Guardians of the Sacred: The Nuns of Soissons and the Slipper of the Virgin Mary[1]

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What could it mean to a medieval monastic community to own a valuable object? Certainly, property in general was crucial to the survival of a stable community, ideals of poverty and the thirteenth-century Franciscan experiment in radical poverty notwithstanding. More specifically, what did it mean to own not simply a field or mill that generated revenue, but an object that was believed to have power beyond its material qualities? Such objects—saints' relics and wonder-working images—did of course also generate revenue, but their meaning and role for the monastic community and the wider society could be much richer than that. And what if the monastic community was a convent of nuns, of professed religious women whose lives were shaped not just by the rule they shared with their male counterparts, but also by the codes, both implicit and increasingly explicit, that constrained the range of women's religious activities?

Although the first two of these questions—about monastic property and the religious value of sacred objects—have been extensively discussed in scholarship on the Middle Ages, a specific focus on gender in relation to monastic ownership of sacred objects has not been widely examined.[2] My focus on gender here is generated by two salient aspects of religious life in the twelfth century, the period of this

1. I would like to thank members of the Vermont Medieval Colloquium, especially George Dameron, Laurel Broughton, and Sean Field, for their response to an earlier version of this article and for their ongoing friendship and collegiality. I am also very grateful to Bob Pepperman Taylor for his comments and encouragement, to the anonymous reviewers for their very incisive readings, and to Kevin Trainor, for everything.

2. Some examples of scholarship on medieval nuns and their sacred objects are Jeffrey F. Hamburger, "The *Liber miraculorum* of Unterlinden: An Icon in Its Convent Setting," in Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany* (New York: Zone, 1998); and Anne L. Clark, "Under Whose Care? The Madonna of San Sisto and the Politics of Women's Monastic Life in 12–13th Century Rome," in *Medieval Constructions in Gender and Identity: Essays in Honor of Joan M. Ferrante*, ed. Teodolinda Barolini (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005).

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study. First, there was an increasing articulation of the priesthood as the sole means of mediating divine presence, and of that priesthood as exclusively male. The priesthood had, de facto, been an exclusively male order for centuries, but the eleventh- and twelfth-century struggles over creating a "purified" clergy, purified, that is, of lay and female elements, concretized the marginalization of women from activity as ritual agents.[3] For example, although women's monasteries continued to be founded and supported by laypeople seeking the benefits of nuns' prayers, the prayer life of nuns suffered some diminished significance with the growing perception of the Mass as the most effective means of liberating souls from purgatory. This tension about the efficacy of women's prayer can be seen in the diaries of Elisabeth of Schönau, a Benedictine nun living in the mid-twelfth century, who ruefully juxtaposed the prayers of her fellow nuns with the Mass celebrated by the abbot.[4] Second, there was increasing pressure on women's communities to accept strict claustration that would reduce or even eliminate religious women's contact with wider lay society. Although the ideal of an absolute break with the world undermined the practical aspects of maintaining a viable community, nuns were expected to remain within their convent walls and not admit outsiders to their cloisters.[5] Both the marginalization of women from ritual roles and the pressure to adopt strict claustration had a significant impact on shaping women's religious life in this period, threatening to circumscribe the range of women's religious activities

3. Gary Macy, "The Ordination of Women in the Early Middle Ages," *Theological Studies* 61:3 (September 2000): 481–507; Anne L. Clark, "The Priesthood of the Virgin Mary: Gender Trouble in the Twelfth Century," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 18:1 (Spring 2002): 5–24. Dyan Elliott persuasively discusses the figure of the priest's wife, with her quasi-sacerdotal character, as the "historical detritus" of the efforts to create a celibate, clerical elite: Elliott, *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 81–126.
4. Anne L. Clark, *Elisabeth of Schönau, a Twelfth-Century Visionary* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 111–17. For a succinct discussion of the debates about the impact of the eleventh- and twelfth-century reforms on women's monasticism, see Bruce L. Venarde, *Women's Monasticism and Medieval Society: Nunneries in France and England, 890–1215* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), 52–57. For continued support for nuns' prayers, see, for example, Penelope D. Johnson, *Equal in Monastic Profession: Religious Women in Medieval France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 232–34; Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, "Dead to the World? Death and the Maiden Revisited in Medieval Women's Convent Culture," in *Guidance for Women in Twelfth-Century Convents*, trans. Vera Morton (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), 173–75.
5. On claustration or enclosure of nuns, see Johnson, *Equal in Monastic Profession*, 150–63; Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), 136–52; Janice M. Pinder, "The Cloister and the Garden: Gendered Images of Religious Life from the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries," in *Listen Daughter: The "Speculum Virginum" and the Formation of Religious Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Constant J. Mews (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 166–69.

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to a much more limited repertoire than that available to men in this period.

Another subject is also approached, albeit obliquely, in this analysis: the religious value of sacred objects and the role of material objects in the devotional lives of medieval Christians. The stories below about pilgrimage, miraculous cures, ritual practices, and zealous care for these objects allow some insight into these more elusive questions about the role of objects in devotional life. The analysis of both of these subjects—the tensions surrounding women's religious life and the role of objects in devotional practice—is constrained by the evidence available. Although the events of this slice of the past are narrated in no less than four medieval sources, all of these sources were composed by men, male clerics with their own assumptions about women and the proper realms of their religious activity. This aspect of the evidence, as will be seen, is itself a crucial element in constructing the picture of nuns and their ritual agency.

I. Orchestrating the Cure: The Nuns of Notre-Dame

Notre-Dame de Soissons, a Benedictine monastery for women in northern France, was said to have been founded about 660 by Drausin, the bishop of Soissons, with the support of Ebroin, mayor of the palace, and his wife, Leutrude.[6] Later, Gisèle, sister of Charlemagne, served as abbess, and the abbey continued to be home to many royal and noble women. Clergy from the adjacent monastery of Saint-Pierre-au-Parvis served as liturgical ministers for the nuns.[7] Royal patronage of the convent continued into the twelfth century, with charters showing material support but also the attempts of kings to control the monastery by, for instance, limiting the number of nuns at the convent.[8] The twelfth century also saw the construction of a new church for the abbey, probably built between 1130 and 1160. Two

6. The two documents accounting for the origins of the convent—the *Vita S. Drausi* and a privilege of Drausin to the convent—are both suspect. See G. Bourgin, *La commune de Soissons et le groupe communal soissonais* (Paris: Librairie Honoré Champion, 1908), 44, although the foundation by Ebroin and Leutrade remains unquestioned in some studies, for example, Michèle Gaillard, "Les Origines du monachisme féminin dans le nord et l'est de la Gaule (fin VIe siècle—début VIIIe siècle)," in *Les religieuses dans le cloître et dans le monde des origines à nos jours: Actes du Deuxième Colloque International du C.E.R.C.O.R.* (Saint-Etienne: Centre Européen de Recherches sur les Congrégations et Ordres Religiuex, 1994), 54; Alain Dubreucq, "Le monachisme féminin dans le nord de la Gaule à l'epoque carolingienne," in *Les religieuses dans le cloître*, 67.

7. At least one scholar considers Notre-Dame a double monastery due to this arrangement. See Dubreucq, "Le monachisme féminin," 62.

8. For the broader context of royal intervention in women's communities in twelfth-century France, see Venarde, *Women's Monasticism*, 156–57.

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arched window frames from this church are all of the convent complex that survived destruction in the Revolution.

The old abbey church dedicated to the Virgin Mary—of which no architectural evidence or textual description remains—seems to have become very prominent in the regional religious scene in September of 1128, when there was an outbreak of ergotism or "holy fire" in Soissons.[9] This wasting disease, caused by fungal growth in rye and recurring sporadically throughout the Middle Ages, has captured the attention of modern epidemiologists as well as historians. The outbreaks in the twelfth century were closely tied up with the emergence of several other Marian shrines in northern France, a complex phenomenon most recently examined by Gabriela Signori.[10] But unlike the other Marian shrines that were said to offer miraculous relief from this horrendous plague, Notre-Dame de Soissons was a women's monastic church, not a cathedral. The dynamics at play in the other cases more clearly support Signori's claims that bishops and their clergy promoted the Marian cults as part of the program of consolidating their pastoral and political activities. But what happens when the shrine is the church of a community of monastic women and not a cathedral?

