

A medieval-style illustration depicting the Virgin Mary holding a lily, with a man kneeling before her in a church setting. The Virgin Mary is shown in a long, flowing white robe with a blue mantle, holding a white lily. She has a halo and is looking down at the man. The man is kneeling, wearing a dark tunic with a red and black diamond pattern, and looking up at her. In the background, there are other figures, including a group of men in white robes looking on. The setting appears to be a church interior with stone walls and a large window.

JAN M. ZIOLKOWSKI

READING THE JUGGLER OF NOTRE DAME

Medieval Miracles and Modern Remakings



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1. The Medieval Story

“Our Lady’s Tumbler” here refers to a piece of French poetry from the Middle Ages. Probably a product of the late 1230s, the poem survives in [five manuscripts](#). It was written in a northern form of the medieval language or cluster of dialects that is conventionally [called Old French](#), with features that point to influence from the region of Picardy. The text comprises 342 rhyming couplets, for a total of 684 octosyllabic lines.

Though generally considered anonymous, the verse narrative has often been wrongly ascribed to the thirteenth-century Benedictine monk [Gautier de Coinci](#), who composed in medieval French verse the vast *Miracles of Our Lady*. Likewise, the story contained in it has sometimes been credited mistakenly to Jacobus de Voragine, also from the thirteenth century but Italian and a Dominican friar, who wrote the *Legenda Aurea* or “The Golden Legend,” an enormously popular collection of saints’ lives in prose. Neither attribution is correct. The author, still unidentified and likely to remain so till doomsday, is put under the rubric of that most prolific of medieval authors, Anonymous (anon., for short).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the work of this unidentified poet was generally called *Del Tumbeor Nostre Dame*, with the *del* (meaning “of”) often omitted. This title is one of a few that have been transmitted in manuscripts, none of them likely to be authorial but instead all scribal. Early on, the words were translated as “Of Our Lady’s Tumbler,” with the order of the nouns in the original flipflopped. “Our Lady” refers to the personage known in Catholicism as the Blessed Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus. Though not as common as some synonyms, *tumbler* is a sufficiently normal word for an acrobat or gymnast who performs somersaults.

The name of the story raised greater challenges in French than in English. For a start, in modern speech the noun *tombeur*, corresponding roughly to *tumbeor*, means lady-killer. Consequently, the title was modified to avoid the less-than-saintly associations of *tombeur* by substituting the synonym *jongleur*. The old-fashioned spelling of *Nostre* was modernized by deletion of the *s*. Finally, grammar now demands adding the word *de* to fulfill the role of *of* in English. By putting these little adjustments together, the poem is now routinely entitled *Le Jongleur de Notre Dame*.

Confusingly, that expression can refer equally to a short story from the fin de siècle by the Nobel prizewinning French writer Anatole France and to an opera from the early twentieth century by the once well-known but now neglected French composer

Jules Massenet. Even more misleadingly, none of the three works has the slightest connection with *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* by Victor Hugo or even with the famous cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris. The epithet Notre Dame, meaning "Our Lady," designates the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus, venerated in the Christian church. The name is attached to many cathedrals, churches, and chapels in France, so often that it can stand for one of them by itself. In this usage, the two words are in French properly hyphenated as *Notre-Dame*.

Enough fussing and fretting about the title: more major issues await in the contents. The tale tells of an all-round professional entertainer who is what the Middle Ages labeled indiscriminately a minstrel, mime-player, and the like. His versatility is borne out in the sole illustration of the poem to survive in a medieval manuscript, which shows him performing as a gymnast but includes a depiction of his violin-like musical instrument.



Fig. 1: The jongleur before the Virgin and Child. An angelic hand delivers a towel from the heavens while a protoviolin lies at the Virgin's feet. Miniature, thirteenth century. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Arsenal 3516, fol. 127r. Image courtesy of Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. All rights reserved.

Such professionals belonged to an immensely varied class of itinerant performers who could specialize in verbal, physical, or musical skills. They could overlap with jesters and clowns; they could be storytellers or singers, acrobats or contortionists, or even animal trainers. In the late twelfth and early thirteenth century, the names by which they were called were [evolving](#), along with the laws by which they were governed and the social norms by which they were judged.

