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NATURAL, MAGICAL, SCIENTIFIC OR RELIGIOUS? A GUIDE TO THEORIES OF HEALING

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In one of the most famous reports of a healing event from the ancient world, Jesus mixes his saliva with dirt and applies it to the eyes of a blind man.¹ Jesus' act has been classified as everything from magic to proto-scientific folk medicine.² This range of opinion mirrors the range of Late Antiquity positions on agency and causality in healing, reflecting debates that were always highly rhetorical, complex and contested. The purpose of this contribution in honor of Professor Pearson is to review the debates, ancient and modern, and offer a new approach to analyzing them.

For an entrance into Late Antique debates about saliva, Pliny is a particularly rich guide. In his *Natural History* he argues in detail, though often unsuccessfully, in favor of his particular interpretations of healing powers. He happily catalogues for readers many theories he rejects, attempting to displace other healers as frauds. We can see, therefore, a range of ideas about causality. Acceptable healing for him involves a dense mapping of social roles and prejudices, many of which anticipate current scholarly struggles to classify powers and modes of healing.

Ancient Theory #1: Saliva as a Divine Substance

Pliny reports that Marsi males who inhabit the mountains of central Italy have very special bodily fluids.³ Their saliva protects against snakebites. Why do they have this unusual spit? One intriguing explanation mentioned by Pliny is that these men are descendants of a son of Circe and "possess this natural property (*vim naturalem*) on that account."⁴ Pliny dismisses this idea of the divine status of Marsi saliva. Despite Pliny's negative attitude

¹ John 9:6.

² For magic, see Smith 1978; for folk healer, see Malina-Rohrbaugh 1998.

³ *NH* 7.15. Discussions of the Marsi include Dench 1995, Piccaluga 1976, and Letta 1972.

⁴ *NH* 7.15.

towards it, the claim refracts a number of very popular ideas and deserves close analysis.

The Marsi reputation as fierce warriors and living-close-to-the-land men was consistently formidable; the evaluation of that power and its impact on Romans varied from author to author. The Marsi are lauded for giving the Roman army free passages through their territory.⁵ Considered to have a special relationship with snakes, they were viewed as healers by some ancient writers, magicians by others. The distinction was based on the social relationship the group had with each author.⁶

If some individuals found them potentially helpful and others saw them as a basic threat to Roman society, still others saw them as a source of a good joke. In the case of satire, for example, snake people, like courtesans, offer an opportunity too good to pass up. Horace mocked the Marsi, claiming that their songs gave him a headache.⁷ This joke deflated both their threat and their healing power, poking fun at them and at those who took them too seriously.

The divine-progenitor explanation of Marsi divine saliva is intriguing, positing a genealogical, quasi-biological relationship between the forces of the female goddess and her male descendents. In the process of the intergenerational and inter-gender transfer, Circe's power was reshaped, or perhaps "domesticated", into a human trait. The humans, meanwhile, were partially divinized, something likely to be contested by many.

Numerous stories outline some connection between a snake-connected goddess and her "snake-like" children. The Marsi religion was long known to have included worship of a snake goddess, Argitia.⁸ This goddess, according to Gnaeus Gellius, who wrote in the second century BCE, was the sister of Circe and Medea.⁹ Argitia no doubt comes into these family connections via her association with snakes as she is assimilated to the more famous goddesses. The Marsi goddess passed on a multi-modal heritage that included both powerful rituals and body fluids, that is, different means for healing snakebites.¹⁰ These stories locate the origin of special powers in passed-on

special knowledge, inheritance of a bodily trait due to a special genealogy and a mixture of both.

A genealogical relationship with a deity or goddess was a basic component of many claims to healing powers.¹¹ As a comparative example close in time to Pliny, C. Stertinius Xenophon, Claudius' doctor, claimed to be related to Asclepius and Heracles. In his case, however, the inheritance does not include any claims about his body parts or fluids being divine as a result.