The major source of evidence about the activities at the convent church at Notre-Dame is a collection of miracle stories composed by Hugh Farsit, a regular canon of Saint-Jean des Vignes in Soissons, sometime after 1143. Hugh's connection to Notre-Dame is unclear, as

9. There is conflicting evidence about the date of the outbreak of ergotism. Some manuscripts of Hugh Farsit's description of the plague date it to 1127 (for example, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale Ms lat. 2873; Paris, BN Ms lat. 16565) and some to 1128 (for example, Paris, BN Ms lat. 14463; Paris, BN Ms lat. 12593). Two texts associated with Saint-Médard, *Annales S. Medardi Suessionensibus* (*Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores*, 26:518) and *Miracula SS. Gregorii et Sebastiani Suessione in monasterio S. Medardi* (*Acta Sanctorum*, Mar. II, 750–751), date it to 1126. Anselm of Gembloux dates it to 1129 (*Continuatio Sigeberti Chronicae*, in *MGH, SS*, vol. 6, 381).

10. Gabriela Signori, *Maria zwischen Kathedrale, Kloster und Welt: Hagiographische und historiographische Annäherungen an eine hochmittelalterliche Wunderpredigt* (Sigmaringen: Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 1995); Signori, "The Miracle Kitchen and its Ingredients: A Methodical and Critical Approach to Marian Shrine Wonders (10th–13th century)," *Hagiographica* 3 (1996): 277–303; Signori, "Marienbilder im Vergleich: Marienische Wunderbücher zwischen Weltklerus, städtischer Ständevielfalt und ländlichen Subsistenzproblemen (10.–13. Jahrhundert)," in *Maria—Abbild oder Vorbild: Zur Sozialgeschichte mittelalterlicher Marienverehrung*, ed. Hedwig Röckelein, Claudia Opitz, and Dieter R. Bauer (Tübingen: Fuldaer Verlagsanstalt, 1990), 58–90. On Marian pilgrimage more generally, see Signori, "La bienheureuse polysémie Miracles et pèlerinages à la Vierge: Pourvoir thaumaturgique et modèles pastoraux (Xe–Xiie siècles)," in *Marie: Le culte de la Vierge dans la société médiévale*, ed. Dominique Iogna-Prat, Éric Palazzo, and Daniel Russo (Paris: Beauchesne, 1996), 591–617.

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is his motivation for writing the text.[11] With no extant prologue, there is no reference to who commissioned the text or why Hugh was chosen to transform the collected stories associated with the shrine into this text. Although he asserts that he personally saw at least one woman who had been miraculously cured of the fire,[12] perhaps as much as two decades passed between some of the events he described and composition of the text, and the text itself includes many stories not directly related to the outbreak of ergotism as the convent church continued to serve as pilgrimage site. The lapse of time between the epidemic and the composition of the text is not atypical of texts of this kind.[13] In this case, the immediate stimulus for the nuns to seek the creation of a formal text of the miracles was probably the death of Mathilde de la Ferté-sous-Jouarre, who was Abbess of Nötre-Dame during the epidemic.[14] Abbess Mathilde is repeatedly portrayed as receiving testimony of the miracles,[15] and probably compiled reports of the cures. With her death, the community would likely have desired to create a more stable repository of their history.

The text begins with a graphic description of the bodily ravages of the disease and moves to a portrayal of the popular response: the afflicted took refuge in the Virgin Mary, gathering in her church in the city of Soissons (that is, the abbey church of the convent). For six days they languished there, filling the space with tormented cries. This seemed to spark fresh dread among the general populace, so that "there gathered in that church *all the people*, with congregations coming from the other churches as well as from the greater church [for example, the cathedral of Saints Gervase and Protase], in bare feet, armed with humility as in the example of Nineveh."[16] The prevailing metaphor is one of war, even apocalyptic war, and Hugh describes the

11. Signori acknowledges that we don't know his motivation for composing the text *(Maria zwischen*, 129, n. 22), although she tends to treat this text like the other miracle collections designed to support cathedral priorities (for example, *Maria zwischen*, 29, and "The Miracle Kitchen," 285). On Hugh, see A. Vernet, "'Loisirs' d'un chanoine de Soissons," *Bulletin de la Société des Antiquaires de France* (1959): 108–09.
12. "Vidimus eam et nos. . . ." Hugh Farsit, *Libellus de miraculis b. Mariae Virginis in urbe Suessionensi*, in *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 179, col. 1782. Ironically, this account with Hugh's claim to personal testimony is a story that had circulated widely in oral form and even in written form, in at least one place with its attribution to a different Marian shrine. Hugh coyly acknowledges the possibility that "similar" miracles may have occurred before (ibid., col. 1781). For a discussion of the various versions of this story, see Signori, *Maria zwischen*, 138–49.
13. Marcus Bull, *The Miracles of Our Lady of Rocamadour: Analysis and Translation* (Woodbridge, U.K.: Boydell, 1999), 43–55.
14. Mathilde was daughter of one of the principal lords of the province and served as abbess from 1116–43.
15. Hugh Farsit, *Libellus de miraculis*, col. 1789, 1792, 1793.
16. Ibid., col. 1778.

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people arming themselves with penitence to do battle against the enemy. Then follows a somewhat ambiguous sentence: "Therefore an area of battle was set up in the church of the blessed Virgin and mother of God, so that they might engage her to help them in so great necessity."[17] Here is one indication, albeit cryptic, of the spatial arrangement in the nuns' church to accommodate its newly expanded role as disease sanctuary. An unnamed priest gives a signal to coordinate the prayers; a penitential fury is unleashed; the Virgin appears accompanied by an angelic escort; a terrifying noise comes from heaven, creating even greater fear in the people; but the enemy is shaken: "every fire of the languishing was extinguished and every pain was numbed with the swiftest sweetness applied," and the clamor turns to one of joy.[18]

It is easy, given the drama of this introduction, to interpret Hugh's collection in the terms he used to frame it: horrific plague, penitential outpouring, celestial mercy, and healing. Yet, despite his compelling introduction, there is much more going on here. For example, the first specific miracle that he describes is explicitly different from the drama he just described. Here is his narrative:

> A certain girl was blessed and healed by the slipper [*per soccum*] of that same mother of the Lord, which is preserved in this same church. For Abbess Mathilde, who then was governing this place, wearied by the importuning and noise of her assiduous clamor, took up the slipper of the blessed Virgin and processed together with her retinue [*comitatu*]. As soon as she was blessed, the aforementioned girl recovered without delay, with her pain gone and sweetness received. Henceforward the most blessed Virgin, mother of piety, with profuse kindness assuaged and healed however many came each day and they returned to their own with their pain gone. And never was there difficulty in maintaining this sweetness. Night and day, again and again, the drums resounded and praises to God omnipotent resounded repeatedly with modulated sweetness by those staying in the church; those who withdrew to their houses or tables were not able to contain their tears or proclamations of praise. What more? Within fifteen days, one hundred and three, noted[19] by name, were quenched of this fire, and three girls who had come with disfigured members were restored to the grace of health.[20]

This is the first mention in Hugh's text of the slipper of the Virgin. The slipper is a relic that has no history, that is, there is no "backstory," no

17. Ibid., col. 1779.
18. Ibid.
19. Reading *annotati* from Paris, BN lat. 16565.
20. Hugh Farsit, *Libellus de miraculis*, col. 1779–80.