This protagonist travels about, giving performances that in his case blur the boundaries between what we differentiate as dance and gymnastics. In doing so, he achieves ever more success but ever less satisfaction. Weary of his *métier*, he is eventually stirred to quit the secular world. After forsaking his money, horse, and clothes, he embarks upon a religious life by entering an abbey as a lay brother.

The anonymous medieval poem is all the more exemplary for having no named characters, excepting Mary herself. The nameless minstrel joins the monastery of Clairvaux. In the French region of Burgundy, this abbey had been founded by the man now called Saint Bernard. He and his followers were [Cistercians](#), often styled “white monks,” from the color of their habits. Cistercianism has special relevance to the background of “Our Lady’s Tumbler” because the adherents of this monastic order made a speciality of [collecting and communicating](#), often from oral tradition, short narratives relating to their founders and to the heavenly blessings bestowed upon the brethren, above all by the Virgin Mary. Between 1140 and 1200 the white monks devoted intense efforts to documenting the men and miracles from the especially heroic and saintly early days of their order. In tracing their history, they paid attention not only to the full monks, so-called choir monks, but also to the lay brothers. A word of explanation is called for about this latter group.

By being a lay monk, the lead character was disadvantaged in many ways vis-à-vis the choir monks. Like *jongleurs*, the lay brothers occupied a social space brimming over with ambiguity. Medieval society comprised the so-called three orders: knights who by warring delivered defense, clerics who by praying saw to salvation, and peasants who by tilling the land furnished food. But class systems are rarely as neat as they first appear. In fact, they are usually approximative. In this case, the lay brothers presented a particular quandary by straddling the last two categories.

The conversion of the tumbler to lay brother requires a thoroughgoing transformation. A man who was previously footloose and fancy-free embeds himself in the [fixity of place](#) that has been a regular essential of monasticism in western Christianity. Of his own accord, he dislodges himself from a position in which he was a professional who commanded his trade. Instead, he lands in a new environment with an utterly unfamiliar etiquette. He is illiterate and knows no Latin, he has no grasp of the liturgy that the choir monks must carry out eight times daily, and in fact he fails even to comprehend when he should speak and when he should keep quiet.

The inadequacy of the erstwhile tumbler in singing, reading, and even staying silent induces him after a while to despair. After the world degraded into a dystopia for him, he expected the monastery to be a utopia in contrast. Having the cloister become equally dissatisfying and disappointing knocked his legs out from under him. Yet he perseveres and maps out an escape from what a psychiatrist might diagnose as his clinical depression.

In due course the onetime entertainer devises a solution all his own for expressing his devotion. Whenever the monks gather in the choir of the church to perform the

liturgical office, he descends to the crypt to do acrobatics before a statue of the Virgin. Yet even now, his troubles have not ended. Eventually he is caught in the act by one of the others, who reports his unusual antics to the abbot. When this informant and his superior spy upon the lay brother, they see that his performance prompts Mary to appear. By fanning him and wiping away his sweat, she shows the favor he has won in the eyes of God. Soon afterward he dies, redeemed and vindicated.

The narrator makes clear that the tumbler achieves results not by worshipping a Madonna, which would violate basic Church doctrine, but by venerating Mary through the image of her, in the hope that she will intercede for him with Jesus. He speaks to the representation, but as a conduit to the Mother of God. The likeness does not come to life. Rather, the woman materializes to comfort him. In turn, God is swayed by her to grant the miracle and with it salvation.

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries [the cult of the Virgin](#) grew breathtakingly throughout western Europe. She became the last refuge of sinners, a miracle worker, shielding them from diabolic dangers and interceding in their favor with her son. Her garments offered special protection and solace, as here. Monks, not the least the Cistercians (who dedicated all their churches to Mary), practiced ever greater devotion to her in prayer and poetry, and lay people, to the best of their ability, imitated them. Both churchmen and the laity craved the immediacy of contact that [Marian apparitions](#) procured them. Writings proliferated, Mariological ones that examined her theologically and that refined the doctrines associated with her, sermons that preached her, poems and hymns that praised her, and miracles that celebrated her feats.

This tale belongs to a large grouping of Marian miracles in which the beneficiaries are individuals whose piety compensates for their ignorance. The outcomes of these accounts bring home that the Mother of God can and does reward the faithful for their [saintly simplicity](#). For example, one such story tells of an ignorant but devout monk who can recite none of the obligatory prayers. Instead, to honor the Virgin he recites five psalms whose first letters spell out her name. After his death, [five roses](#) are found in his mouth in miraculous compensation for his devotion.