The goddess-to-children explanation for the saliva intersects with a number of striking stories about goddess-snake relationships. According to Lucan, drops of blood from the cutting off of Medusa's head turned into the seventeen types of snakes.¹² The bodily fluid (blood) of the goddess spawns snakes in what appears to be a twisted variant on normal childbirth, insemination via sword and childbirth outside the womb. Goddess blood flowing from a sword decapitation produces monstrous children. This blood contrasts with other female "drops," that is, unfertile menstrual blood that falls outside the body and results in no normal children but no monstrous children either.

Circe's descendants, the snake healing Marsi men, can be seen as reverse images of Medusa's snake "children." Their saliva contains the antidote to the snake offspring and their poisonous saliva. They undo some of the harm done to humanity by the creation of snakes, very concretely representing the ambivalent power of female blood (the good and bad sides of female fertility both writ large).

Given the emphasis on a bodily manifestation of power, "snake people," including the Marsi, had to practice careful breeding. The Ophiogenes and the Psylli practiced endogamy in order to preserve their special bodily attributes from generation to generation.¹³ Children were exposed to snakebites in order to make sure that they carried the trait.¹⁴

Ambivalence runs through every anecdote. All of these "snake power" goddesses have frightening aspects; they terrify and enslave men. Yet Circe demonstrating a touching concern for Odysseus.¹⁵ The goddess children, though potentially dangerous, were also good to have around for help. Snakes, not surprisingly, are themselves ambivalent figures. Pliny reports

⁵ Livy 8.6.

⁶ See Phillips 1995 and Dench 1995, 163.

⁷ *Ep.* 17–20, 38.29. For a similar classification see Ovid *Ars amatorium* 2.103 and *Fasti* 6.142.

⁸ *Sulmo Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* ix.3074.

⁹ Gnaeus Gellius *Fr* 9 = Solinus 2.28.

¹⁰ The exact ritual practices attributed to the goddess and the Marsi vary from ancient author to author. For example, according to Dench 1995, 159, they knew how to cause snakes to explode.

¹¹ Smith 1974.

¹² *BC* 9.619–733.

¹³ Lucan, *BC* 9.890–891, Pliny *NH* 7.14–15.

¹⁴ Aulus Gellius *Noctes Atticae* 16.11–2.

¹⁵ Segal, 1968.

that people keep snakes as pets due to their protective powers and also cites Democritus' story of a pet snake that saved a family from robbers.¹⁶

Pliny briefly mentions the claim that Marsi saliva gets its power from the goddess only in order to dismiss it. He is not going to argue against the idea of powerful saliva, but he is going to classify that power on a completely different basis.

Ancient Theory #2: Saliva as a Natural Force

Pliny dismisses the entire story about the divine Marsi relative. Curing for Pliny is primarily based on the innate powers of natural items and he makes as broad and as complicated a claim for them as he possibly can. The Marsi men, according to Pliny, are examples of a common trait found throughout the natural world. In a typical move, he presents himself as one step ahead of everyone else based on his extensive investigation and keen mind. Pliny explains, "All men contain a poison available as a protection against snakes. People say that snakes flee from contact with saliva."¹⁷ Pliny is interested in the Marsi saliva because it falls into his general category "powerful body fluid." Marsi men are unusual but they are unusual on a nature-based scale, manifesting a stronger version of what is widely found in the natural world, not based on inheritance from a goddess. The saliva from a fasting person is also extra efficacious.

In terms of strategy, Pliny is trying to move saliva from a "pseudo-divine efficacy" classification towards the "naturally efficacy" classification as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Pliny's spectrum of terms

Pliny accepts			Pliny rejects	
Natural cures (divine to the extent that nature is divine)			Magical cures (<i>contra naturam</i>)	Pseudo-divine cures
Fluids with extra, extra special powers (<i>religio</i>)	Fluids with extra natural power (<i>miracula</i>)	Fluids with natural power (<i>vis naturalis</i>)	Natural fluids used improperly <i>Veneficia falsa</i> (28:29) <i>Piacula</i> (abominations) <i>monstrosificium</i>	Via Olympian gods (NH 2.5. 2.14–27)

¹⁶ NH 24.158 ff.

