
The Saliva Superstition in Classical Literature

Author(s): Frank W. Nicolson

Source: *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 1897, Vol. 8 (1897), pp. 23-40

Published by: Department of the Classics, Harvard University

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/310489>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*

JSTOR

THE SALIVA SUPERSTITION IN CLASSICAL LITERATURE.¹

BY FRANK W. NICOLSON.

WE learn from various passages in Greek and Latin writers that the ancients believed in the efficacy of human spittle to cure certain complaints, and in man's power to avert ill-luck by the mere act of spitting. Some of these superstitious beliefs have come down to us, more or less changed, and may be found among the common people in various parts of the world to-day. I have examined and classified the various passages in Greek and Latin which bear upon this subject; and in this paper an attempt will be made to show that these references to spitting, diverse and irreconcilable in their nature as they may seem, may all be explained as traceable to an original belief in the deadly or prohibitive nature of human spittle, when employed against certain of the lower animals. I shall endeavor to show that belief in the physical qualities of saliva, as a curative agency, and faith in its powers when employed symbolically in various forms of magic and witchcraft, had their origin in this original notion of *prohibition*; in other words, that just as the Greeks and Romans used to spit towards or upon a serpent or a toad to kill it

¹ Various forms of superstition concerning spitting and the uses of human spittle have been recently discussed by J. E. Crombie, in *Transactions of the International Folk-Lore Congress*, 1891, and later by E. S. Hartland, in his *Legend of Perseus*, vol. II, pp. 258 *sq.* Both of these interesting articles treat the subject from the standpoint of the specialist in folk-lore, and in neither case is an effort made to present all the evidence to be found in Greek and Latin literature. An attempt is made in this paper to present such evidence in a complete form. The theory here advanced to account for the many varying forms of the superstition, coming as it does from one who is comparatively ignorant of folk-lore, may be taken for what it is worth. It suggested itself to the writer, after a somewhat careful comparative study of all the passages in question, as the only one applicable to all the instances of the superstition occurring in the classics.

or to keep it at a distance, so they used to spit symbolically to ward off the approach of disease or of any vaguer evil that threatened their superstitious minds.

I. PHYSICAL QUALITIES OF SPITTLE.

1. *Deadly and Prohibitive Qualities.*

Belief in the deadly power of human spittle, especially when applied to serpents, but also to various other of the lower animals and even to man himself, seems to have been quite as general among the ancients as the belief in its curative power. The following passages from both Greek and Latin writers may illustrate.

Aelian thinks there is in man, as well as in serpents, a certain mysterious virus, the existence of which may be proved as follows : ἦν δὲ ἄρα καὶ ἐν ἀνθρώπῳ τις ἰὸς ἀπόρρητος, καὶ πεφώραται τὸν τρόπον ἐκεῖνον. ἔχιν εἰ λάβοις καὶ πάνν εὐλαβῶς τε καὶ ἐγκρατῶς τοῦ τραχήλου κατάσχοις, καὶ διαστήσας τὸ στόμα εἶτα αὐτῷ προσπτύσειας, ἐς τὴν νηδὸν κατολισθάνει τὸ πτύαλον, καὶ γίνεται οἱ τοσοῦτον κακὸν ὡς σήπειν τὸν ἔχιν. ἔνθεν τοι καὶ ἀνθρώπῳ δῆγμα ἀνθρώπου μαρόν ἐστι καὶ κινδυνῶδες οὐδενὸς θηρίου μείον (*Hist. An.* ii. 24).

Agatharchides, according to Pliny, attributed this virus to one particular race : “ Similis et in Africa gens Psyllorum fuit, ut Agatharchides scribit. . . . Horum corpori ingenitum fuit uirus exitiale serpentibus et cuius odore sopirent eas. Mos uero liberos genitos protinus obiciendi saeuissimis earum, eoque genere pudicitiam coniugum experiendi, non profugientibus adulterino sanguine natos serpentibus ” (*N. H.* vii. 14). But in the same book Pliny himself attributes this power to all men : “ Et tamen omnibus hominibus contra serpentes inest uenenum : feruntque ictos saliuæ (ictum saliuæ?) ut feruentis aquae contactum fugere. Quod si in fauces penetrauerit, etiam mori : idque maxime humani ieiuni oris ” (*N. H.* vii. 15).

In another book Pliny quotes another authority for the same belief : “ Opilius (tradit) serpentes (rumpi) si quis in hiatum earum exspuat ” (*N. H.* xxviii. 38).

In the notes on this passage in the Delphin edition two other ancient authorities are quoted : “ Sola ieiuni hominis saliuæ absque

ulla incantatione scorpionem interemptum scire se ait Aëtius de Re Med. II. 107 ” (Note to Plin. *N. H.* xxviii. 38). “Habdarrahmanus Aegyptius, interprete Ecchellensi, Cap. I., p. 2.: Si quis ieiunus exspuit super scorpionem, interimit illum ” (Note to Plin. *N. H.* xxviii. 38).