"Our Lady's Tumbler" establishes a direct equation between the formal liturgy of chanting the office and the improvised and idiosyncratic one of dancing it. The moves of the gymnastic lay brother are enumerated at length. Each is even assigned its own name, almost as if the French technical terms correlate to the Latin liturgical words that are incomprehensible to the lay brother: he has his own jargon. The description of the acrobat's routine demonstrates that the beauty and discipline of physical acts may stand on par with those of formal verbal reverence. At the same time, the detailed representation of the dance leaves the reader to suspect that the author's knowledge could not have been acquired casually. Being so conversant with the tumbler's trade must have required living within it or at least in intimate proximity to it: he was an insider or at a minimum rubbed elbows with one.

Simultaneously, the poet evidences a remarkable openness to what could have been treated by a lesser mind as the rigid hierarchy within the monastery. He shows compassion for the lay brother, who owing to his ignorance of Latin and the liturgy occupied the bottommost point on the social scale of the convent. By the same token, he evinces sympathy for the choir monks above the convert and finally for the abbot at the apex of the community.

As a craftsman of words, the writer knows that his verbal contribution is required to give the tumbler a voice. In the end, it is the acrobat alone, not his fellow monks, who through his humble physicality stirs Mary into action. Then again, no historical document names the gymnast or even attests to his existence. For such awareness as we have of the spiritual exaltation and exultation of his performance and miracle, we depend on the verse.

The abbot displays his wisdom in not subscribing to the harsh verdict of the monk who brings him to watch the lay brother perform. Yet shortly afterward, the same knowledge of people and human nature fails him, since by summoning the anxious newcomer to his quarters for a private interview, he precipitates the emotional turmoil that kills the tired tumbler.

The translation of the poem here holds close to the French, but not, it is hoped, at the cost of being idiomatic. Often the English follows the original in frequent changes of tense, but it does not attempt to retain many uses of the subjunctive when that verbal mood would be out of place today. The presentation here maintains the large initial letters and corresponding textual divisions of the earliest and best manuscript.

The Old French was not put fully into modern French until first Pierre Kunstmann in 1981 and then Paul Bretel in 2003. In contrast, a translation into English prose by Philip Henry Wicksteed was published first in 1894, by Isabel Butler in 1898, by Alice Kemp-Welch in 1908, and by Eugene Mason in 1910. The poem was translated into English verse in 1897 by William Showell Rogers, albeit in a form that attained only extremely limited circulation, and in 1907 by George Cormack. Among later versions, special mention should be made of the one prepared in 1979 by Everett C. Wilkie Jr.

A. "Our Lady's Tumbler"

In the *Lives of the Ancient Fathers*,
 the contents of which are good,
 we are told a little *exemplum*.
 I do not say that people have not heard
 5 equally nice ones many times,
 but this one is not so flawed
 that retelling it does not serve well.
 Now, I want to speak to you and to tell
 of a *minstrel*, what happened to him.

10 **H**e came and went
 in so many places, and spent,
 until he committed himself to a **holy order**,
 because earthly concerns wearied him.
 Horses, clothing, and money,
 15 and **everything he had, he gave** to it;
 and thus, he withdrew from the world,
 for he wished never after to reengage there.
 For this reason, he put himself in that holy order,
 so they say, at **Clairvaux**.
 20 When this young man committed himself
 who was so elegant,
 handsome, gracious, and well formed,
 he knew no profession
 of which they had need there.
 25 For he had not lived except by **tumbling**,
 vaulting, and dancing:
 to leap and bound, this he knew,
 but he knew nothing else,
 because he did not know the **wording of any other prayer**,
 30 not the **Our Father** or the **canticle**,
 not the **creed** or the **Hail Mary**,
 not anything that worked to his salvation.

