

physician? Would you prescribe medications that were only placebos? Let me tell you a story that helps explain what I'm suggesting.

In AD 800, Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne emperor of the Romans, thus establishing a direct link between church and state. From then on the Holy Roman emperors, followed by the kings of Europe, were imbued with the glow of divinity. Out of this came what was called the "royal touch"—the practice of healing people. Throughout the Middle Ages, as one historian after another chronicled, the great kings would regularly pass through the crowds, dispensing the royal touch. Charles II of England (1630–1685), for instance, was said to have touched some 100,000 people during his reign; and the records even include the names of several American colonists, who returned to the Old World from the New World just to cross paths with King Charles and be healed.

Did the royal touch really work? If no one had ever gotten better after receiving the royal touch, the practice would obviously have withered away. But throughout history, the royal touch was said to have cured thousands of people. Scrofula, a disfiguring and socially isolating disease often mistaken for leprosy, was believed to be dispelled by the royal touch. Shakespeare wrote in *Macbeth*: "Strangely visited people, All sworn and ulcerous, pitiful to the eye . . . Put on with holy prayers and 'tis spoken, the healing benediction." The royal touch continued until the 1820s, by which time monarchs were no longer considered heaven-sent—and (we might imagine) "new, improved!" advances in Egyptian mummy ointments made the royal touch obsolete.

When people think about a placebo such as the royal touch, they usually dismiss it as "just psychology." But, there