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traditional account of its origins, or of its acquisition by the nuns of the convent.[21] Unlike the relics of Christ's blood at the abbey of Fécamp, relics similar to the Virgin's slipper in claims of antiquity and linkage to the most venerated and least bodily available (because bodily resurrected) figures in Christian history, which generated extensive composition in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries of legends about origins, the slipper at Notre-Dame appears suddenly in Hugh's text, with no prior written testimony to its existence.[22] Perhaps Hugh was sensitive to Guibert of Nogent's recent (circa 1125) stinging critique of the extravagant claims of a nearby monastery to own precious relics of the Lord.[23]

Despite this lack of concern for explaining its origins or acquisition, one thing is clear: it is the nuns of Notre-Dame who are the guardians of the slipper. It seems to have been Abbess Mathilde's initiative to use the relic in this way, orchestrating a procession through the church to the clamoring girl and blessing her with the relic. We do not know the form that this ritual took: Did Mathilde touch the slipper to the girl? Did she use the slipper to make a sign of the cross over the girl? Was the slipper enclosed in a reliquary or perhaps wrapped in a cloth? And Hugh asserts that this was the beginning of a tremendous spate, lasting fifteen days, of one hundred and three cures of ergotism and the restoration to health of three disfigured girls.

This story bears comparison with the drama described in his introduction. In both cases, there is a striking emphasis on noise—something that is consistent throughout this text. In the introduction, an unnamed priest tries to coordinate the chaos by signaling the time to begin praying. This leads to momentarily greater chaos and then universal healing. In contrast, a named and very recognizable figure,

21. According to Michel Germain, who wrote the standard history of the convent, the circumstances of the relic acquisition are unknown. He refers to some opinions about it: Some people say the abbey possessed it from the time of its foundation; others say it was a present from Charlemagne to his sister, the Abbess Gisèle. Presumably these are opinions of Germain's contemporaries. He states that the earliest evidence for the slipper relic is the ergotism narratives of Hugh Farsit and Anselm of Gembloux. See Michel Germain, *Histoire de l'Abbaye Royale de Notre-Dame de Soissons* (Paris: Coignard, 1675), 358. The Charlemagne explanation seems unlikely given medieval silence about it, yet he was a collector of relics, especially from "the east," including Marian relics. He was said to have a Marian veil in his chapel at Aachen. See Annemarie Weyl Carr, "Threads of Authority: The Virgin Mary's Veil in the Middle Ages," in *Robes and Honor: The Medieval World of Investiture*, ed. Stewart Gordon (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 71.

22. See Jean-Guy Gouttebroze, *Le Précieux Sang de Fécamp: Origine et développement d'un mythe chrétien*. Essais sur le Moyen Age 23 (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2000).

23. Guibert of Nogent, *On Saints and Their Relics*, trans. Thomas Head, in *Medieval Hagiography: An Anthology*, ed. Thomas Head (New York: Garland, 2000), 399–427. This treatise did not circulate widely, but given Hugh's temporal and geographical proximity to the circle of Guibert, it is likely that he at least knew of it.

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Abbess Mathilde invents a ritual responding to a particular individual whose anguish and cure are not clearly related to the general cure that is implied in the introduction. And it is a ritual, even if we are not told exactly what happened. It is described as an effective ritual, one that introduces a fifteen-day series of over one hundred cures. Hugh does not say so, but the implication is that those cures were obtained by a similar process—a slipper ritual. This impression is supported by his next description of a miraculous cure, where he states: "It was the custom that the sick, having regained their health, would come to this same place every morning for nine days, and on these days the slipper would be blessed and kissed by each of them as it was carried around."[24] So the slipper is routinely borne about the church not only as part of a healing ritual, but also as part of the thanksgiving ritual that displays to the healthy and sick alike the power of relic. This ritual with its repeated thanksgiving kisses was a potentially problematic practice. Laypeople did not always have tactile access to holy relics, and "canon law actually prohibited the laity from handling the *res sacra*."[25] And again it is the nuns of Notre-Dame who seemed to have created this ritual and who acted as officiants, as revealed in Hugh's description of an abuse of this ritual:

> One [fem.] of those who had regained their health, when she was planting a kiss, burned with excessive zeal and seized it with her teeth. Moved with indignation, the bearer and guardian [*gestatrix et custos*] of that slipper began to inveigh with vexation against that one who was guilty of such a crime, and bitterly blame her for having dared to do this.[26]

Hugh does not elaborate on the intent of this woman. Did she hope to ingest a bit of the slipper or to break off with her teeth a piece to keep for her own? Ingesting the relic would have accorded well with another practice associated with the shrine that Hugh and the nuns approved of: pilgrims from afar often took with them some piece of wood, earth, or bread that had touched the slipper, and these items were said to be effective in obtaining cures for people who could not manage the trip to Soissons.[27] This practice, well-attested for other

24. Hugh Farsit, *Libellus de miraculis*, col. 1780.
25. Thomas Head, *Hagiography and the Cult of the Saints: The Diocese of Orléans, 800–1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 165–66. Despite canonical prohibitions, laypeople still managed to touch and even kiss relics; see Nicole Herrmann-Mascard, *Les Reliques des saints: Formation coutumière d'un droit* (Paris: Éditions Klincksieck, 1975), 203–16.
26. Hugh Farsit, *Libellus de miraculis*, col. 1780.
27. Hugh Farsit, *Libellus de miraculis*, col. 1794. On traditional practices of creating new relics by contact with saints' tombs, see Herrmann-Mascard, *Les Reliques des saints*, 45–47.

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relic shrines as well, allows the sick person to consume a substance that, by contact with the powerful relic, was believed to share its wonderworking property. As Carole Rawcliffe has noted, even when the substance may seem unappealing or inedible to us, we must recall that "the medieval pharmacopoeia utilised a wide variety of animal and mineral components, such as hair, human milk, powdered stones, urine and faeces." Furthermore, with the widespread belief in sympathetic medicine—that one might absorb the relevant virtues or attributes of the consumed substance—"to ingest the sacred must have seemed all the more beneficial."[28] The Eucharistic overtones to such an action are also obvious.

But perhaps the woman bit the relic in hopes of keeping a piece of it for herself. Here too, such a practice was not just the demented plan of a recently cured woman. In the early thirteenth century, another attempt at gnawing off a relic morsel was described. Adam of Eynsham, close companion and biographer of Hugh, bishop of Lincoln, described Hugh's enthusiasm for relics of the saints. In addition to the more conventional means of acquiring relics, such as writing a letter to the abbot of Fleury requesting a piece of the body of St. Benedict, which they possessed, Hugh also resorted to some less (or more!) savory techniques. While visiting the monastery of Fécamp, he begged to see the relic of Mary Magdalene. The relic was sewn tightly into three layers of cloth, and the abbot and monks refused to let the wrappings be opened. The resourceful Hugh then took a small knife, cut the thread, and undid the wrappings. "After reverently examining and kissing the much venerated bone, he tried unsuccessfully to break it with his fingers, and then bit it with his incisors and finally with his molars." The outraged abbot and monks of Fécamp decried his profanation: "We thought that the bishop had asked to see this holy and venerable relic for reasons of devotion, and he has stuck his teeth into it and gnawed it as if he were a dog." His biographer settles the conflict by reporting that Hugh mollified their anger with soothing words. If he could handle and even eat the body of the Lord, why should he not venture to handle this relic as he did, "for my protection, and by this commemoration of them increase my reverence for them, and without profanity acquire them when I have the opportunity?"[29]

28. Carole Rawcliffe, "Curing Bodies and Healing Souls: Pilgrimage and the Sick in Medieval East Anglia," in *Pilgrimage: The English Experience from Becket to Bunyan*, ed. Colin Morris and Peter Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 122.

29. *The Life of St. Hugh of Lincoln*, ed. and trans. Decima L. Douie and Hugh Farmer (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1962), 2:169–70.

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As with the unnamed woman at Notre-Dame de Soissons, kissing was just not enough: biting could provide the devotee with a piece of the relic to call one's own. But unlike the woman at Soissons, who was rendered silent by the indignant accusation of the relic's guardian, or whose reaction at least garners no mention in the text, Hugh of Lincoln justified his behavior theologically and in terms of the larger benefit to himself of acquiring a relic. Can we impute the motivations of one of the most learned monks of his day to the unnamed and probably unlearned laywoman of Soissons?[30] Though Hugh's biographer says that he used sweet words in addressing the indignant monks of Fécamp, the justification is simple: It would be good for me to have it; I had the opportunity to get it. Even a learned bishop seems to acknowledge that personal possession of a sacred object offers greater protection to oneself along with increasing one's devotion. The niceties of legal ownership seem to pale next to these desiderata; in fact, ownership is not even mentioned. Stripped of its sweet expression, Hugh's motives seem no more elevated than what we might attribute to the woman at Notre-Dame, who knew already the power of the relic she kissed.

