Among the many miracles attributed to Thomas Becket and collected soon after the archbishop’s violent death in 1170, the story of a wealthy knight named Stephen of Hoyland stands out as a narrative describing the healing of an unusual affliction. Stephen was said to have suffered for thirty years from nightly attacks by a demon, during which assaults he felt himself being crushed or suffocated so ferociously that he imagined he would die. In response to these recurring nocturnal onslaughts, Stephen would call for his servants and beg them to wake him, by raising him to a seated or standing position and even by “violently shak[ing] him by his hair.” In requesting this odd remedy, he seems to have believed that, since the attack arose during sleep, the only solution was to awaken him lest he be killed by the demon in his sleep vision.

While suffering from this intolerable phantasia for decades, the knight had sought out the advice of physicians and offered them many rewards, but despite their efforts, the attacks persisted. The doctors declared that the condition was ephialtes, a Greek term of little significance to the twelfth-century west, and thus requiring the miracle writer’s intervention: “It is what we in Latin can interpret as ‘that which lies on top of something’” or, glossed in a different manuscript, “what is vulgarly [i.e. commonly] known as the incubus, or ‘the crusher’ [oppressor] in Latin.” But the long-suffering Stephen rejects the diagnosis made by the learned physicians: “to those who say it is ephialtes, he constantly asserts that it is a demon.” The stalemate between sufferer and medical practitioners simply continues Stephen’s torment and the need for his servants’ interruption of his sleep.

The remainder of the story relates the inevitable failure of all measures to remove the demon, until he seeks religious intervention. The details of this narrative of healing through the intercession of Thomas Becket follow

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well-worn and predetermined patterns established in the genre of miracle tales and are of little concern for the present discussion. The physicians’ views are proven to be false and their advice ineffectual, as the demonic force is conquered by the power of the martyred archbishop. Pious prayer does what the medical art could not do: it provides relief to the sufferer by overwhelming the demon’s power.

This rich and remarkable narrative introduces the topic under discussion in this essay, the condition known as the incubus, and identifies some of the difficulties medieval doctors faced when dealing with the phenomenon. Although the patient rejects their interpretation, the physicians in the miracle tale have identified Stephen of Hoyland’s affliction as an illness with a lengthy and complex past (and future) in medical literature: the incubus. The physicians in the Becket miracle tale call it by its Greek name, but the more common term for the condition is incubus, a name which, as we shall see, brings with it considerable baggage. This study seeks to explore the disease category of the incubus in relation to two topics: the importance of ‘emotional’ reactions, particularly fear, and the role of the imagination or fantasy in the medical discussion of the condition.

This essay focuses on discussions of the incubus in the medical literature written between the late eleventh and early fourteenth centuries in the Latin west. During this formative period in the history of medieval medicine, as the learned traditions of the ancient and Islamic worlds were rediscovered and explored in Salerno, Paris, Montpellier and elsewhere, the incubus became firmly established as a disease in learned medicine. The incubus is an exceptional category as understood in the medical discourse, in that it straddles the divides between learned and popular, theological and medical, religious and secular. It also provides a

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3 It is highly unusual that physicians in the miracle tale use the Greek term; with rare exception, the medical materials consistently refer to the disease by its Latin name.

4 Given the lack of definite articles in Latin, it is difficult to know if the term should be translated “the incubus” or just “incubus.” This becomes an issue when dealing with the problem of the disease as a personification or as an abstract medical category. For the latter, the use of a definite article would appear awkward in modern English usage, and might distinguish the disease from the demonic figure.