When he committed himself to this order,
 he saw men with a very **high tonsure**
 35 who expressed themselves by **signs**
 and did **not utter a word** from their mouths.
 He believed most surely
 that otherwise they did not speak.
 But soon he was beyond doubt about it,
 40 because he knew well that as penance they abstained from speech.
 For this reason, they kept silent sometimes,
 so that it happened often
 to be expedient for him to keep silent.
 45 He kept silent so patiently,
 and for such a long time,
 that he would not speak the whole day through,
 unless someone directed him to speak,
 so that they had much **laughter** about this.
 50 In their midst, he was entirely confounded,
 for he did not know how to say or do
 what one was supposed to do inside there.
 Because of this, he was very sad and ashamed;
 he saw the monks and **lay brothers**:
 55 each one served God here and there

in such an office as he held.
 He saw the *priests at the altars*,
 for such was their office,
 the *deacons at the Gospels*,
 60 the *subdeacons at vigils*;
 and in turn the *acolytes stand ready*
for the epistles, when it is the set time for them:
 one pronounces *versicles*, the other the *lesson*.
 And the *young clerics* are at the *psalters*
 65 and the lay brothers at the *Miserere*—
 in this way they present their laments—
 and the most ignorant of them at Our Fathers.
 He looked everywhere, up and down,
 in the workspaces and main buildings,
 70 and he saw hidden in corners
 here five, there three, here two, there one.
 He observed well, as he could, each one:
 he hears *one groan, another weep*,
yet another moan and sigh,
 75 and so he wonders by what they have been touched.
 “*Blessed Mary*,” he then says,
 “by what have these people been touched, that they behave in this
 way
 and display grief of such a kind?
 They are very distressed, it seems to me,
 80 when they make such great mourning all together.”
 “*Blessed Mary*,” he then said,
 “alas, what have I, wretch, said?
 I believe that they pray to God for mercy.
 But what am I, base as I am, doing here?
 85 Here there is not anyone so wretched
 that he does not endeavor entirely
 to serve God in his occupation.
 But I would not have any occupation here,
 for I neither do nor say anything.
 90 I was most wretched when I joined,
 for I know neither to do well nor to pray.
I go about aimlessly,
 I manage here only to waste time
 and to consume food for nothing.
 95 If noticed for this,
 I would be badly mistreated.
 They will put me *out in the fields*,
 for here I am a sturdy peasant,
 and here I do nothing but eat.
 100 I am indeed wretched to a high degree.”
 Then he cries to assuage his grief.

If he had had his wish, he would have wished very much to be dead.
 "Blessed Mary," he said, "oh, mother,
 entreat the father on high
 105 to hold me in his good will,
 and to send me such good counsel,
 that I may be able to serve him and you,
 so that I may be able to merit
 the food that I consume here,
 110 for I know well that I am committing a wrong."

After he had lamented so,
 he went wandering through the monastery
 until he found his way into a [crypt](#).
 So he crouched near an [altar](#)
 115 and as much as he could, he took a place there.
 Above the altar was [the likeness](#)
 of my lady, Blessed Mary.
 He had not at all lost his way
 120 when he headed there.
 God who knows well to guide his people.
 When he heard the [Mass sound](#),
 he leaped up, altogether confounded.
 "Ah!" he said, "how I am betrayed!"
 125 Now each one will say his verses,
 and I am here an [ox on a tether](#)
 who does nothing here but browse
 and squander food for nothing.
 And I will say nothing or do nothing?
 130 By the Mother of God, I will do it so.
 I will not be reproached now,
 I will do what I have learned,
 I will serve the Mother of God
 in her monastery with my office.
 135 The others serve by singing,
 and I will serve by tumbling."

He takes off his cloak, undresses,
 and puts his clothes beside the altar,
 but [so that his flesh would not be naked](#),
 140 he kept a short [tunic](#),
 which was very fine and delicate.
 It counts for little more than an [undershirt](#)—
 so his body remained dressed only in it.
 He is well belted and outfitted;
 145 he belts his robe and arrays himself.
 He turns back to the statue

very humbly and looks at it.
“Lady,” he says, “to your protection
I commit my body and soul.
150 Sweet [queen](#), sweet lady,
do not look down on what I know,
for I wish to put myself to the test,
to serve you in good faith,
if God helps me, without any unseemliness.
155 I do not know how to sing or read for you,
but surely I wish to pick out for you,
by choice, all my lovely stunts.
Now let me be like a kid
that leaps and bounds before its mother.
160 Lady, do not be harsh
to those who serve you rightly;
such as I am, let it be for you!”
Then he begins to make leaps,
little and low, and great and high,
165 first up and then down.
Then he places himself on his knees
toward the image and prostrates himself
“Ah,” he says, “very sweet Queen!
In your mercy, in your generosity,
170 do not look down on my service.”
Then he leaps and tumbles, and in performing makes
[the Metz move, in a circle on his head](#).
He bends toward the image, so he worships it;
as much as he can, he honors it.
175 Afterward, he makes for it the French move,
and then the one of Champagne,
and then he makes for it the Spanish move,
and the moves that they make in Brittany,
and then the Lorraine move:
180 as much as he can, he strives.
Afterward he makes the Roman move:
he puts [his hand in front of his forehead](#)
and dances daintily.
185 He looks with great humility
at the image of the Mother of God.
“Lady,” he says, “here is a good performance,
I do it only for you,
if God helps me, I do it surely,
and for your son, in very first place.
190 I dare indeed to say, and I make boast of it,
that I take no pleasure from it,
except to serve you and thus to discharge my duties.
Others serve and so do I.