It is clear from the above passages, and especially from the use of the words *iós*, *uirus*, and *uenenum*, that the ancients considered the deadly qualities of human spittle to be due to a resemblance in nature between it and the virus of serpents. It is interesting to note, though not easy of explanation, that the element of fasting enters largely into the deadly powers of spittle. Its relation to the curative powers we shall notice later.

Human spittle being thus dangerous to serpents, the natural result is that they avoid it, “as they would hot water,” Pliny says, in a quotation given above. They flee even from the smell of it:

πολλάκι καὶ βροτέων σιάλων ὑποέτρεσαν ὀδμήν.

Nicander, *Theriaca*, 86.

(Cf. also Agatharchides, quoted by Pliny above, “cuius odore sopirent eas.”)

Aristotle says it is dangerous to most venomous creatures: πάντων δὲ χαλεπώτερα ἔστι τὰ δῆγματα τῶν ἰοβόλων, ἐὰν τύχη ἀλλήλων ἐδηδοκότα, οἷον σκορπίον ἔχῃς. ἔστι δὲ τοῖς πλείστοις αὐτῶν πολέμιον τὸ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου πτύελον (*Hist. An.* viii. 29); and Aelian suggests that it is their sting that is particularly affected: ἀνθρώπου δὲ σιάλῃ καταπτύοντός (φασὶ) ἀμβλύνεσθαι τὸ κέντρον (τῆς ἀσπίδος), καὶ μαλκίειν καὶ ἐς τὴν πληγὴν ἀδύνατον γίνεσθαι (*Hist. An.* ix. 4).

It is not only serpents, however, upon which man’s spittle has a deadly effect, though, to be sure, most of the references point to them; but certain other of the lower animals, especially such as inspire loathing, as, for instance, centipedes and toads, may be destroyed by being spit upon. Aelian mentions the sea centipede (*scolopendra*) in this connection: σκολόπενδρα θαλαττία διαρρήγγονται, ὡς φασιν, ἀνθρώπου προσπτύσαντος αὐτῇ (*Hist. An.* iv. 22).

Pliny makes the same statement on the authority of Marcion of Smyrna, and adds the toad to the list, on the same authority: “Marcion Smyrnaeus, qui de simplicibus effectibus scripsit, rumpi

scolopendras marinas sputo tradit, item rubetas aliasque ranas” (*N. H.* xxviii. 38).

It will be noticed that the verb “burst” is used in both cases. The superstition in precisely this form, though with the addition of the element of fasting, previously noticed, is found in one of Fletcher and Massinger’s plays :

Let him but fasting spit upon a toad
And presently it bursts and dies.

A Very Woman, iii. 1.

Aelian, discussing the wisdom of goats, says that they know very well that man’s spittle is dangerous to other animals, and so avoid it. The passage reads as follows : σοφὰ δὲ αἰγῶν ἔστι καὶ ἐκεῖνα. πτύελον ἀνθρώπου θανατηφόρον εἶναι ζῷω ἐτέρω καλῶς ἴσασι καὶ φυλάττονται, ὥσπερ οὖν καὶ ἡμεῖς πειρώμεθα ἀποδιδράσκειν ὅσα ἀνθρώπῳ κακὸν ἔστιν, εἴπερ οὖν ἀπογεύσαιο αὐτῶν. ἤδη μέντοι τις καὶ ἀνθρώπος ἀγνοῶν καὶ λαθῶν τι κακὸν κατέπειν, αἱ δὲ αἶγες, οὐκ ἂν αὐτὰς λάθοι τὸ προειρημένον. [ἀποκτείνειν δὲ καὶ τὰς θαλαττίας σκολοπένδρας τὸ αὐτὸ δῆπου πτύελον δεινότατόν ἔστι.] μέλλουσα δὲ ἡ αἰξ ἀποσφάττεσθαι, σαφῶς οἶδε· καὶ τὸ μαρτύριον, οὐκ ἂν ἔτι τροφῆς προσάψαιο (*Hist. An.* vii. 26).

The sentence bracketed contains simply the statement made by Aelian in a previous book (iv. 22) and quoted above. It is clearly out of place in this passage. I regard it simply as a gloss on the words πτύελον ἀνθρώπου θανατηφόρον ζῷω ἐτέρω of the previous sentence, which crept into the text, and that, too, in the wrong place.

Finally, although the ancients attributed to human spittle many curative powers, as will be seen later, they believed no less strongly that if one man bit another, the bite was likely to prove fatal, owing to the deadly influence of this very same spittle, also esteemed curative.