These stories of kiss and bite are told from two different perspectives: one focused on the saintly "offender" who was also said to have helped himself to relics at other churches, and the other on the community defending the relic. Not surprisingly, the repercussions of these two attempts to appropriate a piece of a relic look quite different. Whereas the aggrieved monks of Fécamp seemed to have lost part of their relic, the nuns at Soissons were able to protect their relic from violation. Undoubtedly it was more difficult for the monks to compel Bishop Hugh of Lincoln to respect their claims than for the nuns to exert their authority over the woman.

But the abbess of Notre-Dame, guardian of the slipper, went further than simply berating the woman and saving the relic. According to Hugh Farsit, the abbess declared that because the woman had dared to do this, "no more [*ulterius*] would she bring it [the slipper] out to them due to excesses of this kind."[31] Hugh Farsit seems to say that this incident led the nuns of Notre-Dame to withdraw their precious relic from public circulation. Again, his cryptic expressions leave room for ambiguity. *Ulterius* may have a spatial rather than temporal sense, meaning that she would not bring it to the other side. Perhaps the relic would now have to be venerated at a distance; it would not

30. For Hugh's learning, see Hugh Farmer, "Introduction," in *The Life of St. Hugh of Lincoln*, xi.
31. Hugh Farsit, *Libellus de miraculis*, col. 1780.

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circulate among the people. Also, there is the very curious audience for this withdrawal: she would no more bring it out to them, to the women, *ad eas*. Is the problem of laudable but insane love (*laudabilis tam furiosae dilectionis*) for the slipper a peculiar problem of the women who were cured? Hugh's text is striking for the significant number of women cured at the shrine—41 percent.[32] The nuns at Notre-Dame may have, deliberately or not, created a more welcoming environment for women, who were often denied entrance to saints' shrines at male monasteries.[33] Yet, Hugh himself seems unsure of the ultimate outcome of this incident. He immediately says that he is completely convinced of the healings, shifting attention from the ritual life of the nuns and their public to the unquestionable fame of the grace that excited everyone from the ocean to the banks of the Rhine. He emphasizes this wide-flung reputation by citing locations beyond the region of Soissons and his reference to pilgrims bringing home pieces of wood, earth, or bread that had touched the slipper. So even though the slipper relic itself was not to be divided for distribution, countless relics of contact could be created for distribution to the faithful far and wide. But given his assertion of the many cures obtained from the slipper and the nuns' role in managing the relic rituals, it is striking that there are so few descriptions of it.

After the incident of the mad attempt to bite the relic, different rituals are described. Now women and men are described as embracing the altar and praying for the Virgin's intercession. Altars were often the sites of enshrined relics, and it seems that the slipper relic lost its processional mobility and was stationed at the altar. In being relocated at the altar, the slipper of the Virgin was subsumed into the ritual hierarchy associated with the altar. Traditionally, relics were to be only but briefly exposed on altars because the altar was reserved for the sacrifice of the Mass. In the eleventh century, some churches began more permanent placement of relics on the altar, although this was by no means universal. [34] The eleventh-century bishop Burchard of Worms included in his collection of canon law a canon that allowed relics on the altar, and in so doing he crystallized the relationship between altar, relics, and priesthood: "The table of Christ, that is, the altar where the body of the Lord is consecrated, where his blood is drunk, where relics of the saints are hidden, where prayers and vows

32. Signori, "The Miracle Kitchen," 299. For general patterns of gender ratios in shrines of northern and southern France, see 286–87.

33. Julia Smith, "Women at the Tomb: Access to Relic Shrines in the Early Middle Ages," in *The World of Gregory of Tours*, ed. Kathleen Mitchell and Ian Wood. Cultures, Beliefs and Traditions: Medieval and Early Modern Peoples 8 (Leiden: Brill, 2002) 163–80.

34. Herrmann-Mascard, *Les Reliques des saints*, 168–75.

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of the people are offered by the priest in the sight of God, should be honored with all veneration and most carefully covered with the cleanest altar cloths and corporals, and nothing should be placed upon it except the reliquary with saints' relics and the four Gospels."[35] Even if the shrine at Notre-Dame was an example of the new practice of lengthier exposition of relics on the altar, it must be remembered that this period also saw an increasing association between altar, the Eucharist, and its priestly ministers.[36] In Hugh's text, Abbess Mathilde's presence is still explicitly noted, but usually in stories where a priest persuades a woman to confess her sins and then she is cured. So the embracing of the altar, confession, and sacerdotal absolution seem to take the place of the nuns' procession and the slipper ritual. After the story about the woman trying to bite the slipper, there is only one more incident that explicitly involves the slipper, and this time, it is a story about a man.

A man named Boso, who was a servant of a knight of Soissons, had some free time during the holidays and went with his friends to the shrine. But while others made offerings honoring the slipper of the Virgin, he offered nothing and even derided the relic. Hugh gives him these words: "You are truly stupid if you think that is the slipper of holy Mary, for certainly it would have long since rotted away!" Of course as soon as he blasphemed the relic with this bit of common-sense realism, his mouth was violently twisted and his eyes seemed to pop out of his head at the pain. Hideously disfigured, he returned to the church, threw himself before the altar, and lay there in torture. "Moved by pity, Abbess Mathilde and others who were there steered him to the altar. When he had embraced it, he was blessed with the slipper and the relics, and began to get better."[37]

This episode fits one of the general patterns of what Pierre André Sigal has noted as chastisement miracles: stories about disrespect toward or lack of confidence in a saint. Such a story of a saint's vengeance reinforces the picture of the saint's power as it is localized in the specific relics venerated at a specific ecclesiastical site.[38] Hugh's use of this motif concretizes the concern implicit throughout the text, that is, to portray the undeniable power of the Virgin Mary localized

35. Burchard of Worms, *Decretorum libri viginti*, in *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 140, col. 693.

36. Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 49–58.

37. Hugh Farsit, *Libellus de miraculis*, col. 1786.

38. Pierre André Sigal, "Un aspect du culte des saints: Le chatiment divin aux XIe et XIIe siècles d'après la littérature hagiographique du Midi de la France," in *La religion populaire en Languedoc du XIIIe siècle à la moitié du XIVe siècle*. Cahiers de Fanjeaux 11 (Toulouse: Édouard Privat, 1976), 39–59.

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at Notre-Dame de Soissons. As Sigal notes, shrines of the Virgin Mary faced a particular challenge given the increasingly non-localized devotion to Mary and the absence—in general—of corporeal relics.[39] Yet, even as the chastisement story evokes a strong claim for the localized presence of the Virgin's power by again referring to the slipper, a hint of ambiguity envelops the story. A modified slipper ritual is referred to: the slipper is used to bless the afflicted, ostensibly with the convent's other relics. There is no procession; it takes place at the altar. Thus the slipper is not exposed to the dangers of "furious love" in the midst of a chaotic crowd. But Hugh gives no ritual details; whether Abbess Mathilde or perhaps someone else wielded the slipper to bless Boso is not indicated.

Inevitably, there are myriad problems in trying to read such hagiographical texts as witnesses to historical events, and I have not in the foregoing comments taken this text as a transparent window onto the past.[40] Rather, I want to emphasize Hugh Farsit as creator of this picture of devotion to the Virgin Mary and her miraculous intervention in the lives of people who came to Notre-Dame de Soissons. He certainly had his own agenda in creating this text, an agenda that is at least partially related to the campaign to build a new church for the convent. In one of the most dramatic incidents that he narrates, he tells of an eleven-year-old shepherd boy who was brought to the church by his mother in hopes that he would be cured of the holy fire. In the church of Notre-Dame, after the entrance of a crowd from the cathedral, the boy narrates a vision he had in which the blessed Virgin prayed for the deliverance of her people. After receiving the Lord's word that they would be spared, the Virgin asked her son "about her house which was more vile and abject than others." Her son reassured her that "from across the sea and across the Rhine he would make wealth be brought from which her house should be built and it would brighten all eyes looking at it. . . . He also announced that the evil came from God to the people of Soissons *because* they were not rebuilding the house of his mother."[41] Whatever his motivation in writing this text, Hugh is clearly committed to the rebuilding of the nuns' church and is willing to cast the entire plague in terms of it. In this episode, the apocalyptic tenor of the introduction is transformed into a concrete picture of a somewhat mundane transgression on the

39. Sigal, "Un Aspect du culte des saints," 58, n. 42.
40. For an interesting attempt to analyze the actual medical aspects of miracle collections from relic shrines, see Rawcliffe, "Curing Bodies and Healing Souls."
41. Hugh Farsit, *Libellus de miraculis*, col. 1784.