Lady, do not spurn your servant,
 195 for I serve you for your pleasure.
 Lady, you are the summit of joy,
 who take stock of the entire world."
 Then he turns his feet upside down
 and goes back and forth on his two hands
 200 before having them again on the ground.
 He dances with his feet and weeps with his eyes.
 "Lady," he said, "I adore you
 with my heart, body, feet, and hands,
 for I know how to do neither more nor less.
 205 From now on I will be your minstrel:
 they will sing there in a group,
 and I will come here to entertain you.
 Lady, you can guide me.
 By God, please do not spurn me."
 210 Then he beats his breast, sighs,
 and sobs very tenderly,
 for he does not know another way to pray.
 Then he turns backward and makes a leap.
 "Lady," he says, "as God is my savior,
 215 I have never before done this.
 This leap is not for the poorly trained;
 on the contrary, it is brand new for you.
 Lady, how he would have his wishes fulfilled
 who could stay with you
 220 in your splendid dwelling.
 By God, Lady, lodge me there;
 I belong to you and not at all to myself."
 Then he performs again the Metz move,
 and tumbles and dances all at once.
 225 And when he hears the chant rise,
 then he begins to push himself.
 So, as long as the Mass goes on,
 his body did not cease dancing,
 prancing, and leaping,
 230 to the degree that he was so close to fainting
 that he could not keep on his feet;
 instead, he sprawled to the ground,
 he fell down, out of sheer fatigue.
 Just as grease comes out from meat on a spit,
 235 so the sweat comes out of him from top to toe,
 from his feet up to his head.
 "Lady," he says, "I cannot do any more now,
 but truly I will come back."
 He seems all inflamed from heat.
 240 He put back on his clothing.

When dressed, he rises,
 bows down to the statue, and goes off.
 "Farewell," he says, "my very sweet friend.
 For God's sake, do not lose heart,
 245 for if able, I will come back.
 At each canonical hour I intend
 to serve you as well as is possible,
 if it is attractive to you and permitted to me."
 Then he goes off, watching the statue.
 250 "Lady," he says, "it is with great regret
 that I do not know all the psalms.
 I would say them gladly
 for love of you, very sweet lady.
 To you I commit my body and soul."

255 **H**e led this life for a very long time:
 at each canonical hour, without holding back,
 he would go before the statue
 to render his service and homage.
 For it pleased him wonderfully,
 260 and he did it so willingly,
 that he was on no day so tired
 as to be unable to accomplish his wish
 to entertain the Mother of God;
 he would never have wished to play another game.
 265 People certainly knew well
 that he went to the crypt daily,
 but no one on earth except God knew
 what it was that he did.
 And he would not have wanted, for all the wealth
 270 the whole world could possess,
 that anyone should know of his conduct,
 except Lord God, all alone.
 For he believed fully that as soon as they knew it,
 they would chase him out of there,
 275 and they would put him back in the lay world,
 which is ringed about entirely by sins,
 and he would have wished to be dead,
 rather than that he should ever submit anew to sins.
 But God, who knew his will
 280 and his very great contrition,
 and the love for which he did it,
 did not want at all to keep his activity hidden.
 On the contrary, the Lord wanted and granted
 that the work of his friend
 285 for his mother, whom he celebrated,
 should be known and evident,

so that everyone should know,
 understand, and recognize
 that God rejects no one
 290 who commits himself to him out of love,
 no matter whatever the profession to which he belonged,
 provided that he loves God and does right.