In a passage already quoted (p. 24), Aelian affirms that while man’s spittle is poisonous enough to kill a snake, it is equally effective against a fellow-man, and that therefore the bite of a man is as dangerous as that of any wild beast. Pliny and Celsus add their testimony to the dangerous nature of a man’s bite : “Morsus hominis inter asperrimos quoque numeratur. Medentur sordes ex auribus ; . . . melius e percussi auribus prosunt” (*Plin. N. H.* xxviii.

40) ; “Sequitur ut de iis (uulneribus) dicam quae morsu fiunt, interdum hominis, interdum simiae, saepe canis. . . Omnis autem fere morsus habet quoddam uirus” (Cels. *de Med.* v. 27).

Albertus Magnus gives an instance of such poisoning on the supposed authority of Aristotle (the work referred to is not genuine), and adds a reason for considering it possible : “Sed de mirabilibus quae uisa sunt in talibus est unum quod refert Aristoteles, in libro de regimine dominorum, quem scripsit ad Alexandrum : quod uidelicet puella missa fuit Alexandro ex cuius morsu moriebantur homines, sicut ex morsu serpentum : et humor saliuialis in ipsa fuit uenenum. Et possibilitas huius probatur ex eo quod sagitta intincta in saliuam hominis ieiuni intoxicatur, quando uulnerat alium” (*de Anim. Tract.* vii. 2. 5).

We may note in this connection the superstition prevalent in the Southern States, that the bite of a “blue-gum” negro is deadly.

2. *Curative Qualities.*

Several passages indicate clearly a belief in the benign medicinal influence of human spittle in certain complaints. Pliny states that eruptions of the skin, leprosy, inflammation of the eyes, and cancer may all be avoided by its use : “Credamus ergo lichenas leprasque ieiunae (sc. saliuae) illitu assiduo arceri : item lippitudines, matutina quoque uelut inunctione : carcinomata, malo terrae subacto” (*N. H.* xxviii. 37). Note the use of *arceri* as suggesting prohibition.

Pliny also suggests a method to cure incipient boils : “(Mos est) incipientes furunculos ter praesignare ieiuna saliuam” (*N. H.* xxviii. 36). In a note on this passage in the Delphin edition Habdarrahamanus the Egyptian is quoted on the authority of Ecchellensis as advising the application of “fasting spittle” (*sputum ieiuni*) to tumors. Another note in the same edition gives, though it does not support, a suggested explanation for these cures : “Quam uim saliuae tribuunt ad eleuandam ulcerum malignitatem, illius sane origo est quod sodii et potassialis hydrochlorati saliuae inest : at uis illa quantula est, si est!” (Note to Plin. *N. H.* xxviii. 35).

It will be noticed that in the cases already mentioned, as well as in those that follow, a preference is shown for the spittle of a fasting

person (*ieiunus*). An attempt has been made to explain this, in accordance with the suggestion in the quotation last given, by means of a theory that the spittle of one who has fasted for some time is saltier than that of one who has recently dined, there being less water in his system!

There seems to have been a belief that human spittle would cure snake bites. Habdarrahmanus, already quoted, says so (*loc. cit.*); and Pliny (*N. H.* vii. 13) quotes Varro as authority for the story that there was a people in Asia Minor called the Ophiogenes, “quorum saliuæ contra ictus serpentium medeantur.”

Pliny’s recommendation of the use of spittle to cure inflammation of the eyes (*lippitudo*) is given above. In the same book of his Natural History, a few chapters later, we read: “Mulieris quoque saliuam ieiunæ potentem diiudicant cruentatis oculis” (*N. H.* xxviii. 76).

I have nowhere found a claim made by an ancient writer that the use of spittle will cure total blindness; but in the miracle of the restoration of sight by Christ to the blind man, as recounted by St. Mark and St. John, and in the almost equally famous story told by Tacitus and Suetonius of the healing of the blind Alexandrian by the Emperor Vespasian, it will be noticed that the use of spittle plays a prominent part. The Biblical narratives are as follows:

“And he took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the town; and when he had spit on his eyes, and put his hands upon him, he asked him if he saw aught.” St. Mark, viii. 23.

“When he had thus spoken, he spat on the ground and made clay of the spittle, and he anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay.” St. John, ix. 6.

Incidentally may be mentioned a recommendation of the use of clay in eye troubles by Serenus Sammonicus, the physician:

Si tumor insolitus typho se tollat inani
Turgentes oculos uili circumline caeno.

De Med. Praec. 225, 226.

Cf. also the use of clay made with spittle in sorcery (p. 40).

Tacitus’s account of Vespasian’s reputed miracle begins as follows: “E plebe Alexandrina quidam oculorum tabe notus genua eius

(Vespasiani) aduoluitur, remedium caecitatis exposcens gemitu, monitu Serapidis dei, quem dedita superstitionibus gens ante alios colit; precabaturque principem ut genas et oculorum orbes dignaretur respergere oris excremento" (*Hist.* iv. 81).