¹⁷ NH 7.15.

Table 1. (cont.)

Pliny accepts			Pliny rejects	
Urine	Fasting saliva	Saliva	Some uses of menstrual blood,	"divine" saliva
Menstrual blood from first menstruation	Marsi saliva	Menstrual blood	human blood	

Pliny's argument is not theoretical and his terminology is fairly sloppy and varied. He does not offer abstract arguments about how natural forces work, a frustration for those who want to see him presenting proto-science. In this generality he had plenty of company; highly theoretical arguments are few.¹⁸ He presents what is often identified as a basic Stoic stance towards nature, taken for granted while he outlines the diversity of natural forces.¹⁹ These forces are related to divine forces only in a very secondary, or tautological, manner. Divinity underlies the entire cosmos, and particularly the sun, so divinity is manifest in every natural force. The sum total of divinity is the sum total of everything he describes in his extensive volumes, manifest in the natural world better than in the questionable stories about Olympian gods.²⁰

Pliny follows general ideas about sympathy and antipathy, looking for interconnections in nature.²¹ Pliny's use of these ideas, however, was extremely broad as he envisages a "sacred canopy" that encases the entire cosmos. He tries to convince others of his vision through the extravagance of his offering, much like the *Guinness Book of World Records*, and by his encyclopedic thoroughness.

Reclassifying saliva from divine to natural efficacy involves several strategic moves. As with any powerful fluid, saliva has a number of roles beyond snakebites.²² Saliva takes its place within a complex of powerful human body parts and fluids. The list is impressive and includes bones of the untimely dead, saliva, earwax, menstrual blood, gallstones, and teeth.²³ At the same time, every claim made about these elements should not be accepted.

¹⁸ Rives 2003, 320, notes for example, the same vague depiction found in Cicero. He cites in particular Cicero's statement about the limits to his understanding of forces (*De Divinatione* 1.13 and 16).

¹⁹ Stated, among others, by French 1994, 198.

²⁰ NH 2.5.

²¹ This is not to say that his use of these ideas is always consistent. Cf. NH 36.26.

²² NH 28:35.

²³ Many of these are discussed in Book 7.

Menstrual blood, for instance, is connected with all sorts of wild stories.²⁴ Careful review, presumably by Pliny, is needed.

“Natural” is distinguished from “magical” since Pliny wants to avoid any notion of suspect or illicit agency in his cures.²⁵ Pliny repeatedly stresses that he rejects anything that looks like magic. Magic is described, as basically vanity (*vanitas*), supplemented with terms such as “madness” (*rabies*, 30.8) and “detestable, vain and idle.”²⁶ Magic is itself a disease.²⁷ It threatens to infect the Roman “body” and thus must be eliminated.²⁸ An educated Roman who uses a natural cure cannot by definition be engaging in magic.

Pliny maps a wide range of specific potencies, presented with a shifting set of terms. Urine, Pliny reports, has a double potency, both “*ratio*” and an addition level of power he calls *religio*. W.S. Jones translates the terms as “natural” and “supernatural,” though this option does not satisfy him.²⁹ Pliny does not have a consistent term for the extra-effective natural elements such as blood from a first menstruation. The “commercials” he writes vary, perhaps based on the sources he cites.

In contrast to his enthusiasm for the natural world, Pliny takes what must have looked like an unusually negative position for his time and rejects the power of the spoken word. Words, both spoken and sung, were widely used in cultic and healing rites.³⁰ Most healing rites combine spoken formulas (words) and use of special objects. Since he was wary about the power of words, Pliny was wary of words in general, he made no attempt to distinguish between “words,” “charms” and “incantations.” He faults the Magi on their unnecessary addition of complex phrases to healing rites. Significantly, he does not deny all uses of words. He points to a long tradition that words, particularly words orally exactly copied from written texts, were a necessary part of sacrificial practices. A sacrifice was not complete without a song,

²⁴ NH 28.23.