Do you believe then that God would have approved
 his service if he had not loved him?
 295 Not at all, no matter how much he tumbled,
 but he accepted that he loved him.
 No matter how much you suffer and endure,
 no matter how much you fast and keep vigil,
 no matter how much you weep and sigh,
 300 moan and worship,
 no matter how much you subject yourself to mortifications
 both at Masses and at matins,
 and give whatever you have,
 and pay whatever you owe,
 305 if you do not love God with all your heart,
 these goods are soon cast down to rot.
 In such fashion, understand well,
 they count for nothing in point of salvation.
 For, without love and without charity
 310 all toils are valued at nothing.
 God asks neither gold nor silver,
 but instead true love in people's hearts,
 and God loves such individuals frankly.
 For this reason, God appreciated his devotion.

315 The good man lived this way for a long time:
 I do not know to tally for you the years
 that the good man was thus in comfort.
 But soon he was in great discomfort,
 for a monk took note
 320 who reproved it much in his heart,
 that he did not come to matins.
 He wonders what becomes of him
 and says that he will not make an end
 until he knows
 325 what this man is, how he serves,
 and by what means he *wins his bread*.

The monk stalked,
 followed, and spied on him so much
 that he saw him, quite overtly,

330 perform his craft openly,
 just as I told you.
 "By my faith," he said, "this man has a good time
 and greater joy, it seems to me,
 than we have all put together.
 335 Now the others are at prayer
 and at work in the farm buildings,
 but he dances so vigorously,
 as if he had been paid one hundred silver marks.
 He performs his craft rightly
 340 and pays us as he ought.
 That is a very good arrangement:
 we sing for him, and he tumbles for us;
 we pay him, and he pays us;
 if we weep, he calms us.
 345 For this reason, the monastery should see him now
 as I do, even with the proviso
 that I fast until night.
 There would be no one, I believe,
 who could ever restrain himself from laughing,
 350 if he saw the frenzy
 of this wretch who thus kills himself,
 who so exhausts himself in tumbling
 that he takes no pity on himself.
 God counts it for him as penance,
 355 for he does it without ill intent,
 Surely, I do not hold it for wrong,
 for he does it, as I believe,
 according to his understanding, in good faith,
 for he does not want at all to be idle."
 360 The monk sees this with his own eyes,
 at all hours of the day,
 how he toils without respite.
 He laughed and wept much over this,
 for he feels pleasure and compassion about it.

365 **H**e comes to the abbot and tells him
 from beginning to end the whole tale,
 as you have heard.
 At this, the abbot raised himself to his feet
 and said to the monk: "Now keep silent
 370 and do not make an issue of it.
 By your monastic vows, I enjoin you.
 In fact, if you uphold this injunction well
 so that you do not speak of it except to me,
 we will both see him.
 375 So we will see what can be going on

and we will pray to the heavenly king
 and his very sweet, dear mother,
 who is so valued and famed,
 for her to entreat with her sweetness
 380 her son, her father, her lord,
 that he allow me on this day
 to see this activity, if it pleases him,
 so that God may be more loved for it
 and the good man not faulted for it,
 385 if it pleases him likewise."
 Then they go off without delay
 to hide themselves in complete quiet
 near the altar in a nook,
 so that he does not notice them.
 390 The abbot and the monk watch
 the entire service of the lay brother,
 the very varied tumbles that he performed,
 the leaping and dancing,
 the prostration before the statue,
 395 the cavorting and bounding,
 until he was at the point of collapse.
 He presses on in such great exhaustion,
 that he must of necessity fall.
 Then he sat, so exhausted
 400 that from effort he is completely soaked in sweat,
 so that the sweat drips down
 from him in the middle of the crypt.
 But in a brief while, soon,
 his sweet lady assists him,
 408 whom he served completely without falsehood.
 She knew to come in his time of need.

The abbot watches without waiting,
 and sees come down from the vault
 a lady so splendid
 410 that no one has seen one so precious
 or so richly adorned,
 and none so beautiful was ever born.
 Her clothes are very costly,
 from gold and precious stones.
 415 With her are angels
 and archangels from heaven above
 who surround the minstrel,
 console him, and support him.
 When they have assembled around him,
 420 his whole heart is soothed.
 Then they apply themselves in serving him,

because they wish to repay
 the service that he does the lady,
 who is such a [costly gem](#).
 425 For her part, the sweet, noble queen
 holds a [white cloth](#)
 and with it fans her minstrel
 very gently before the altar.
 The bountiful lady
 430 fans him to cool
 his neck, torso, and face.
 The lady endeavors well to help
 him; she devotes herself to the task.
 The good man does not take note,
 435 for he does not see or know at all
 that he has such beautiful company.