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part of the people of Soissons: their failure to contribute funds to build a decent church for the blessed Virgin.

But in his clear commitment to the church of Notre-Dame, Hugh's understanding of the nuns, whose church it is, is much less clear. He was aware of the ritual role of the nuns, yet having noted it, it is then submerged in his narrative. Sacerdotal absolution fits more neatly into a narrative of sin, penitence, and divine forbearance; it also fits more neatly into a picture of ordained, male clergy as exclusive ritual specialists within the church. The nuns make barely an appearance in later stories, and when they do, their action is to meld into the cacophony of voices and bells resounding the *Te Deum laudamus* at the occurrence of miracles, only to be disparaged later for their "girlish harmonies" [*puellares concentus*] and "treble and hypertreble modes" [*acutos et super acutos virginum modos*].[42] The abbess is referred to as someone who receives the testimony of the miracles,[43] but her role as ritual celebrant is overshadowed. I think we can see the tensions in Hugh's texts as he tries to create a clean story despite its potentially jarring elements. Hugh offers evidence of a particular situation in which professed women saw the possibility of extending their own ritual life of devotion to their treasured relic to address the sufferings of those around them. This was not without cost—to their own life of quiet (Hugh repeatedly emphasizes the din) and to their control of their own most prized possession, as their new ritual enabled another woman to try to invent her own little ritual life with a bite of the slipper. And perhaps another cost to the nuns can be seen. What was initially a ritual of healing presided over by a woman, using the powerful relic of the most powerful woman in the universe, faded from view—at least in Hugh's text—and was replaced by rituals with other emphases (that suffering was due to sin), other gestures (embracing an altar, site of sacerdotal agency), and other officiants (priests). Whether or not Hugh was aware of Guibert of Nogent's condemnation of relic frauds, his diminishment of the nuns' role is consonant with Guibert's emphasis on the clergy as the proper group to control relic veneration.[44] Although it is impossible to know if Hugh's text reflects an actual transformation in the ritual life of the nuns of Notre-Dame or only his uneasiness with portraying the nuns' carrying out of their healing ministry in their church, it seems clear

42. Hugh Farsit, *Libellus de miraculis*, col. 1788. Referring to a different incident, Signori incisively notes that the substantial number of stories told about women in this text should not lead us to assume that Hugh did not share the negative views of women often found in contemporary ecclesiastical texts ("The Miracle Kitchen," 299).
43. Hugh Farsit, *Libellus de miraculis*, col. 1789, 1792, 1793.
44. Guibert of Nogent, *On Saints and Their Relics*, 408.

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that at least at the outbreak of disease in their town, the nuns of Notre-Dame did something to respond to the terror.

The nuns' response to the terror not only had its costs; it also had its benefits. Although it was the recipient of royal largesse since the early centuries of its existence, the convent looked to new gifts from the faithful to enhance its property. As we have seen, Hugh Farsit explicitly linked the outbreak of ergotism with the failure of the people of Soissons to support a renovation, thus making the strongest possible case for the urgency of financial support from the people of the region. The construction of the new church is generally believed to have been initiated during the abbacy of Mathilde de la Ferté-sous-Jouarre, the abbess who seems to have invented the slipper ritual. She died in 1143 before construction was completed, and the main construction was completed and the church dedicated under her successor, Mathilde of Toulouse, who died in 1162.[45] The construction could not have been accomplished without new sources of income, and in fact it was a time in which the domains of the convent expanded both in the Soissonnais and beyond.[46]

Hugh's text must be seen in the context of this campaign to build the new abbey church, even if we do not know who may have commissioned him to write it. It would not be surprising if Abbess Mathilde II did.[47] Another candidate is Bishop Josselin de Vierzy, the bishop of Soissons from 1123–52, who supported the reform of existing monasteries and the development of new ones in the diocese.[48] And yet, although Bishop Josselin was afforded a prominent place in another contemporary account of the outbreak of ergotism in Sois-

45. The construction and architecture of the new church are discussed in Carl F. Barnes, "The Documentation for Notre-Dame de Soissons," *Gesta* 15 (1976): 61–70, and Pierre Héliot, "Les Eglises de l'abbaye de Notre-Dame à Soissons et l'architecture romane dans le nord de la France capétienne," *Revue belge d'archaeologie et d'histoire de l'art* 37 (1968): 49–88. Héliot also refers to the fundraising efforts of Mathilde II.

46. For a list of the properties, see Jules Saincir, *Le Diocèse de Soissons. Tome Premier: Des origines au XVIIIe siècle* (Évreux: Imprimerie Hérissey, 1935), 82.

47. On women commissioning men to write religious and historical texts, see Joan M. Ferrante, *To the Glory of Her Sex: Women's Roles in the Composition of Medieval Texts* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1997).

48. A brief sketch of his career is in Dany Sandron, *La cathédrale de Soissons: Architecture du pouvoir* (Paris: Picard, 1998), 30. To be used with caution is Louis Jacquemin, "Annales de la vie de Joscelin de Vierzi, 57e éveque de Soissons," in *Quatrièmes Mélanges d'Histoire du Moyen Age* 20, ed. Achille Luchaire (Paris: Alcan, 1905), 1–161. The relationship of Bishop Josselin to Notre-Dame is ambiguous. He was in the process of raising funds for the major building campaign for the cathedral, and it is possible that he would have seen the activities at Notre-Dame as competition. Germain attributes to him a very active and supportive role in the proceedings at Notre-Dame during 1128; that seems optimistic based on the evidence, but it accords well with Germain's generally positive view of the convent's history and its place in the diocese.

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sons,[49] Hugh Farsit never describes any episcopal activity. There are unnamed priests, there is a procession from the cathedral to the nuns' church, but the bishop is never mentioned; his term in office is not even noted in a story where Hugh gives a date by identifying the year in the king's reign.[50] Hugh was recorded as witness in two of Josselin's charters, thus suggesting the acquaintance between the two men.[51] But seeing Hugh's *Libellus de Miraculis* as commissioned by Josselin is going beyond the evidence, especially since Hugh seems at pains to diminish the bishop's role in the events surrounding the plague.

II. Beyond the Convent

Hugh's account of the miracles at Notre-Dame circulated beyond the diocese of Soissons and was incorporated into larger collections of miracles of the Virgin.[52] Thus beyond Soissons, Hugh's complex picture of the nuns of Notre-Dame as ritual ministers to the needy laity was transmitted to those who read about or listened to the stories about the Virgin Mary saving those who sought her help.

But Hugh's text was not the only source of information about the miraculous occurrences at Notre-Dame. Leaving aside the famous thirteenth-century work of Gautier de Coincy that used Hugh as a source,[53] there were other independent testimonies to the events at the convent. Anselm of Gembloux, a contemporary monastic chronicler writing several years earlier than Hugh, reported the outbreak of "a plague of divine fire" at Chartres, Paris, Soissons, Cambrai, and Artois in 1128, marvelously extinguished by the blessed Virgin, with more miracles in Soissons than elsewhere. Unlike Hugh, Anselm did not cast the plague in apocalyptic, or even penitential, terms. He narrated several miracles said to have taken place in Soissons, stories similar to those that would be told by Hugh Farsit, but not usually the same incidents. The only acknowledgment that the church in Soissons where the miracles took place was part of a women's community

49. The anonymous hagiographer of St. Médard, in *Miracula SS. Gregorii et Sebastiani AASS*, Mar. II, 750–751, discussed below.
50. Hugh Farsit, *Libellus de miraculis*, col. 1798.
51. It is not surprising to see Hugh's name on a charter of 1140 confirming a donation to St.-Jean-des-Vignes; an 1135 charter unrelated to his abbey is more noteworthy. See Jacquemin, "Annales de la vie de Joscelin de Vierzi," 48, 76.
52. For example, Paris, BN Ms lat. 2873 (late twelfth-century manuscript owned by a Carmelite convent in Paris), and Paris, BN Ms lat. 14463 (twelfth century, abbey of St. Victor in Paris).
53. See now *Gautier de Coinci: Miracles, Music, and Manuscripts*, ed. Kathy M. Krause and Alison Stones. Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe 13 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006).