²⁵ Given the inherently strategic nature of the term “magic”, it no surprise that, he fails as Gordon 1987, 75, reluctantly notes, “The character of magic remains entirely elusive in Pliny’s account”. He echoes the concerns of Riess 1896 that Pliny rejects magic yet his curses are the same as those found in the *Papyri Graecae Magicae*.

²⁶ NH 30.17. See the detailed discussion in Gordon 1987.

²⁷ NH 30.8.

²⁸ Gordon notes this stance of Pliny’s but he still searches for a substantive meaning for the term *magic*.

²⁹ Jones 1963, 46, appends a short note offering normal/abnormal as another possible reading.

³⁰ Majno 1975 is still a good introduction to the use of words in healing.

and one that exactly copies the written version.³¹ This evidence leads him seriously to consider the “potency” (*vis*) of formulas, perhaps based on the power of the written texts they were taken from. In addition, certain religious specialists can employ words with direct efficacy. He reports that Vestal Virgins can stop people in their tracks, at least within the city. Their powerful words are restricted to the area of their divine power, that is, within the city.

Outside of these examples, Pliny lacks a theory of powerful words that might be suitable for the setting of healing. This is not a scientific stance in the modern meaning. At least one strand of thought in the Hebrew Scriptures, the priestly source, appears to have advocated for silent animal sacrifices. In both cases we see a kind of obsession about causality, as if they do not want anything to detract from a single-minded channeling of divine power via the killing of the animal in the case of the Biblical sacrifices and via the power inherent in a part of nature in the case of Pliny. He wants his divine forces to be manifest through the plant or body part and only through that item. No other divine power is necessary, making any formulas either redundant or annoying interference.

Much has been written about Pliny’s citation of the phrase *qui fruges excantassit* translated as “who ‘sings off’ crops.”³² Pliny cites the phrase from the now-lost XII Tables, dating to the fifth century BCE. In this legal text the use of songs to harm others by stealing their crops was deemed illegal. For both ancient and modern writers, legal codes offer the promise of definitive definitions of vexed terms, hence the close scrutiny of the use of *excantare*. However, the fixing of this term as an illegal action is context-dependent. The term *excantare*, as Rives notes in his thorough analysis, appears for the first time in a medical writer, Marcellus Empiricus.³³ To “sing off” can be a very good action if something like a disease needs to be gotten rid of. Using song to steal crops is completely different. Once again the basic idea is songs have power and the classification of that power depends on someone’s point of view about how that power was used.³⁴

³¹ NH 28.3,5.

³² NH 28.10.

³³ Rives 2002, 273.

³⁴ Rives 2003, 327, points out that by the time of the trial of Apuleius, Roman law was moving from “an exclusive focus on harmful actions accomplished through occult and uncanny means, toward a more general concern with issues of religious deviance.”

Pliny's classification system calibrates not simply an item from nature, but also the status of the person using it (see: Table 2). Even as the rhetoric flows, he borrows extensively from doctors and magi, complicating his classification system.

Table 2. Pliny's classification system

Person using tool→	Doctors/Greek doctors	Romans like Pliny	Roman priests	Magi
Tool↓	Read, don't believe (NH 29.7)			
Items from nature	Extortion (NH 29.13), search for popularity	Cure	[No cultic use]	magic
Human blood	Greeks make immoral uses of body parts (NH 28.5–7)	Cure	[No cultic use]	Cannibalism
Songs/ cantare incantare excantare		No role in healing	Necessary for sacrifices 28.3,5; 17.18	magic

