On a Miracle of Saint Thomas Aquinas¹ (ca. 1325)

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Introduction

Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) was a philosopher, theologian, university professor, and Dominican who is widely considered to be one of the most important representatives of high medieval Scholastic theology. His grave at the Dominican monastery of Fossanova, south of Rome, drew the immediate attention of pilgrims. Indeed, the friars, fearing they would be asked to relinquish the relics of so potentially important a saint, hid his body the day after his death by moving it from a grave near the high altar of their church and reburying it in an adjoining chapel. (They returned it to the original, more honorable location several months later.) Thomas' formal canonization was approved in 1323, amid many reports of miracles. The miracle below appears in the Life of St. Thomas written by another important figure of the high medieval Dominican order, the French inquisitor and bishop, Bernard Gui (1261–1331). Gui wrote his Life just after the successful canonization of his subject. It seems likely that the events he related here took place within few months after Thomas’ death, as the narrative mentions that the grave was in a different location than the main altar of the church.

This miracle is interesting, from a disability perspective, for its careful navigation of medical and theological concerns, especially as they are presented by a well-educated, scholarly man whose career was greatly concerned with the pursuit of truth in a legal setting. Gui is unusual among the author of these sorts of narratives for his use of learned medical terminology in attempting to describe the girl whose illness was healed. However, his medical observations, while learned, were also uncertain. He refers to three illnesses which appear in the medical compendia of the day: lethargy (a state of semiconsciousness), phrenesy (delirium from fever or inflammation of membranes around the brain), and mania and melancholia (loss of reason from excess humors). Gui suggests that it appeared as though the first of these had developed out of one of the other two conditions. His reference to mania is particularly unusual; while the diagnoses of lethargy and phrenesy, which have concrete external bodily symptoms, appear occasionally in miracle narratives, conditions which might be diagnosed as mania and melancholia are usually instead referred to by a number of more legal or pedestrian terms (such as amens or demens, “out of one’s mind”). Gui also chooses not to declare any of these diagnoses as a singular, pervasive, or internal truth; instead, he uses medical terminology to convey something of the girl’s external “seeming,” and more confidently and colloquially names her condition upon her arrival at the monastery as “half-alive.”

Gui’s diagnostic caution remains continuous as he recounts the actions and conversations that took place at the grave site, and events turn more clearly theological. While the girl’s illness was initially presented as seeming akin to a number of medical diagnoses, she herself eventually explains that it was demonic in origin, claiming that she was “held bound up” by a “black man.” (Demons are frequently represented in hagiographic literature as being black, sometimes with...
explicit, racialized references to sub-Saharan African peoples.) The remainder of the miracle figures the unnamed Aquinas of this vision in a role as healer, who first is mentioned defending the girl from the black man, and then passing his hands over the body of the sufferer before declaring her cured. But even here, the nature of the girl's health crisis is not entirely clear. While the author acknowledges that the girl claimed to have had a vision, he presents those claims not as facts, but as claims made by one person (“she said,” and “a vision was given to the girl”), a dispassionate approach which brings to mind the contemporary debates over discernment of spirit and the possibility of false visions. Further, Gui had already established that she seemed to be ill from phrenesy or mania, etiologies which would suggest that her perceptions might not have been reliable. As such, Gui reports the claim of a vision and also about the outward appearance of both severe sickness and sudden cure, but he never stakes a firm claim about the etiology of the sickness. This caution suggests a strong desire for accurate diagnostic categorization of the girl’s experience, especially coming from an author who was familiar with both learned theology and learned medical diagnoses, and was also writing in a celebratory mode about an illustrious member of his own religious order whose canonization had recently been successful.

Bibliography


In the castle of St. Laurence of the Valley next to the Monastery of Fossanova there lived a certain girl who was struck by some loss of mind; because of this illness, in the time that followed, she was made immobile like a stone, and she was neither able to eat, nor to speak, nor to breathe normally. It seemed as if the infirmity of lethargy had overcome her out of phrenesy or manic passions. As this illness could not be alleviated by medical remedies, her father, hearing the fame of the miracles of Saint Thomas, made a vow and promised her to Saint Thomas, praying that through his merits that she would either be removed from life, or healed by the mercy of God. Therefore he carried the girl half-alive to the monastery, and in the church, by permission, she was carried to the grave of St. Thomas; and he placed her on top of the grave until the monks had returned from the monastery’s altar in the church, to which they had gone so that they might offer thanks. When the father therefore wished to lift his daughter from the tomb out of proper reverence, she said this: “Father, do not touch me, because one great Friar Preacher stands before me, who heals me, and defends me from a certain black man who holds me tied up in this way.” The abbot and monks gathered there, and they prayed that by the merits of Saint Thomas (having heard the prayers of the father), the girl might be freed. Then a vision was also given to the girl in which the aforesaid Friar drew both of his hands from the girl’s head down to her feet, saying to her: “Girl, get up, because you are cured.” At these words the girl got up at once, having been made perfectly healthy.
Endnotes

1 Acta Sanctorum, March I, p. 722.
2 amentia, a general term meaning “away from” (ab) one’s “mind,” “understanding,” or “reason” (mens).
3 letargia, a learned medical diagnostic category for semi-consciousness or torpor.
4 phrenesi, a learned medical diagnostic category for fever delirium, or inflammation of the membrane around the brain caused by excessive hot humor which caused delirium.
5 maniaca passio, literally “the disease of mania,” referring to melancholia et mania, a learned medical diagnostic term for a loss of reason caused by humoral imbalance.
6 The word used here may also be translated as “evil,” but demons are frequently figured as being black in color.