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comes in reference to the cure of a deaf and mute boy, who was "raised from infancy for the love of God by the abbess of this church where these things were happening."[54] Anselm does refer to the slipper, using a different Latin term for the relic than Hugh Farsit would, suggesting perhaps that there were no well-known, long-standing traditions about it. Here is his discussion of it:

> That most ancient and noble place possesses a slipper [*subtalare*] of the holy Virgin Mother. One night, while everyone was weeping and roaring with great anguish and gnashing of teeth, they saw a splendid light, and the Mother of mercy descend with it [*cum ipso*] to the altar. The Mother and Virgin approached one of the sick; she asked whether he wished to be cured. She understood that his wish was a desire to be cured. She touched him; he was cured. She ordered him to make known what he had seen in the same way to everyone. They were touched; they were healed; the whole city rejoiced. The opening through which the light from light had entered, remained as if a sign, and it was venerated by all.[55]

As with several crucial passages in Hugh Farsit's account of slipper rituals, there is ambiguity here in Anselm's reference to the slipper. This passage could be read as an account of the coming of the slipper to the convent: Mary brought it with her when she descended to the church altar during the plague. Even if it was not an account of the coming of the slipper to the convent, it is an account of healing rituals of touch, perhaps even an account of the origin of the slipper ritual. According to Anselm, Mary herself instituted the ceremony. But the ritual action said to follow this first miracle is mystified in this account. The passive voice of the construction ("They were touched; they were healed"; *Tanguntur, sanantur*), leaves the ritual agent unidentified. Was it Mary? Or was it a human agent such as a priest or a nun? It is striking that Hugh Farsit's text makes no reference to Mary as directly offering healing touch to the suffering. Perhaps he was uncomfortable with a picture of Abbess Mathilde as the successor to Mary in a miraculous rite of healing. But Anselm, willing to suggest a supernaturally instituted healing ritual, makes absolutely no connection between the relic, the healing, and the nuns who processed their relic among the sick seeking relief. Instead, the opening (*foramen*) through which Mary descended to the altar was said to be venerated.

54. Anselm of Gembloux, *Continuatio Sigeberti Chronicae*, *MGH*, *SS*, 6:382.
55. Anselm of Gembloux, *Continuatio*, 6:383.

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Identifying no human agent as mediator of the saving power of touch, Anselm makes a hole the site of the holy.[56]

Another echo of the events at Notre-Dame de Soissons is a story in a collection of miracles of the Virgin found in a thirteenth-century manuscript from Bury St. Edmund's. It tells of a visit by King Louis of France, who is described as an avowed skeptic about miracles, to the church of the mother of God at Soissons.[57] The scene at the church is crowded with activity: Mass is being celebrated by a priest, "a multitude of religious women served the Lord," and "people walked around visibly consumed by an invisible fire." In the midst of this description, the author pauses long enough to emphasize the nuns' habit and profession of virginity, and then tells of the noise and the sudden cure of many people. But it is not until a woman carries a little boy in her arms to the king, a boy whose bodily comportment announces the grace of the Virgin Mary, and the boy speaks to the king of the wonders of Mary's power, that Louis is convinced of the truth of the miraculous intervention. The author concludes by affirming the cure of the afflicted, something that is almost secondary to the story of the king's conversion.[58] And if the cure of the afflicted is secondary, the role of the nuns is tertiary. They are explicitly invoked as part of the awesome scene in the church where the body of Christ is being confected, their own devotional life is described, and the dew of heaven rains down on the burning bodies of the sick. But there is no hint of their liturgical role beyond their singing, no reference to the powerful relic they guard.

If the nuns' healing ministry aroused ambivalence in the work of Hugh Farsit, and obliviousness in Anselm of Gembloux and the author of the Bury St. Edmunds collection, it was outrightly denied in a piece of monastic propaganda that makes Hugh Farsit's agenda

56. The hole or opening (*foramen*) venerated here as a connection between heaven and earth may evoke a traditional cultic practice. Tomb-shrines were sometimes constructed with *foramina* or apertures to allow the faithful to get closer to the saints' relics. A well-known testimony is in Bede's description of the tomb of St. Chad (*Historiae ecclesiasticae gentis Anglorum*, IV, 3). See Ben Nilson, *Cathedral Shrines of Medieval England* (Woodbridge, U.K.: Boydell, 1998), 44–45.

57. The manuscript, British Library, Royal MS 6 B. x., fol. 38, says only "gloriosu[s] re[x] francorum ludovicu[s]." H. L. D. Ward, *Catalogue of Romances in the Department of Manuscripts in the British Museum* (London: British Museum, 1893), 2:644, suggests Louis VII, who reigned from 1137–80, although Louis VI seems a better fit in terms of chronology (he reigned during the ergotism epidemic) and general biography (Louis VII was famed for his religious inclinations, which would make his public doubt about miracles unlikely). Ward mistakes the site of the miracle, referring to the cathedral of Soissons.

58. British Library, Royal MS 6 B. x., fol. 38.

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seem mild by comparison, a compilation of the miracles of St. Gregory whose remains were claimed by the monks of St.-Médard.

Comparable in antiquity and prestige to Notre-Dame, the male monastic community of St.-Médard in Soissons was also founded in the seventh century and had enjoyed royal patronage for centuries. Its holdings were vast, although it underwent a period of material and spiritual decline in the tenth century. By the early twelfth century, monastic discipline had been restored, and the community had successfully established its independence from episcopal control.[59]

St.-Médard had a colorful history of relic veneration, enabled by its inventive hagiographers who are now sometimes referred to as forgers or, more sympathetically, as engaged in "pious fraud."[60] Most relevant to the events of the ergotism crisis in Soissons is the tradition that, in 826, Roduin of St.-Médard brought back from Rome the relics of St. Sebastian the martyr and St. Gregory the Great. St. Sebastian became one of the most important patrons of the monastery, but not surprisingly, Gregory remained in the shadows. Despite the indisputable potential greatness of having the relics of Pope Gregory I in one's possession, the reticence of the monks to celebrate this patron was most likely due to the disbelief it would engender since everyone knew his body was in Rome.[61] As Dom Delanchy has shown, the liturgical documents from St.-Médard demonstrate no serious cultic recognition of Gregory before the twelfth century.[62] But the outbreak of ergotism proved irresistible, and an intrepid hagiographer used

59. Jean Becquet, "Abbayes et prieurés. Tome XVII: Diocèse de Soissons (Province de Reims)," *Revue Mabillon* 61:303–4 (1986): 177–83.

60. "Pieuse fraude" is used by D. Delanchy in his overview of the cult of St. Gregory at St.-Médard. See Delanchy, "Étude Historique," in *Saint-Médard: Trésors d'une abbaye royale*, ed. Denis Defente (Paris: Somogy Éditions d'art, 1996), 117. For various developments in the hagiographical traditions of St.-Médard, see Felice Lifshitz, "The 'Exodus of Holy Bodies' Reconsidered: The Translation of the Relics of St. Gildard of Rouen to Soissons," *Analecta Bollandiana* 110 (1992): 329–40; B. de Gaiffier, "Les sources latines d'un Miracle de Gautier de Coincy: I. Apparitions de Ste. Léocadie et de la Vierge à S. Ildephonse," *Analecta Bollandiana* 71 (1953): 100–32; and E. Müller, "Die Nithard-Interpolation und die Urkunden- und Legendenfälschungen im St. Medardus-Kloster bei Soissons," *Neues Archiv der Gesellschaft für ältere deutsche Geschichtskunde* 34 (1909): 681–722.