This is the complete account as given by Suetonius in a more concise form: "E plebe quidam luminibus orbatu, item alius debili crure, sedentem (Vespasianum) pro tribunali pariter adierunt, orantes opem ualetudinis, demonstratam a Serapide per quietem: restitutum oculos, si inspisset: confirmaturum crus, si dignaretur calce contingere. Cum uix fides esset ullo modo rem successuram, ideoque ne experiri quidem auderet, extremo hortantibus amicis palam pro contione utrumque tentauit, nec euentus defuit" (*Vesp.* 7). Cf. a parallel story told of Hadrian by Spartianus (*Hadr.* 25).

In the Biblical narratives the employment of spitting may be purely symbolical on the part of the performer of the miracle, though it seems to depend for its force upon some underlying superstition of the people: but in the profane history the request for the use of spittle comes in both authors from the blind man himself, which seems to show a belief, more or less general, that blindness could be cured by the proper use of spittle by the proper person.

Another Biblical instance of the use of spittle for a purely symbolical purpose in the process of curing is in the miracle of the restoration of hearing to the deaf man. St. Mark's account is as follows:

"And he took him (the deaf-and-dumb man) aside from the multitude, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spit, and touched his tongue (*καὶ πτύσας ἤψατο τῆς γλώσσης αὐτοῦ*), and looking up to heaven he sighed, and saith unto him, Ephphatha, that is, Be opened." St. Mark, vii. 33, 34.

The use of spittle in the rite of baptism in the Roman Catholic church seems to be based upon this narrative. After the ceremony of making the "sign of the cross," the priest recites an exorcism, touches the ears and the nostrils of the candidate for baptism with a little spittle, and says: "*Ephpheta, quod est adaperire, in odorem suauitatis; tu autem effugare, diabole; adpropinquabit enim iudicium Dei.*" Here the element of prohibition is strongly marked.

II. SYMBOLICAL QUALITIES OF SPITTLE.

1. *Its Use in Medicine and Healing.*

In all the cases above given involving the curative powers of saliva, it seems to have been applied directly to the parts affected by disease. The number of instances is greater, however, in which the healing is represented as due not to the physical, but to a symbolical use of saliva. Erasmus thus refers to its magical use in medicine: "Et in admouendis remediis ter exspuere, habebatur salutare" (*Chil. Prouerb. s. v. despuere malum*).

Pliny's words imply even a more general resort to this custom: "Et iam eadem ratione (*i.e.* spuendo) terna despuere deprecatione in omni medicina mos est, atque ita effectus adiuuare" (*N. H.* xxviii. 36).

He gives three specific cases where the custom may be employed to advantage:

"(Folia urticae) praecipua contra tumores feruoresque et collectiones cum axungia uetere tusa, ita ut ferro non attingatur; qui perunctus est despuat (despuat?) ad suam dexteram ter. Efficacius remedium esse aiunt si tres quoque trium nationum homines perungant dextrorsus" (*N. H.* xxiv. 172).

"Erigeron a nostris uocatur senecio. Hanc si ferro circumscriptam effodiat aliquis, tangatque ea dentem, et alternis ter despuat, ac reponat in eundem locum ita ut uiuat herba, aiunt dentem eum postea non doliturum" (*N. H.* xxv. 167).

"Panos sanat . . . uerbascum cum sua radice tusum, uino aspersum, folioque inuolutum, et ita in cinere calefactum ut imponatur calidum. Experti affirmare plurimum referre si uirgo imponat nuda, ieiuna ieiuno, et manu supina tangens dicat, 'Negat Apollo pestem posse crescere cui nuda uirgo restinguat,' atque ita retrorsa manu ter dicat, totiesque despuant ambo" (*N. H.* xxvi. 92, 93).

The custom of spitting upon an individual attacked with epilepsy, or upon one's own breast at sight of an epileptic, is attested by several passages in the ancient writers. That spitting in this case was not intended to be curative, but was merely symbolical, is proved by the fact that the superstitious man did not always spit upon the

epileptic, but sometimes into his own breast. The purpose of spitting was, we are told by Pliny, to keep off contagion: "Despuimus comitiales morbos, hoc est, contagia regerimus" (*N. H.* xxviii. 35).

With the idea of "driving back" implied in *regerimus*, cf. [*despuendo*] *fascinationes repercutimus* (Plin. *N. H.* xxviii. 35), quoted below.

The idea of the ancients was not that by spitting upon an epileptic they kept him at a distance, and so avoided mere physical contact; but the spitting had a purely symbolical intention, for they followed the same custom in the case of a madman, whose disease could certainly not be caught by mere physical contact: ὁ δὲ δαιμονδαίμων τοιοῦτός τις (δόξειεν εἶναι) ὁ ἴος . . . μαινόμενόν τε ἰδὼν ἢ ἐπιληπτον, φρίξας εἰς κόλπον πτύσαι (Theoph. *Charact., de Superst., fin.*).