The holy angels honor him very much,
 but they do not remain any longer with him,
 and the lady does not linger there any longer:
 440 she crosses him in the name of God, then departs from him,
 and the holy angels,
 who take wonderful delight
 in looking upon their companion, accompany [her](#).
 They pay heed to nothing, apart from the hour
 445 when God will release him from this life
 and they will take his soul.
 In truth, the abbot and his monk
 saw this indisputably at least four times,
 as it happened at each hour
 450 that the Mother of God came there
 to aid and support her servant;
 for she knows well how to support her servant.
 The abbot took great delight in this,
 for he yearned very much
 455 to know the truth.
 But now God showed him well
 that he liked the devotion
 his humble servant performed for him.
 The monk was bewildered through and through,
 460 inflamed with anguish as he was.
 He said to the abbot, "Lord, take pity!
 It is a saintly man that I see here.
 If I have said of him anything wrongly,
 it is right that my heart set it right.
 465 So impose on me the penance for it,
 for he is without doubt a virtuous man.
 We should have understood it entirely;

we ought never be misled."
 The abbot says; "You speak truly,
 470 God has made us well aware
 that he loves him with a very pure love.
 Now I order you without delay
 and by virtue of obedience
 (or else you will fall under a penalty)
 475 that you speak to no one
 of what you have seen,
 except to God and to me."
 "Lord," he says, "I commit to this."
 After these words they go back
 480 and do not stay any longer in the vault.
 In truth, the good man did not stop,
 but after putting back on his clothes
 when he had completed all his office,
 he goes to entertain himself in the monastery.

485 **S**o time came and went,
 until a little afterward it happened
 that the abbot called for him,
 who had so much good in him.
 When he heard that they were calling for him,
 490 and that the abbot was requesting him,
 his heart was so very full of passion
 that he did not know at all what he could say.
 "Alas," he said, "I have been denounced.
 Henceforth I will not be a day without discontent,
 495 without torment, or without great shame,
 for my office is worth nothing.
 I don't believe that it pleases God,
 alas, but rather I believe that it displeases him,
 for the truth of the matter is uncovered.

500 Did I believe that this task
 that I performed, and that this game
 should please Lord God?
 Not at all, it does not please him a bit.
 Oh, wretch that I am, I never did anything good.
 505 Alas, what will I do? Alas, what will I say?
 Good and most gentle God, what will become of me?
 Now I will be doomed to die and to be shamed,
 now I will be banished from here,
 now I will be again put as a target
 510 out in the world among the great wrongdoing.
 Gentle lady, Saint Mary,
 how my thinking has gone astray!
 I do not know from whom to seek advice.

Lady, come to advise me!
 515 Very gentle God, assist me!
 Do not delay a bit, do not wait,
 and bring your mother with you;
 for God's sake, do not come without her.
 Both of you come to help me,
 520 for certainly I do not know how to make a plea.
 They will say swiftly
 at my first utterance, 'Get out of here!'

What grief! What will I be able to reply,
 when I am unable to express a word?
 525 What good is it? It is expedient for me to go."
 Weeping, he comes before the abbot,
 such that his face is wet from tears;
 weeping, he kneels before him.
 "Lord," he says, "for God's sake, take pity!"

530 Do you want to drive me out of here?
 Tell what you order;
 I will do as you wish."
 The abbot says, "I want to know
 and want you to tell the truth:

535 you have been here a long while,
 in both winter and summer.
 So I want to know in what way you serve,
 and by what you earn your bread."
 "Oh, woe," he said, "I knew well

540 that I would be sent packing,
 as soon as they knew all my activity,
 that they would not have anything to do with me anymore."
 "Lord," he said, "I will go off.
 I am a wretch and will be a wretch;

545 I have never done even half of a good deed."
 The abbot said, "I do not say this at all;
 on the contrary, I request and insist of you,
 and after that I order you,
 that by virtue of obedience,

550 you tell me your whole heart,
 and what office
 you fulfill in our monastery."
 "Lord," he says, "how you have slain me!"
 How this order slays me!"