This system permits Pliny to make use of other people's cures but distance himself from them based on social position. Echoing Cato, Pliny charges doctors with extorting huge fees and killing with impunity.³⁵ The powers that doctors use are based on remedies available to any person, making their special claims as unnecessary as those about the divinity of saliva. It might seem unbelievable that Pliny would borrow their ideas, but not only does he by necessity but also he admits borrowing from animals as well. They have discovered natural powers by accident, so the content of a cure can be separated from those who employed it. Though again, Pliny does not press this point since he tries to disguise the extent of his borrowing. Social role is everything. Greeks who used olive oil for anointing their bodies were wrong-headed, but Romans who anointed their victory wreaths with oil were engaging in a noble practice. The use of cold baths is encouraged by Greek doctors and people who did not know better, while the wise (Roman) might still bathe but not make the baths too cold.³⁶ In sum, when a Greek doctor uses some item from nature, it is simply in order to extort large amounts of money from the patient. The same item may be effective when

adopted for use by a properly-educated Roman. Others, such as the Magi, may use the same items for magical purposes.

The use of human blood is a good example of his dilemma. Romans are permitted to use human body parts and fluids since they are so efficacious. However, Romans must absolutely avoid anything that looks like cannibalism. Making a distinction appears to depend on establishing moral superiority for Roman uses, combined with offering some confusing examples. Prolonging life at any cost is rejected as if a general acceptance of death might mitigate against cannibalistic tendencies. A basic contrast is established between helpful cures (*auxilia*) and abominations (*piacula*) such as “drinking” blood directly, as from a wound. Pliny denounces the Greek writer who suggests using human items all the way down to the paring of nails yet, despite the rhetorical flourish, offers uses of just as small body parts. The principle and the specific example do not prohibit many other uses of human blood that could also be classified as cannibalism.

In contrast to the correct Roman use of body parts, Ostanes, the Persian sage, is called the “inventor of monstrosities.” He presumably has no limits, though again his monstrous practices are not clearly distinguished from permitted Roman practices. Pliny intertwines his discussion of cannibalistic-sounding human-based cures with cases of human sacrifice, such as the Scythian tribes who both sacrifice humans and eat their flesh. This anecdote darkly implies that any cures that employ body parts may depend on the slaughter of humans, a practice forbidden to Romans.³⁷ This point only serves him to a limited extent since he refers to some examples where Romans engage in practices that can be interpreted as human sacrifice. Romans are still left with the problem of how to procure the body parts needed for cures. The topic raises fantasies of not only cannibalism but necromancy since any supply of body parts implicates corpses.³⁸

Similar problems plague his discussion of menstrual fluid.³⁹ Wild claims are made about this blood by the Magi and others, described by Pliny as “monstrificum” and a “virulent scourge.” He then outlines many uses and appears to endorse them all. The Greek doctors, Magi and Pliny may in the end have been indistinguishable on the topic of cures that come from humans.

³⁵ See, for example, his attack on the royal doctor Thessalus (NH 29.5.10). That this is his own opinion, see Nutton 1986, 31.

³⁶ NH 29.11.

³⁷ Beagon 2005, 123 lists numerous related references to human sacrifice and cannibalism.

³⁸ Women are most likely to be charged with involvement in this unsavory process as seen in Lucan's Erichtho, a masterful depiction of the total boogey-woman.

³⁹ NH 7.63–65, 28.20–23.

Given how much he borrows from people he dismisses, and how hard it is to sustain his social prejudices as a classification system, Pliny admits that he is not sure exactly how to evaluate some of the claims made by foreigners. Ultimately, Pliny demurs; everyone will have to weigh the evidence.⁴⁰ The Romans, according to Pliny, are more civilized than most people, so can pick and chose among all the information available from the entire world. Pliny's intellectual empire is cast as a parallel to the political rise of Rome; his encyclopedic knowledge mirrors the reach of Roman power into the farthest regions of the world.⁴¹ Romans know how to fight and rule, so they will also know which cures are effective.

