Christian origin.<sup>164</sup> Nevertheless, the magical phrases and nonsense formulae demonstrate a degree of syncretism between the emerging Christian faith and traditional folk magico-medicine. Amulets of this type as well as hundreds of other varieties remained popular throughout late antiquity and into the medieval era, and many people still wear protective amulets for myriad purposes today.<sup>165</sup>

Of all the prominent classical folk remedies for epilepsy that survived into the Middle Ages, one that did not was Pliny’s infamous gladiator blood cure. As one might expect, Christian apologists of late antiquity reacted to the practice of drinking gladiator blood with extreme disgust, not unlike Pliny’s own reaction to the so-called remedy. In fact, Pliny and the Christian apologists both object to the practice of drinking human blood on account of its impiety, albeit from a different religious framework and within a different literary context. Whereas Pliny wrote from the perspective of an encyclopedist evaluating the cure’s efficacy, two of the earliest Christian apologists, Tertullian and Minucius Felix, condemned the practice as part of a broader

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<sup>162</sup> Roy Kotansky, “Two Amulets in the Getty Museum: A Gold Amulet for Aurelia’s Epilepsy: An Inscribed Magical-Stone for Fever, ‘Chills,’ and Headache,” *The J. Paul Getty Museum Journal* 8 (1980): 181.

<sup>163</sup> Kotansky, “Two Amulets,” 181.

<sup>164</sup> Kotansky, “Two Amulets,” 182-3.

<sup>165</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of Classical Myth and Religion*, s.v. “amulets.”



defense of their religion. Both apologists were responding to an attack levied upon Roman Christians claiming that they practiced a rite of killing and eating small children, among other obscene practices.<sup>166</sup> In an extended polemic against what he views as a Roman proclivity for bloodshed, Tertullian asks, “Those, too, who at the gladiator shows, for the cure of epilepsy, quaff with greedy thirst the blood of criminals slain in the arena, as it flows fresh from the wound, and then rush off – to whom do they belong?”<sup>167</sup> Minucius Felix makes a similar argument, adding that “so much do we shrink from human blood, that we do not use the blood even of eatable animals in our food,” presumably referring to such verses from the Old Testament as Deuteronomy 12:23, “Only be sure that thou eat not the blood: for the blood is the life, and thou mayest not eat the life with the flesh.”<sup>168</sup>

### **Patron Saints and Healing Prayer: A Glimmer of Hope?**

Perhaps one of the most interesting traditions regarding epilepsy in the medieval era was the veneration of patron saints. Today, the Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican Churches venerate hundreds of saints from throughout Christian history, many of whom are believed to intercede on behalf of the faithful from the afterlife. By the High Middle Ages, Christians across the continent of Europe venerated as many as twenty different patron saints for epilepsy alone, which seems to be a striking figure considering how uncommon the disease is.<sup>169</sup> Among the patron saints of epileptics, St. Valentine was highly favored, and his popularity across the continent was so great

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<sup>166</sup> Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, VII. <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0301.htm> (accessed March 25, 2021).

<sup>167</sup> Tert. *Apol.* IX.

<sup>168</sup> Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, trans. Robert Ernest Wallis, XXX.

[https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0200-0300,\\_Minucius\\_Felix,\\_Octavius\\_\[Schaff\],\\_EN.pdf](https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0200-0300,_Minucius_Felix,_Octavius_[Schaff],_EN.pdf) (accessed March 25, 2021).

<sup>169</sup> Ferdinand Peter Moog and Axel Karenberg, “Heilige als Patrone Gegen den Schlaganfall,” *Early Science and Medicine* 8.3 (2003): 209.

that medieval Germans referred to epilepsy as, “St. Valentine’s illness.”<sup>170</sup> By the twelfth century, another peculiar tradition had developed of venerating the three Magi in order to remedy epilepsy; a formula involving their three names—Gaspar, Melchior and Balthasar—was commonly found in medical books for centuries and was often recommended to be inscribed onto amulets or rings and read into the epileptic’s ear during a seizure.<sup>171</sup> Temkin theorizes that the Magi were associated with epilepsy due to their “falling down” before the infant Christ and presenting him with gifts, which seems like a tenuous connection at best. Nevertheless, epilepsy has been attributed to some ancient and medieval saints, including St. Paul, St. Cecilia, St. Brigitta, and St. Catherine of Genoa, and such traditions may have even circulated in the early medieval era.<sup>172</sup> Appealing to saints who might have had epilepsy themselves is particularly salient to this thesis, as there seems to be a major disparity between how such holy men and women were venerated by Christian society and how epileptics were generally stigmatized. Perhaps a saint with epilepsy could have represented a rare positive image of epilepsy in the Middle Ages, much like Aristotle’s great men and the Caesars had been in classical antiquity. Rather than serving as an intangible example of talent or power *in spite* of their illness, Christian saints afflicted with epilepsy could have inspired everyday epileptics *on account* of their suffering, a spiritual concept unique to Christianity in the context of this discussion.