61. Competing claims to possess the same relics was another problem discussed by Guibert of Nogent (*On Saints and Their Relics*, 417). For contradictory claims to possess the relics of Saints Sebastian and Gregory I, see Hippolyte Delehaye, *Cinq leçons sur la méthode hagiographique*. Subsidia Hagiographica, 21 (Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 1934), 84–87. Delehaye's goal is to ascertain which claims were true. For a discussion of a dispute between two abbeys who claimed to have the same relic, in this case the body of St. Loup, see Pierre Héliot and Marie-Laure Chastang, "Quêtes et voyages de relique au profit des églises françaises du moyen âge,"(suite et fin) *Revue d'histoire ecclesiastique* 60 (1965): 18–19.

62. Delanchy, "Étude Historique," 117.

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this opportunity to promote the cause of St.-Médard's most questionable asset.

According to this hagiographer, in 1126, due to the "abundant iniquity of many," the city of Soissons was struck by the wrathful judgment of God and countless people died, while those who lived were consumed with dread. The St.-Médard hagiographer does not spend much time on the graphic details of human misery that Hugh Farsit was willing to narrate, but immediately goes for the resolution. Typical penitential practices of fasting and almsgiving were undertaken. But the people and the bishop realized that something beyond typical penitential means were required in this state of emergency. They remembered the model of the great Pope Gregory I who, to save the Roman people from the plague of 590, organized processions around the city.[63] So they asked the monks of St.-Médard if the body of Gregory could now be carried in procession. The monks agreed, and great crowds formed for the procession. Bishop Josselin led the way, heading toward the convent of Notre-Dame. The "choirs who serve God and blessed Mary there" came out to meet Gregory, respectfully leading him into the church. There, Mary was begged to act as *moderatrix* to her Son, presumably to mitigate the wrathful divine judgment inflicted on the city. Then the crowds left the convent church, bearing Gregory on to the cathedral where Mass was celebrated by the bishop in honor of Gregory and the Abbot of St.-Médard preached a sermon to the people. From there, Gregory was carried around the city with great devotion. The crowds cried out to Gregory, even those at death's door, "and it happened that wherever the Saint was carried, there it would be quiet with the plague having fled."[64]

It seems very likely that the author of this text knew about the miracles said to have taken place at Notre-Dame. Rather than let the reader second-guess the relationship between the ergotism miracles attributed to the Virgin and those attributed to Gregory, the author has taken on the problem by incorporating—and radically diminishing—the role of the Virgin as venerated at Notre-Dame into his story about St. Gregory. In this account, the Virgin Mary is called upon in her role of mediator to her Son, but no direct power to cure the sick

63. At least as early as the eighth century, Pope Gregory I was said to have divided the people of Rome into seven groups to pray for release from a plague that had followed a flood of the Tiber (Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum*, ed. Georg Waitz. *MGH, Scriptores rerum Langobardicarum* [Hannover, 1878], Lib. 3, ch. 24).

64. *Miracula SS. Gregorii et Sebastiani*, 750–751.

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is attributed to her.[65] The nuns themselves appear in the text to clarify the geographical reference: the procession moved to the "place of the nuns" (*loco sanctimonialium*). Their normal ritual activity of chanting the divine office and offering intercessory prayer is subsumed under a telling phrase: "the choirs who serve God and blessed Mary there." The "choirs" (*chori*), not a more gender-specific term, could indicate the clergy from Saint-Pierre-au-Parvis—the liturgical ministers of the nuns—as well as the nuns themselves. This less gender-specific term allows their "going out" of the church to pass without comment, without raising the objectionable possibility of the nuns going outside their sanctioned walls. This same concern about claustration may also underlie their disappearance from the rest of the text. The nuns are not portrayed as participating in the rest of the procession when Gregory finally intervened. And such participation that would indicate the superiority of St.-Medard's relics is an issue that was important to this author. In another episode, he portrays the monks of Saint-Crespin as reluctant to add their relics to a procession of Gregory's body, asserting that their patrons were martyrs, superior in the celestial hierarchy to the confessor Gregory. The bishop condemned their faulty logic (a pope was in effect an apostle, thus trumping even martyrs), but the matter is ultimately settled by "the arrows of the Lord": after the successful procession, the prior, then the abbot, then ten monks of the monastery were "suddenly and unexpectedly struck by death."[66] Comparable pressure is not applied to the nuns of Notre-Dame, who—after all—must remain within their convent precinct.

In so explicit yet minimal acknowledgment of the nuns of Notre-Dame, their church, and their patron, the author omits any reference to the object that bound together the nuns, church, and patron: the slipper relic. And with no mention of the slipper relic, there is of course no hint of the nuns as ritual healers, as guardians of a shrine, as ministers to the needy. Interestingly, there is also no mention in this story of the *relics* [*reliquiae, pignus*] of St. Gregory, and there is only one reference to his body. Instead, the physical object that is said to be carried around the city, enthroned on a wooden chair, placed on an altar, and ultimately returned to its original spot is simply referred to as the saint. The author here seems to be most concerned to emphasize the veracity of the saintly presence rather than dwelling on the phys-

65. On gender competition between miracle stories of the Virgin Mary and male saints, see Katherine Allen Smith, "Mary or Michael? Saint-Switching, Gender, and Sanctity in a Medieval Miracle of Childbirth," *Church History* 74:4 (December 2005): 758–81.

66. *Miracula SS. Gregorii et Sebastiani*, 751.

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ical support of that presence. As he concludes the vengeful story about the hapless monks of Saint-Crespin, "This affirms that blessed Gregory truly is in this place."[67] Unlike the stories of Hugh Farsit that portray, however ambivalently, the ritual life of the nuns of Notre-Dame as it was embodied in their physical manipulation of the slipper relic, the account of Gregory's intervention is not about the ritual life of the monks of St.-Médard. Rather, the text is about the verification of a very valuable yet controversial asset.

The value of Gregory to St.-Médard was not his ability to attract donations for the monastery. The author of the text explicitly rejects that. He says that after the processions and the purification from the plague, the saint was placed above the altar in the abbey church. Crowds still came to visit "desiring to honor their protector, but the reverend Abbot, since he was prudent and generous, lest there be any appearance of avarice, quickly ordered that the holy body be returned to its location and that the people return to their homes."[68] A perfect occasion for enhanced revenue is rejected, with perhaps a subtle dig at Notre-Dame, where the plague and miracles of the Virgin were openly used as an opportunity to elicit donations to the convent.[69]

Rather than being offered as a magnet for donations from the faithful (the monastery had many other relics that could serve that function), Gregory had already been used by the monks of St.-Médard in their struggles with the bishops of Soissons. From the tenth century, St.-Médard suffered losses of possessions at the hands of the bishops. Gregory's name—that of the most important pope in the Western church—was inserted into documents claiming ancient privileges for the monastery, and stories of Gregory's vengeance against the enemies of the monasteries were told.[70] The hagiographer who wrote about Gregory's intervention in the Soissons plague was more concerned to use the plague to demonstrate the veracity of controversial claims to a powerful patron than to exalt that patron as part of the devotional life of the monastery or as part of the ministry to the surrounding community. Furthermore, if there were any basis of truth to this story about the plague, that is, if there were processions and invocations ordered by the bishop and carried out by the populace of Soissons, it would probably have been noted by Anselm of Gembloux, who was very interested in the outbreaks of holy fire throughout

67. Ibid.

68. Ibid., 750.

69. This sanctimonious rejection of fundraising could also be in response to the critique of profiteering by relics, raised by Guibert of Nogent, who had attacked without naming the excesses of St.-Médard. See Delanchy, "Étude Historique," 118, and above, n. 21.