The explanation seems rather to be this. Epilepsy, variously named *morbis sacer, diuus, demoniacus, Hercules, comitialis, caducus, lunaticus astralis, maior*, was one of the most mysterious and most dreaded diseases of the ancients. As the first three of the above epithets imply, it was regarded as a direct visitation from the gods, and the unfortunate epileptic was looked upon as "possessed with a devil." Madness and a few other forms of disease were explained in the same way, but epilepsy, being the most dreaded of all, was regarded as the demoniacal disease, *par excellence*. Assuming the truth of the theory which this paper aims to support, — that of the prohibitive qualities of human spittle symbolically used, — nothing could be more natural than that a superstitious man, believing in these qualities, when he met an epileptic, or saw one fall in a fit, should spit upon him or upon his own breast, to keep the devil that was in the man from seizing upon himself also.

The most common name of the disease was *morbis comitialis*, which Erasmus is careful to explain was not given to it because the sick man was more liable to be taken with it in a crowd, but because the occurrence of this ominous disease on the day of the comitia was sufficient to cause a postponement of the meeting (see Festus, s. v. *prohibere*): "(Veteres) sibi persuaserant desputationem esse remedium aduersus imminencia mala, praecipue aduersus morbum comitiale: cui non hinc tantum est nomen inditum quod in hominum frequentia saepius aboriatur, uerum etiam quod prohibeat comitia fieri" (*Chil. Prouerb.* s. v. *despuere malum*).

A well-known reference to the custom of spitting upon an epileptic is found in Plautus :

TY. Hegio, istic homo rabiosus habitus est in Alide :

Et illic isti qui sputatur morbus interdum uenit.

AR. Et (ain) eum morbum mi esse, ut qui med opus sit insputarier?

HE. Ne uerere : multos iste morbus homines macerat,
Quibus insputari saluti fuit atque is profuit.

Capt. 547 sq.

In the following passage the verb *despuo* seems to carry a double meaning, the primary reference being to the custom under consideration, with a subordinate idea of spitting as a sign of contempt: "Neque enim grauius est corpore quam corde collabi, pede potius quam mente corruere, in cubiculo despui quam in isto splendidissimo coetu detestari" (Apul. *Apol.* 489).

Finally, we learn on the authority of Pliny that quails (*coturnices*) are the only creatures to share with man liability to this dread disease ; for which reason, as well as on account of their fondness for poison as food, they do not appear upon the table: "Coturnicibus ueneni semen gratissimus cibus; quam ob causam eas damnauere mensae, simulque comitalem propter morbum despui suetum, quem solae animalium sentiunt praeter hominem" (*N. H.* x. 69).

With the above instances of the ancient custom of spitting upon an epileptic may be compared the following account of a Viennese custom as given by Blaas, *Volksth. aus Niederösterreich* (*Germ.* xxix. 86): "Damit ein Gelbsüchtiger seine Krankheit verliere, soll man ihm, wenn man ihm begegnet, in's Gesicht spucken." (So also Wuttke, *Der Deutsche Volksaberglaube*, p. 333.)

The following passages seem to combine both the curative and the symbolical element. The first three have to do with healing. Pliny gives this remedy for a pain in the neck: "(Credamus) ceruicis dolorem (arceri), saliuā ieiuni dextra manu ad dextrum poplitem relata, laeua ad sinistrum" (*N. H.* xxviii. 37).

The same cure occurs in a slightly different form in Marcellus Empiricus: "Ad ceruicum dolores remedium physicum sic: ieiunus

dextram manum saliu tange, et dextrum poplitem perfrica: deinde sinistra manu sinistrum: et hoc ter per singulos poplites facito, statim remediabis" (*de Med.* xviii. 4).

The second remedy is to be applied when one's arm or leg has "gone to sleep": "Salpe (scripsit) torporem sedari quocumque membro stupente, si quis in sinum exspuat, aut si superior palpebra saliu tangatur" (Plin. *N. H.* xxviii. 38).

The next remedy is for mental troubles: "Alius saliu post aurem digito relata sollicitudinem animi propitiat" (Plin. *N. H.* xxviii. 25).

It will be noticed that in none of these three cases is the spittle to be applied directly to the part affected. While there may be in each case an underlying notion of its curative power, it is pretty clear that the use of it in all three is symbolical. And however much or little the curative power of spittle is in question, its prohibitive nature is here very strongly marked. In each instance some troublesome thing has to be kept off or driven away, whether pain from the neck, or torpor from the limbs, or anxiety from the mind. A modern parallel to the second instance is to be found in the custom of small boys in various parts of the country, who spit on their legs when they go in swimming, "to keep away the cramps."