Somewhat surprisingly, Pliny does not spend much time denouncing women healers. He mentions midwives and prostitutes, both groups that might be expected to have special knowledge related to women's health issues.⁴² In this off-hand and not negative mention, Pliny separates himself from the many other ancient writers who cast suspicion on any healing activity done by women. As many recent studies have argued, women may have been able to use various healing tools in the privacy of their families but outside they were vulnerable to the charge of engaging in magic. The more public the family, the greater the danger as well.⁴³ This slippery slope towards charges of magic illustrates just how limited the possibilities were for a woman to use any type of healing tools on the public stage, gender determining the interpretations of such actions.

Pliny worked under tremendous constraints in trying to establish his authority, depending primarily on displaying his extensive research and the impressive number of volumes he consulted. He had to make the argument that what he presented was more effective than the alternatives. His superiority has to be built at someone else's expense to build a hierarchy of healing reliability.

Lévi-Strauss described reluctant healers, forced by social circumstances to display powers they did not believe in.⁴⁴ Quesalid, a now-famous Kwa-kiutal native first described by Franz Boas, began investigating shamans in order to expose their tricks but found himself caught up in the process of healing people. Encountering other shamans with even thinner tricks, his

tricks gained a new status and efficacy in his eyes as well as in the eyes of the disgraced shamans.

Pliny was by no means a reluctant healer but the Magi and Greek doctors function as his "weaker" shamans; he was not sure about all of the ideas he presented but he knew that his corpus in its totality was better than theirs. Their remedies may work but should be rejected because of the fees that accompany the remedies and their ethical standards.

Reclassifying Pliny's Classifications

Many modern scholars classify the use of natural forces as magic.⁴⁵ Derek Collins argues that natural forces are the basis of magic because natural forces are unseen.⁴⁶ Richard Gordon makes a similar argument about the natural basis of magic based his reading of Aelian. This writer on natural forces points out that chameleons can change their external form in a manner parallel yet distinct to the shape-changing drugs used by Circe.⁴⁷ Perhaps instead what Aelian is arguing is that chameleons do not have to use herbs, a fact that makes their natural power all the more impressive. Christopher Faraone similarly defines magic via Pliny's report about the use tortoises make of plants to attract other turtles.⁴⁸ As presented by Pliny, the point of the story is that animals make use of natural forces just as humans do. While it is no doubt a story about human attraction as much as turtle-love, as Faraone points out, the thrust of the story is not about magic in any form. Instead its point is exactly that it is not necessary to resort to other explanations of powers in order to understand the natural world.

More popular in recent scholarship has been classification of Pliny's ideas as proto-science, despite, among other points, the fact that he rejects the use of surgery.⁴⁹ Pliny's use of plants can be interpreted as having, in the eyes of scholars, some "real" efficacy; his advocacy of animal parts is much more problematic.⁵⁰ Even the use of plants matches medical cures only in a

⁴⁰ *NH* 28.29.

⁴¹ French 1994, 205–206.

⁴² *NH* 28.18. On 'wise women' see Gordon 1987, 64.

⁴³ A few exceptional women, for example, were trained as doctors through being "substitute sons" for fathers who had no biological sons.

⁴⁴ Lévi-Strauss 1963.

⁴⁵ All of these, including the three examples discussed here, repeat the early Christian attack on sympathy, that is it just magic. See Edelstein-Temkin-Temkin 1967, 235.

⁴⁶ Collins 2003.

⁴⁷ Gordon 1987.

⁴⁸ *NH* 7.7.

⁴⁹ French 1994, 124. The bulk of studies of Pliny follow this paradigm from Stannard 1965 through Tempkin 1991.

⁵⁰ Any treatment may, of course, seem efficacious from the placebo effect.

coincidental manner. As Tamsyn Barton points out about astrology, drawing a simple line from the ancient to the modern practice obfuscates the completely different social role it plays in society.⁵¹ Finding the precursors of modern science demands such a broad definition of science, she reiterates, as to be meaningless.⁵²

After making these judicious remarks, Barton offers yet another critique of modern modes of characterization. She writes, "No one in antiquity strove through philosophy to manipulate nature except perhaps the Magi and the doctors."⁵³ Here she seems to be channeling Pliny's prejudices, since this would not be the self-characterization of either the Magi or doctors. The very term "manipulate" has a negative connotation, as if other might use nature more "naturally," an idea that is based not on a specific technique but again based on an evaluation of what a technique implies.