Despite the innumerable cures and remedies promoted throughout late antiquity and the Middle Ages, Jesus himself recommends neither amulets nor gladiator blood for the healing of epileptics; rather than the veneration of saints, even, he prescribes a life of holiness. Returning to the episode of the lunatic boy, all three Synoptic Gospels agree that the father asked Jesus’

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<sup>170</sup> Gerhard Kluger and Verena Kudernatsch, “St. Valentine—Patron Saint of Epilepsy: Illustrating the Semiology of Seizures Over the Course of Six Centuries,” *Epilepsy & Behavior* 14 (2009): 220-2.

<sup>171</sup> Temkin, *The Falling Sickness*, 111.

<sup>172</sup> Orrin Devinsky and George Lai, “Spirituality and Religion in Epilepsy,” *Epilepsy & Behavior* 12 (2008): 637.

disciples to heal his son, but they were unable to do so. When he requests that Jesus heal his son, he begs, “If thou canst do anything, have compassion on us, and help us,” to which Jesus says that all things are possible for those who believe.<sup>173</sup> After the miracle is performed, the disciples are bewildered by their inability to help the boy, and they ask Jesus, “Why could not we cast him out?”<sup>174</sup> Jesus poignantly responds, “This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting.”<sup>175</sup>

In a way, Mark’s Gospel teaches epileptics what from an early Christian perspective may have been the most uplifting and positive of all remedies available to them: faith in Christ to live a humble, penitent lifestyle. In a society where epileptics were feared, abused and mocked on account of a disease they could neither control nor cure, hearing and believing that the Son of God cured the lunatic boy must have inspired greater hope for epileptics than virtually any other cure could have. Prayer lies at the heart of nearly every medieval remedy for the disease, including the use of amulets, recitation of magical formulae and veneration of patron saints. In this regard, prayer served a dual purpose for early Christian epileptics: it is a Christianized form of ancient purification ritual meant to abate epilepsy (particularly in the case of exorcisms), and it also strengthens the patient’s personal faith in Christ, a feature of religious purification that did not really exist in the pagan Greco-Roman world. Oppressed under an increasingly hostile social understanding of their disease, medieval epileptics could perhaps take hope in a sort of greater, more positive understanding of themselves and their epilepsy through prayer, which personally connected them with the divine and offered some recourse from their stigmatization.

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<sup>173</sup> Mark 9:22-23 *KJV*.

<sup>174</sup> Mark 9:28 *KJV*.

<sup>175</sup> Mark 9:29 *KJV*.

## Conclusion

The misconceptions, theories and stigmas surrounding epilepsy across different eras and cultures mark it as one of the most misunderstood diseases in history. The social approach method employed throughout this thesis reveals that epilepsy had a unique and complicated status in Greek and Roman society, one routinely fueled by ignorance and fear. Although *On the Sacred Disease* attempted to rationalize epilepsy from a naturalistic point of view, popular understandings of the disease continued to focus on its supposed divine origin well into late antiquity. The social history of epilepsy is indelibly tied to the Greek and Roman religious concepts of pollution and purification, and it appears that the sacred disease was viewed as a form of supernatural selection in the Greco-Roman world, though the implications of that selection varied. Exceptional literary and political figures, such as Julius Caesar and Caligula, could have potentially exploited epilepsy as a sign of the gods' favor upon them; for ordinary Greeks and Romans, however, having epilepsy meant being spat upon, stigmatized and shunned by the general public for something they could not control. Conditions for epileptics only grew worse after the rise of Christianity, when the sacred disease became synonymous with demonic possession and evil. While Christ's healing message may have provided some medieval epileptics with hope, epilepsy would still be perceived as a mysterious, frightening disease throughout the Middle Ages and into the modern era.

Considering the wealth of misinformation that has surrounded epilepsy since antiquity, how far removed are we from drinking gladiators' blood and performing exorcisms on epileptics in the twenty-first century? In some regions of the world, not very far: a 2014 survey of 1,500

Jordanian university students from three major institutions across the country found that 31.5% of respondents believed epilepsy was caused by evil spirits, and 71.4% recommended treatment of the disease with the Holy Quran, which beat medication as the top-recommended treatment by 0.1%.<sup>176</sup> Furthermore, 25.9% of students believed epilepsy was a punishment from God, and 22.5% recommended exorcisms be performed in cases of epilepsy.<sup>177</sup> 22.8% of respondents had never even heard of epilepsy.<sup>178</sup> In the town of Otu in Oyo State, Nigeria, a 2011 study of 365 participants found that 81.4% believed epilepsy was caused by witchcraft, and 26.8% blamed demonic possession.<sup>179</sup> While only 2.9% of the Jordanian students believed epilepsy to be contagious, 28.8% of Nigerian respondents thought epilepsy could be spread by saliva, and 12.1% even believed that epilepsy could be contracted by making fun of an epileptic.<sup>180</sup> Studies indicate that a lack of awareness about epilepsy persists in the developing world, but stigmas persist in the developed world, too: in a 1997 survey of over 5,000 epileptics across Europe, half of all respondents said they felt stigmatized for having epilepsy.<sup>181</sup> More recently, a 2007 survey of high school and university students in Rome found that 16% believed epilepsy was a contagious disease.<sup>182</sup> It would seem, then, that the ancient and medieval superstitions observed throughout this thesis have not been fully relegated to the past in any part of the world.