If an insect crawls into the ear, here is a method for getting it out: "Si quod animal aurem intraerit et inspuatur, exire (credamus)" (Plin. *N. H.* xxviii. 37).

As we cannot expect to spit upon the creature itself under these circumstances, the act must be in this case also prohibitive, rather than either curative or deadly. We must suppose that the insect, knowing the deadly nature of human spittle, seeks to escape at once from the dangerous locality, and its only way to escape is to come out.

The most difficult passage of all is the following. Pliny tells us that if one is sorry for a blow which he has given to any creature, and will spit into the middle of the hand which gave the blow, the suffering victim will be immediately freed from pain: "Mirum dicemus sed experimento facile: si quem paeniteat ictus eminus cominusue illati, et statim exspuat mediam in manum qua percussit, leuatur ilico percussus a poena. Hoc saepe delumbata quadrupede approbatur, statim a tali remedio correcto animalis ingressu" (*N. H.* xxviii. 36).

It is plain that in this case also the curative element is merely employed symbolically, for the injured animal may be some distance away when the cure is attempted, and in any case the spitting is into the hand, and not upon the animal. The action of spitting is purely symbolical and prohibitive, and its object is to drive away pain from the animal.

But Pliny adds to this passage something which is less easy of explanation. He says that some increase the force of a blow before giving it, by spitting on the hands in the same way: "Quidam uero aggrauant ictus, ante conatum simili modo saliuā in manu ingesta" (*N. H.* xxviii. 37).

At first sight this looks like a case merely of bad reasoning: if we can diminish the force of a blow after it is given by spitting on the hand that gave it, conversely we can increase the force of a blow before giving it by following the same method. Yet even here the prohibitive theory of symbolical spitting is as applicable as in many of the cases we have discussed. For it may be said that just as in the use of drugs or charms we spit to keep away any bad influence which would spoil the effect of the drug or the charm, so here we spit on our hand before giving a blow, to keep off anything that would tend to weaken the effect of the blow. This seems rather a far-fetched explanation of the reason why spade-laborers, for instance, spit constantly upon their hands. One would naturally say that the explanation was purely a physical one,—they spit to moisten the hand and so secure a firmer grasp of the implement they are using. Yet there are cases where the action seems purely symbolical, as, for instance, when a man dares another to "come on," and by way of preparation, and of enforcing the power of his blows, "rolls up his sleeves and spits on his hands."

In nearly all the instances given above of the use of human spittle for the purpose of healing, whether such use appears directly curative or merely symbolical, it is easy to trace the idea of *prohibition*. Many of the words employed in the various passages themselves suggest it, and to some cases of this character attention has been called. The use of spittle in healing may have been originally purely symbolical, being directed against some unknown bad influence or spirit which might be supposed to be endeavoring to counter-

act the good effects of the drugs employed, or against the disease itself, or perhaps against Death. This negative prohibitory notion would tend in time to assume in the minds of the people a positive form, and they would come to regard that which kept disease away as itself an active curative principle.

2. *To Avert Evil Influences of Various Sorts.*

Having observed the belief of the ancients to be that they could not only keep off from themselves and even kill serpents and other loathsome animals merely by spitting towards or upon them, but could also keep off or cure certain diseases by the use of spittle, we may now notice certain other symbolical uses of spitting by the superstitious Greeks and Romans. It will be seen that they all contain the idea of *prohibition*, and so may be explained in accordance with the physical views above indicated; that is, the Greeks and Romans used to spit, symbolically, to keep off any evil suggested by their superstitious minds, just as they used to spit, physically, upon or toward a noxious animal to keep it away from them.

Erasmus states the custom plainly, as follows: "Manet et hodie in uulgi moribus ut si quid audiant execrandum quod sibi nolint euenire, despuant uelut abominantes. Id autem haesit ex ueterum superstitione, qui sibi persuaserant desputationem esse remedium aduersus imminetia mala" (*Chil. Prouerb. s. v. despuere malum*).

Old women are always more given to superstition than younger people, and so Theocritus and Persius make special mention of them in this connection:

ἄμμιν δ' ἄσυχία τε μέλοι γράϊα τε παρείη
ἄτις ἐπιφθύζουσα τὰ μὴ καλὰ νόσφιν ἐρύκοι.

Theoc. *Idyll.* vii. 127.

Ecce auia aut metuens diuum matertera cunis
Exemit puerum, frontemque atque uda labella
Infami digito et lustralibus ante saliuus
Expiat, urentis oculos inhibere perita.

Pers. ii. 31.

Here the "grandmother or superstitious aunt" acts for the child, which is not yet old enough to spit for itself and so keep off the "evil eye."