Taking a different tack, Richard Gordon distinguishes between five types of healers: 1) divine healers who use divination, 2) root cutters with their "materia medica," 3) purifiers who use incantations and lustrations, 4) exorcists with amulets and 5) sorcerers with their counter-magic.⁵⁴ Gordon's schema avoids some generalizations, building very closely from late antique terminology.⁵⁵ These categories, however, are not commensurate or nearly as stable as Gordon argues. "Root cutters" ranged from anonymous "wise women" to Diocles who did dissection.⁵⁶ Roots are used in purification, exorcisms and all sorts of other rites.⁵⁷ Finally, in Gordon's schema some categories are based closely on a general theory of illness (exorcism) while others, such as sorcerer, on hostile labeling.

These modern re-classification attempts are likely not to succeed. Each item used in a healing rite is, as it were, a "power tool" used to make something happen. But the tools and their employment are not easy to classify on the still-popular spectrum of magic, science and religion. Of these, at least in the case of Pliny, given his emphasis on the divine basis of nature, all his cures are closest to the modern second-order category religion.⁵⁸

This observation is not new. Already in 1932 David Kaufman outlined the contours of the ancient Latin term *veneficium*: translation by either "poison" or "drug" is dependent on the accompanying adjective assessing it as harmful or beneficial.⁵⁹ A form of retro-determination is needed even to decide what is in fact a tool. It is no surprise that Theophrastus "seems uncertain of his definition [of herb], because he continues by distinguishing those potencies ... of roots which are general from those *dynameis* in roots which have use in healing or medicinals."⁶⁰

Classification of the tool was often after-the-fact and was an attempt to assign a specific interpretation of cause and motivation (attempt to heal, attempt to murder). These rhetorical interpretations are both flexible (more than one possible interpretation exists) and yet at the same time constrained (only certain types of classificatory arguments were considered plausible). All classifications depend on a "retro-determination" in which an action is given a specific interpretation from among the many possible. The implications of these observations are side-stepped as scholars fill in the interpretive gaps themselves and allot one use as harmful (magic) and another beneficial (medicine) based on, for example, what seems to be a closer precursor to a modern category such as science.

The basic problem with classification, ancient and modern, is always-shifting meanings of the material dimension of social life. In these rites, objects are used as agents of power by "imputing spirits to dead matter and divine agency to ordinary creatures."⁶¹ For Pliny, humans, just like plants and animals, are implicated in the obvious power of the cosmos, brithming with all sorts of forces. They are in fact the very best examples of that divinity, not set over or in opposition to it. He has no "Protestant theory of transcendence," as it were, where "the value of a person is not defined in its distinctiveness from, and superiority to, the material world."⁶²

A completely different way of trying to solve the classification problem is to directly address what Webb Keane calls the "economy of representation."⁶³ As analyzed by Keane, the practice of bridal exchange presents some

⁵¹ Barton 1994.

⁵² Barton 1994, xiv.

⁵³ Barton 1994, xii.

⁵⁴ Gordon 1995.

⁵⁵ As, for example, lumping all healers into the three categories of doctor, exorcist and doctor/prophet. See Coffman 1993, 421–422.

⁵⁶ Scarborough 1991, 355. Galen's all-male "official list" of root cutters may have influenced the idea of a profession. See Gordon 1987, 566.

⁵⁷ Scarborough 1991, 143–145.

⁵⁸ Smith 2004.

⁵⁹ Kaufman 1932. The Greek term *pharmakos* raises identical issues.

⁶⁰ Scarborough 1978, 356.

⁶¹ Keane 2002, 67.

⁶² Keane 2002, 71.