70. Delanchy, "Étude Historique," 118–21.

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northern France.[71] And at the very least, Gobert de Coincy, prior of St.-Médard from 1254–60 and author of its *Annales*,[72] would have mentioned it.[73] The Gregory miracle stories also seem rather far from devotional or ritual concerns. They are not in general miracles of protection or succor offered to the devotees of the saint. They are stories of vengeance exerted by Gregory upon those who do not believe that he is truly present at St.-Médard or, just as bad, who do not think his status is as high as it truly is.[74]

With these priorities driving the St.-Médard narration of the plague, it is not surprising that the ritual life of the nuns of Notre-Dame is so thoroughly eliminated. The fame of their shrine must be reckoned with, but in so doing it becomes a mere station along the path; the Virgin becomes one whose activities are restricted to her son and not directed to the people of Soissons; and the nuns open their doors, sing the Sanctus, and disappear into the crowd. Nothing as complex as the ambivalence that seeps through in Hugh's text, just straightforward invention to claim the events for St. Gregory.

III. Conclusion: Nuns and Their Relics

Amy Remensnyder has pointed to the significant increase in hagiographical activities beginning in the eleventh century as ecclesiastical communities began to compete intensely with one another over pilgrims, prestige, and relics: "These communities needed increasingly not only to state the identity of their relics but also to attach those relics firmly to a particular shrine, that is, to their own church. They attempted to do so in increased production of sacred biographies, accounts of how the relics had arrived at the shrine, and so on. These represented a concerted textual effort to create the specificity of the relics and to integrate them into the history of the community."[75] Certainly this is true, and all the texts discussed here reflect these dynamics. Yet, there is more. And less.

There is less than one expects in Hugh Farsit's narration of the miracles at Notre-Dame. There is no attempt to establish the history of the Virgin's slipper. In other hagiographical texts, often a pious monk

71. There is no reference to the role of Gregory or Saint-Médard in Anselm's stories about the plague in 1129 (Anselm of Gembloux, *Continuatio*, 381–83). In the next installment of the chronicle (Anselm's ends at 1135), the "divine fire" was said to return in 1141, and many afflicted were relieved "through the intercession of Mary, the holy mother of God, and other saints" (*Continuatio Gemblacensis*, in *MGH, SS*, 6:381).

72. Delanchy, "Étude Historique," 30.

73. *Annales S. Medardi Suessionensibus*, in *MGH, SS*, 26:518–22.

74. Typical again of the vengeance miracles described by Sigal, "Un aspect du culte."

75. Amy G. Remensnyder, "Legendary Treasure at Conques: Reliquaries and Imaginative Memory," *Speculum* 71:4 (October 1996): 905–906.

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or nun has a vision predicting the arrival of holy relics. Some texts even go so far as to convict monastic communities of theft, albeit pious theft, to account for their now proud ownership of powerful relics.[76] But Hugh says nothing about how the nuns came to possess the slipper of the Virgin. He offers no picture of the nuns as a pious community, not even a conventional phrase praising their communal life. Why is this?

It is unlikely that Hugh would not have been acquainted with basic hagiographical motifs. His silence on this matter may more reasonably be linked to his attitude about his subject matter. As noted above, Hugh's acknowledgment of the nuns' ritual activity is always muted as he tries to keep the focus on the miracles. Thus Remensnyder's observation about the explosion of hagiographical writing needs to be seen in the context of two other related issues: the rise in literacy in this period and the question of gender. The expanded literacy was integrally related, both as cause and effect, to the need to provide textual records for claims to property and privileges sometimes long held and supported by oral tradition.[77] But this increase in literacy was not equally distributed across monastic communities. The fact that the *Libellus de Miraculis* of the convent of Notre-Dame was written by a male religious with no clear affiliation to the community may suggest that even in this prestigious convent there might not have been a nun equipped or inclined to undertake the formal composition of this text. Or perhaps the nuns wished the text to have the greater authority of a qualified, ostensibly disinterested author from outside their community.[78] Here too, gender expectations are relevant: the authority of the disinterested author was also the authority of a male religious. Hugh composed his work long before women's communities began producing their own chronicles (early fourteenth century),

76. For a nun's heavenly vision predicting the arrival of relics, see *Die Visionen der hl. Elisabeth und die Schriften der Aebte Ekbert und Emecho von Schönau*, ed. F. W. E. Roth (Brünn: Verlag der Studien aus dem Benedictiner- und Cistercienser Orden, 1884), 124. For the piety of the relic thief or receiving community, see Patrick J. Geary, *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages*, rev. ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 115–16.

77. For the emergence of a literate culture, see Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983). For the expansion of textual record-making, see M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066–1307* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979).

78. The contemporary miracle collection from the cathedral of Laon, written by an outsider, Herman, the abbot Saint-Martin, Tournai, is similar in this regard, although Herman had written earlier hagiographical works at the request of the bishop of Laon, and thus his selection is better understood than Hugh's. On Herman, see Bull, *The Miracles of Our Lady of Rocamadour*, 44–45.

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and immediately preceding the emergence of nuns' texts about their own extraordinary experiences (mid-twelfth century), the latter at least usually marked by tension about male participation in the textualization of women's voices or deeds.[79] It is not surprising that the nuns of Notre-Dame would seek a seemingly disinterested, authoritative male writer to transform their memoirs of miracles into a conventionally recognizable and respectable text. Yet, in the hands of an unrelated male author, the nuns' religiosity, to say nothing of the details of their communal life, was just not noteworthy. Or perhaps his discomfort with the nuns' creation and performance of healing rituals led him to diminish any attention to their piety or worthiness.

But despite this lack, Hugh's text allows some insight into what is often difficult to excavate about women's monastic life. That is, this text allows glimpses of—if not the sanctity—then, more important, the cultic activities of nuns. Relics are usually talked about as tangible means of connection to the otherworldly, to the divine. This was true for medieval Christians, but the slipper of the Virgin was also a tangible means of connection among human beings, which is especially significant when the very nature of human beings is so degraded by the disease that Hugh describes in such graphic terms.[80] Certainly these connections were fragile and susceptible to all manner of human inclination and social pressures, as witnessed by the woman who tried to bite off a piece of the slipper and Abbess Mathilde's harsh reaction to her. And these glimpses also offer an important corrective to the historical picture generated by focusing on prescriptive literature for monastic women, which calls for nuns' excision from contact with the world. Penelope Johnson, in her study of convents in medieval France, has suggested that what laypeople seemed to want from the convents in their midst was not displays of heroic sanctity but rather some benefit for themselves.[81] From this perspective, Abbess Mathilde and the nuns of Notre-Dame were true

79. On nuns' texts about their communities, see Anne Winston-Allen, *Convent Chronicles: Women Writing about Women and Reform in the Late Middle Ages* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004). On tensions about men's roles in creating texts about women, see Catherine M. Mooney, "Voice, Gender, and the Portrayal of Sanctity," in *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*, ed. Catherine M. Mooney (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), and Lynn Staley Johnson, "The Trope of the Scribe and the Question of Literary Authority in the Works of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe," *Speculum* 66:4 (October 1991): 820–38.

80. For the use of relics to negotiate social tensions, see, for example, Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), and Patrick J. Geary, *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994).

81. Johnson, *Equal in Monastic Profession*, 142–46 and throughout.

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ministers to their community. Not only was their abbey church the natural refuge for the needy of Soissons, a city with a major cathedral and several male monastic communities, but also, with no script from tradition, the nuns of Notre-Dame became mediators of the power of their patron to address the sufferings of their fellow Christians. That this offering came at a price—the raising of funds for a new church—was part of the relationship between monastic and lay society, something that was only to be sneered at by the hagiographer of St.-Médard who subjugated the nuns and their female patron to the great male patron of his monks. But his story did not take. Rather, it was the Virgin Mary, with her slipper protected by the nuns, who was remembered by posterity as the savior from the plague. However, this memory itself was created in such a way that both lifted up and submerged the events. For the picture of nuns' touching, handling, wielding, and controlling of a material object that was the locus of heavenly presence and power, moving among laypeople from whom they were supposed to be cut off, blessing the laity with this sacred object and thereby transforming their bodies and souls, did not fit with the ever-hardening picture of nuns as themselves laypeople, but cut off from the world, and of priests as the primary mediators of sacramental grace. Yet for all the tension that Abbess Mathilde and her sisters might have generated for Hugh Farsit, their gestures, if not their words, allow us this glimpse of twelfth-century religious women seizing a moment to expand their place in the world of an increasingly clericalized church.

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