A parallel to this custom is found in the rite of baptism in the Roman Catholic church, already referred to (p. 29). Here the spittle is used in its double character, both curative and prohibitive; for the priest not only touches the child's ears and nostrils with spittle, and says Ephphatha, etc., but he also recites an exorcism, and adds to the prayer for the opening of the ears the apostrophe, "But be thou put to flight, O Devil, for the judgment of God will be at hand."

We have seen from a passage of Erasmus, quoted above, that the ancients used to spit, as if to avert the omen, when they heard anything which served to call up to their minds the idea of misfortune or trouble. The prohibitive idea which we are trying to illustrate is well shown in this passage from Seneca: "Quis umquam uestrum de exilio, de egestate, de luctu cogitare ausus est? Quis non si admoneatur ut (de his?) cogitet, tamquam dirum non respuat, et in capita inimicorum aut ipsius intempestiui monitoris abire illa iubeat?" (*Consol. ad Marciam*, ix.) In the same way the common people of Germany are accustomed at the present day to spit on the mention of illness or misfortune.

Pliny tells us that by spitting we may preserve ourselves from witchcraft, and the ill effects which naturally follow from meeting a man lame in the right leg: "Simili modo (*i.e.* despuendo) et fascinationes repercutimus dextraeque clauditis occursum" (*N. H.* xxviii. 35). Notice in this instance the emphatic verb used (*repercutimus*) as if of "driving back" a creature approaching one.

The three following cases may be considered together:—

A nurse in charge of a sleeping infant, on the approach of a stranger, spits towards him (not upon him), as if to keep off from the child a possibly evil influence: "Nos si haec, et illa credamus rite fieri: extranei interuentu, aut si dormiens spectetur infans, a nutrice terna aspui" (*Plin. N. H.* xxviii. 39). The Russian nurse of to-day, in a like case, spits in the stranger's face (*Grimm, Deutsche Mythologie*, 4th ed. p. 923).

A maiden who rejects a rough country lover spits upon her own

breast (not upon him), as a sign of loathing, and to keep off the omen implied by his hateful presence :

τοιάδε μυθίζουσα τρὶς εἰς ἐὼν ἔπτυσσε κόλπον.

Theoc. *Idyll.* xx. 11.

A crowd of boisterous youths, mocking an old lover who comes in his dotage to pay court to his mistress, in order to avert from themselves the ill omen implied in this preposterous love, spit, not upon the old man, but each upon his own breast :

Hunc puer, hunc iuuenis turba circumterit arta,

Despuit in molles et sibi quisque sinus. Tib. i. 2. 96.

It is to be noticed that in the last three instances the actors do not spit upon the person who inspires their fear or loathing. Such an act was common enough, and implied merely contempt for the person so treated. In these three cases the idea is prohibition, — of the approach of the stranger in the first case, of the approach of misfortune, as implied in an ill omen, in the other two; and so the spitting is in all three purely symbolical, in the first case *towards* the stranger, in the others upon the breasts of the actors themselves. Cf. with the last three passages a somewhat parallel case in Maximianus (*El.* ii. 11–13). See also Becker, *Charicles*, I², 240–242.

3. *To Avert the Approach of Nemesis.*

The ancients lived in constant dread of Nemesis, the goddess of justice, who might at any moment change their good-fortune to ill, as a punishment for some previous crime. The approach of this avenging goddess they conceived might be warded off by spitting upon the breast:

ὡς ἀγαθὴ θεὸς ἐστὶ, δι' ἣν ὑπὸ κόλπον, Ἄλεξι,
πτύομεν, ὑστερόπουν ἀζόμενοι Νέμεσιν.

Anth. Pal. xii. 229.

Compare also this passage from Lucian:

καὶ ἐψέκει ἡ Ἀδράστεια (*Nemesis*) τότε κατόπιν ἐφεστῶσά σοι εὐδοκιμούντι ἐφ' οἷς κατηγορεῖς τῶν ἄλλων, καταγελαῶν ὡς ἂν θεὸς εἰδύα τὴν

μέλλουσάν σοι ἐς τὰ ὅμοια μεταβολὴν καὶ ὅτι οὐκ ἐς τὸν κόλπον πτύσας πρότερον ἠξίους κατηγορεῖν τῶν διὰ ποικίλας τινὰς τύχας τοιαῦτα πράττειν ὑπομενούτων. *Αῖολ.* vi.

Nemesis, they thought, was especially likely to be on the track of one who indulged in "big talk," and one who found himself doing this used to spit, to avert the approach of the angry goddess. Hence the proverbial expressions:

εἰς κόλπον οὐ πτύει: ἐπὶ τῶν μεγαλούχων.

Paroemiogr., Leutsch, I. p. 245.

εἰς κόλπον πτύει: ἀντὶ τοῦ μεγαλορρημονεῖς.

Paroemiogr., Leutsch, II. p. 112.