⁶³ Keane 2002. Keane's writings are part of a much larger corpus of anthropological research that brings close attention to culturally-specific linguistic ideologies and semiotics modes of interpreting words and objects. His writing is particularly useful because he does not simply equate the meaning of objects with the now wildly-popular idea of performativity

of the same issues of interpretation as healing rites to both those engaged in it and to scholars. As practiced in Indonesia, it appears to the newly-converted Christians as a disturbing degradation of women. These women seem to be “brought-down” to the level of objects so the practice is reinterpreted as merely being symbolic.⁶⁴ To those who engaged in the practice, however, it “exemplified rather than threatened the distinctiveness of human self-worth.”⁶⁵ The exchange is reinterpreted as having primarily symbolic meaning. This new retro-determination makes the exchange “stand for” symbolic meanings that suit the interpreter. For those used to the old system, marriage that is not represented by an exchange means reducing marriage to the level of animal behavior.

In semiotic terms Pliny posits a formal “standing for” relationship between a sign (a plant) and what the sign stands for (nature as divinity). The relations are not arbitrary but instead are either the same or mirror opposite (both formal). At the same time they are all one level removed from divinity but still formally connected to that power. No human intention is needed and no basic transformation of objects into formal representations of divinity. The problem for Pliny is that many people do not understand the workings of the cosmos and supposed healers disseminate disinformation about which items represent healing powers and which do not.

In other healing rituals, parts of nature are employed based on different “economies of representation,” that is, on different interpretation of the role of objects and words. The elaborate rituals preserved in the *PGM* are described by J.Z. Smith and others as modified sacrifices.⁶⁶ Here a miniaturized, mobile version of sacrifice takes place, with an emphasis on the act of writing itself.⁶⁷ In these rituals an item is sanctified by contiguity with a sacred site (altar) or person (officiant), or perhaps by having sacred words spoken over them. Brought into contact with a source of divinity by means of these actions, something closer to a “pivoting of the sacred,” the transformed item now represents power. These rites transform nature (i.e. natural items) into something divine and esoteric in the sense of being hidden from general understanding and restricted to only the few.

as scholars are now doing, making a completely circular argument that objects also “do things” just as words do.

⁶⁴ Keane 2002.

⁶⁵ Keane 2002, 71.

⁶⁶ Smith 2004.

⁶⁷ Smith 2004, 26.

The divine ancestor theory of saliva motivates a special “standing for” relationship between the saliva and its power based on genealogy. This delineation of power is transmittable but also restricted via literal embodiment. Divine saliva cannot be created by any act but it also is not divine based on the Pliny’s sympathy and antipathy.

If we now return to Jesus’ use of saliva as presented in John, whatever ideas the reader might have about the power of saliva, the special usage in this story is establishing the power of the person putting the saliva to work. Despite the fact that many more direct interpretations of healing saliva are available, the anecdote trumps these theories with yet another theory, this one with its emphasis on the figure who uses the saliva as a special type of person (better than both natural causation and a distant divine ancestor). “If he were not from God,” the text explains, “He would not be able to do these things.”⁶⁸ The act points to the special “standing for” relationship of the healer himself.

Outlining Pliny’s ideas does not give us a complete guide to ancient ideas but only his version. Even a small random sample shows the web of strategies used by Late Antique writers, some familiar from Pliny, others not. Tertullian posited that the holy spirit is manifested in the holy water by means of “natural processes” seeming to wish to harness the positive association of this description much as advertisers today use the word “natural” to sell any and every product.⁶⁹ Tatian argued against the use of roots and amulets hoping to set Christians apart in their notion of where divine power is located.⁷⁰ Analyzing these ideas must begin in each case with the particular strategy each author is trying to use to “retro-determine” agency and causality. Only when these are investigated will we be able to construct a complete guide to theories of effective action in late antiquity.

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⁶⁸ John 9:32.

⁶⁹ *De Baptismo* 4.

⁷⁰ *Oratio* 16. Temkin 1991, 120, argues that this is a rejection of magic, an odd stance for a historian of science to take.

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