CHAPTER 5

Illness and Imagination: The Healing Miracles of Clare of Montefalco

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From a 2008 journey through Tuscany and Umbria that involved many extraordinary adventures—an ascent of Mount Alverna, a pilgrimage to Santa Maria degli Angeli in Assisi for the Porziuncula Indulgence, a pre-Palio dinner with the contrada of Selva in Siena—the most enduring experience for me remains the memory of Bill Cook shepherding the participants of our NEH Seminar into the empty narthex of the church of Santa Chiara in Montefalco in order to view the relics of its namesake.¹ When we arrived at the church, the viewing panel containing Clare's curious body was closed, so Bill quickly disappeared down a corridor in order to fetch a member of the community who might make it available to us for observation. In those passing moments as we awaited his return, I began to ponder this body, its stories, and its signs. Clare's death in August of 1308 had precipitated an inquiry within and around her community: would her heart bear the marks of Christ's cross, a physical manifestation of the visionary experience she reported in which Christ had implanted her heart with the crucifix and other symbols of the passion? Preparing to examine the organ myself, which the nuns of Montefalco had dissected and preserved and continue to display under the high altar at Santa Chiara, I wondered what act of imagination or perception might have prepared fourteenth-century viewers to regard her body as altered, transformed, branded by God.

In this essay I propose to explore that act of imagination as constructed by her hagiographer, Bérengar of Saint Afrique, in the *Life* of Clare of Montefalco. After becoming abbess in 1291, Clare regularly drifted in and out of prolonged and fervent ecstasies, during which she claimed to have received numerous divine visions and revelations. Her interior affective experiences during these periods of ecstasy were especially notable for their physical and external effects. After her death, Clare's sisters discovered on her heart an impression of the crucifix, the scourge that was used to strike Christ, the crown of thorns, nails, and the lance; and her gallbladder also contained three small stones, which the nuns interpreted as a sign of the trinity. Clare's visionary power and

¹ Professor William R. Cook led three NEH Seminars for College and University professors on "St. Francis and the Thirteenth Century."
her imagination's reception of divine vision, the nuns believed, had left physical
marks, or bodily “proof” of God’s presence and power within her. As described
by Bérengar, Clare’s intimate ecstasies left marks, “not simply as images in con-
templation, but also materially and sensibly.”2 Bérengar’s comment emphasized
continuity between the interior content that colored the imagination, and the
external characteristics the imagination expressed on the body. This continuity
between the internal and external, I will show, was modeled in the person of
Clare and encouraged in sick petitioners by the members of her cult.

Bérengar wrote the Life of Clare, which includes her first posthumous mir-
acles, to prepare the imagination for those who read and heard Clare’s story.3
Bérengar’s hagiography helped shape the imagination of its readers and audi-
tors so that they might expect their own physical transformation. As Giselle
de Nie has shown, miracle stories played a role in training the saint’s audi-
ence to expect a cure or some powerful experience of transformation.4 Clare’s
Life and posthumous miracles enable us to consider the ways that some com-
munites of late medieval Christians understood the relationship of the
imagination to bodily healing. In the miracle stories that describe the nuns’
discovery of the marks on Clare’s heart, Bérengar describes how an entire
community comes together to work out the details, goad the imagination,
and witness a cure.5

By looking at healing miracles in this way, as stories that express an under-
standing of the relationship between body and belief, physical expression and
interior imagination, it is my hope that we can produce a more complete picture
of medieval healthcare. As Joseph Ziegler has urged, medieval healthcare was
multi-dimensional, blending “religious” functions with more clearly “medical”

John E. Rotelle (Villanova, PA: Augustinian Press, 1998), 35; Vita Sanctae Clarae de Cruce:
Ordinis Eremitarum S. Augustini, ed. Alfonso Semenza in Analecta augustiniana, vols. 17–18:
rice contemplando, sed etiam corporaliter et sensibiliter habuisse.”
3 On the Vita, see M. Falconi Pulignani, “Vita di S. Chiara da Montefalco scritta da Berengario
di S. Africaano,” Archivo storico per l’Umbria vol. 1 (1884), 557–625; vol. 11 (1885), 193–266;
Claudio Leonardi, “Chiara e Berengario: L’agiographia sulla santa di Montefalco,” in Chiara da
Montefalco e il suo tempo, eds. Claudio Leonardi and Enrico Menstò (Florence: La Nuova
Italia, 1985), 369–386.
4 Giselle de Nie, The Poetics of Wonder: Testimonies of the New Christian Miracles in the Late
5 Waida considers miracle as a sociological category, see: Manibu Waida, “Miracles,” Encyclopedia
USA, 2005), 1X, 6049–6055.