The common belief on the subject of the punishment which followed boasting is expressed by Plato: μὴ μέγα λέγε, μὴ τις ἡμῶν βασκανία περιτρέψῃ τὸν λόγον τὸν μέλλοντα λέγεσθαι (*Phaed.* 95 B). So Damoetas, one of Theocritus's herdsmen, after singing his own praises for some time, checks himself, and remembering the instructions of a superstitious old woman, spits three times into his breast to avert the omen:

ὡς μὴ βασκανθῶ δέ, τρίς εἰς ἐμὸν ἔπτυσσα κόλπον·
ταῦτα γὰρ ἂ γραία με Κοτύτταρις ἐξεδίδαξε.

Theoc. *Idyll.* vi. 39.

A doubtful case is the following, from Juvenal:

'Sed genus ignauum, quod lecto gaudet et umbra.'
Dic igitur, quid causidicis ciuilia praestent
Officia et magno comites in fasce libelli.
Ipsi magna sonant, sed tum, cum creditor audit,
Praecipue, uel si tetigit latus acrior illo
Qui uenit ad dubium grandi cum codice nomen.
Tunc immensa caui spirant mendacia folles
Conspuiturque sinus. *Sat.* vii. 105-112.

The scholiasts give two interpretations of the words "conspuitur sinus," — (1) in accordance with the preceding passages, that the spitting is to avert the ill omen implied in the lawyer's boasting talk (cf. *magna sonant*); (2) *a loquendo multum spuunt* (cf. Quint. *Inst. Orat.* xi. 3. 56, where he names as one of the vices of oratory "*tussire*

et exspuere crebro”). The first of these two explanations is adopted by Madvig and Mayor; Maclean prefers the second, thinking that *conspuo* would not be used of spitting to avert the omen, but rather *despuo*. But *conspuo* is used in this very sense, if we accept the MSS. reading, in a passage in Petronius (74) to be considered later. Nevertheless, I am inclined to think that the second explanation is the correct one here. The reference to spitting seems to me to be too casual and unemphatic to be capable of the fuller interpretation which the scholiast endeavors to read into it.

Not only “big talk” but likewise excessive hopes were considered likely to invite a hostile visitation from the gods, especially from Nemesis, which could be averted by spitting. Erasmus and Pliny both refer to this belief: “Simili superstitione contra improbae spei fascinum ter in sinum expuebant” (Erasm. *Chil. Prouerb. s. v. despuere malum*); “Veniam quoque a deis spei alicuius audacioris petimus, in sinum spuendo” (Plin. *N. H.* xxviii. 36).

There seems to have been a proverb on the subject: οὐ μὴν τὰς γε ἐλπίδας ἀνείλεν, ἀλλ’ εἰσὶ καὶ λαμπραὶ· πτώω δὲ εἰς κόλπον, τῇ παροιμίᾳ πειθόμενος (Libanius, *Epist.* 191, *ad Modestum*).

Naturally enough, “putting on airs” was liable to the same punishment as “big talk,” and the punishment could be averted in the same way. Compare the following passages: ὑπερμαζῆς γάρ, ὦ Ἀδείμαντε, καὶ ἐς τὸν κόλπον οὐ πτύεις; (Lucian, *Nav.* xv.); “At inflat se tamquam rana, et in sinum suum non sputit (so Bücheler; MSS. *conspuit*), codex, non mulier” (Petron. 74).

4. Use in Charms and Incantations.

The efficacy of charms and incantations was supposed to be increased by spitting three times during, or after, their use. The explanation would seem to be the same as in the case of the symbolical spitting in the use of drugs,—namely, to keep away any evil influence that would interfere with the working of the charm. Here are two references to the custom:

Haec mihi composuit cantus, quis fallere posses:
Ter cane, ter dictis despuo carminibus. Tib. i. 2. 54.

“Hoc peracto carmine ter me iussit (anicula) expuere terque lapillos conicere in sinum, quos ipsa praecantatos purpura inuoluerat.” Petron. 131.

The words of a charm and instructions for employing it are thus given by Theocritus:

καὶ λέγ' ἐπιφθύζουσα· τὰ Δέλφιδος ὄστέα μάσσω.

Theoc. *Idyll.* ii. 62.

Another use of spittle in sorcery might be put under this head: “Mox turbatum sputo puluerem medio sustulit digito frontemque repugnantis signavit (anicula)” (Petron. 131).

The modern custom of “spitting for luck” is well known, and instances could be multiplied. A boy playing marbles, if he sees his companion’s marble on the way to strike his own, spits in front of it to avert the contact. The custom is here clearly symbolical and prohibitive. The same boy spits on his bait “for luck” when he goes fishing. A waiter spits “for luck” on the first piece of money which he receives as a tip in the course of the day. The act of spitting in the last two cases may have been originally intended not so much to bring good luck as to keep away bad luck and evil influences.