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<sup>176</sup> Jameel Khaleel Hijazeen, Munir Ahmad Abu-Helalah, Hussam Ahmad Alshraideh, Omar Salameh Alrawashdeh, Fadi Nather Hawa, Tariq Asem Dalbah and Fadi Walid Abdallah, "Knowledge, Attitudes, and Beliefs About Epilepsy and Their Predictors Among University Students in Jordan," *Epilepsy & Behavior* 41 (2014): 240.

<sup>177</sup> Hijazeen et al., "Jordan," 241.

<sup>178</sup> Hijazeen et al., "Jordan," 239.

<sup>179</sup> Kayode O. Osungbade and Sunday L. Siyanbade, "Myths, Misconceptions, and Misunderstandings About Epilepsy in a Nigerian Rural Community: Implications for Community Health Interventions," *Epilepsy & Behavior* 21 (2011): 426.

<sup>180</sup> Hijazeen et al., "Jordan," 241; Osungbade and Siyanbade, "Nigerian Rural Community," 426.

<sup>181</sup> Gus A. Baker, Ann Jacoby, Deborah Buck, Carlos Stalgis and Dominique Monnet, "Quality of Life of People with Epilepsy: A European Study," *Epilepsia* 38.3 (1997): 353.

<sup>182</sup> Oriano Mecarelli, Pietro Li Voti, Nicola Vanacore, Silvana D'Arcangelo, Marielisa Mignola, Patrizia Pulitano and Neri Accornero, "A Questionnaire Study on Knowledge of and Attitudes Toward Epilepsy in Schoolchildren and University Students in Rome, Italy," *Seizure* 16 (2007): 317.

If the beliefs that epilepsy is contagious and caused by demons have been lessened by increased medical advancements, treatments and religious secularism in the Western world, why do epileptics continue to feel stigmatized by society? One reason may be the relative lack of funding compared to other neurological conditions: a 2011 study from the National Institutes of Health found that, when adjusted for relative prevalence to epilepsy, government research funding for Alzheimer’s Disease, Parkinson’s Disease, MS, ALS and strokes all outpaced epilepsy, even though epilepsy is the third most common of the six neurological diseases.<sup>183</sup> In a 2018 study, the Department of Health Care Policy at Harvard Medical School found similar results from private funding, with epilepsy research receiving about \$74 per patient.<sup>184</sup> It would seem, then, that while superstitions surrounding epilepsy have declined in the developed world, the disease has sunk into the background of medical research and knowledge. In this sense, epilepsy suffers from a form of societal invisibility: lack of appropriate societal awareness and proportional research perpetuates stereotypes and stigmas of the disease.

How, then, can this situation be remedied? After all, in his analysis of epidemic disease, Brandt cautions that “disease cannot be ‘demystified’” and argues that “there is no cultural ‘disinfectant’ that is likely to free Western cultures from a deep and profound fear of disabling or lethal disease.”<sup>185</sup> While Brandt is most likely correct in this observation, recent developments in how American society understands epidemic disease do provide some hope of recourse. To end where this thesis began, I consider the current state of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States: in the spring of 2021, every week, hundreds of thousands of vaccine doses are being

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<sup>183</sup> Kimford J. Meador, Jacqueline French, David W. Loring and Page B. Pennell, “Disparities in NIH Funding for Epilepsy Research,” *Neurology* 77.13 (2011): 1306-7.

<sup>184</sup> David C. Grabowski, Jesse Fishman, Imane Wild and Bruce Lavin, “Changing the Neurology Policy Landscape in the United States: Misconceptions and Facts About Epilepsy,” *Health Policy* 122 (2018): 800.

<sup>185</sup> Brandt, “AIDS and Metaphor,” 391.

administered across the country, and for the first time in over year, the hope of a return to some sense of normalcy is on the horizon. Information about COVID-19 has been aggressively thrust onto the American public over the last year and from seemingly every direction; it has dominated news stations, social media, and even university email chains to, I think, an overall success. Misinformation continues to be spread and always will be, but public awareness of the virus and trust in masks and vaccines have grown considerably since last March. In a sense, I think that a similar approach could help stop the spread of misinformation around epilepsy, too. Increased funding and publicity for epilepsy could turn the tide of public awareness and stigma in both developed and developing countries, and combined with modern medical treatments, create better health outcomes and quality of life for epileptics around the world. For all their shortcomings, it seems that ancient commentators talked about epilepsy in every medical, religious, literary and social context they could squeeze it into; perhaps we could benefit from adopting part of their approach after all.

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