555 Then he tells him, though it is burdensome to him,
 his entire life, from top to bottom,
 so that he does not neglect to say a word;
 instead he tells it all in a single go,
 as I have told it to you;

560 he said it and told it all,

with his hands joined and weeping.
He *kisses his feet* while sighing.

The saintly abbot leans down to him
and, all the while weeping, lifts him up;
565 he *kissed both his eyes*.
"Brother," he said, "now be silent,
for I make with you a compact
that you will be in our monastic community.
May God grant that we be in yours,
570 as much as we may be able to merit in ours.
We will be, you and I, good friends.
Very sweet brother, pray for me
and in return I will pray for you.
In fact, I ask you, my sweet friend,
575 and I order, without any dissimulation,
that you perform this office fully,
as you have done it,
and better still, if you know how."
"Lord," he said, "is this sure?"
580 "Yes," the abbot said this, "it is sure."
He imposes this on him as penance,
so that he would not be any more in doubt.
Then the good man was so very happy,
as the story relates,
585 that he hardly knew what became of him.
It was expedient for him of necessity to sit down;
he became completely pale.
When his heart returned to him,
it stirred him profoundly with joy,
590 so vehemently that an illness attacked him,
of which he died very soon after.
Yet he performed his office
with great goodwill unceasingly,
morning and evening, night and day,
595 such that he never omitted an hour
until he fell ill.
For, in truth, so great an illness took hold of him
that he could not stir from the bed.
It was extraordinarily burdensome to him
600 that he could not pay his keep;
it is this that distressed him most,
for he did not complain of illness,
but he was in anxiety
that he might lose the fruits of his penance,
605 for which he did not toil
with such toil as he had been accustomed to do;
it seemed to him all too much that he was idle.

The good man, who was little sinful,
 entreated God to receive him
 610 before idleness led him astray.
 For he felt such great grief
 that people should know about his business,
 that his heart could not bear it:
 it was necessary for him to lie in bed without activity.
 615 The saintly abbot honors him greatly;
 his monks and he go to sing
 for him at each hour before his bed,
 and he took such great pleasure
 in their singing of God to him
 620 that he would not have taken ownership of *Ponthieu*,
 even if they had wanted to render it all to him;
 so much it pleased him to hear the singing.
 He had confessed and was repentant,
 but all the same he was in uncertainty.
 625 Yet what does it matter? In the end,
 it was needful for him to reach the finish.

The abbot was there and all his monks;
 many priests were there and many *canons*
 who watched him very humbly,
 630 and saw entirely publicly
 a most marvelous miracle.
 For they saw, with their own eyes,
 that at his last moment were present angels,
 the Mother of God, and archangels,
 635 who were arrayed around him.



Fig. 2: The juggler is lifted up by angels, rescued from the clutches of a demon. Illustration by Henri Malatesta, 1906. Published in Anatole France, *Le Joueur de Notre-Dame* (Paris: F. Ferroud, 1906), 9.

Opposite were the *enraged*,
adversaries, and devils,
 so as to have his soul; this is no tall tale.
 But to no avail they waited,
 640 they struggled and strove so much,
 for they would never have possession of his soul.
 At that moment the soul takes leave
 of the body, but it is not at all led astray,
 for the Mother of God rescued it.
 645 The holy angels who are there
 sing for joy and so go off;
 for a certainty, they carry it to heaven.
 The entire monastery and all the others
 who were there saw this.
 650 Now all knew and understood
 that God wished no longer to hide
 his love for his good young follower;
 on the contrary, he wished all to know
 and recognize the man's good qualities.
 655 From this they derived great joy and wonder:
 they honored his body very highly,
 and carried it into their chapel;
 they performed the divine office solemnly.
 There is no one who does not sing or read
 660 in the choir of the main church.

With the greatest honor they bury him
 and then watch over him as a holy body.
 Next, the abbot relates to them,
 without covering up anything, the whole story
 665 about him and his whole life,
 just as you have heard it,
 and all that he saw in the crypt.
 The monks gladly hear it.
 "Surely," they say, "it does well to believe;
 670 no one should disbelieve you about it,
 since the facts give evidence.
 He is tried and tested in the time of need:
 no one should ever have any doubt
 that he performed his penance."
 675 They had among themselves great joy about this.

Thus, the minstrel came to an end.
 He tumbled blessedly, he gave service blessedly,
 for he merited high glory,
 with which none other can compare.

680 *The holy fathers* tell us this,
 what thus happened to this minstrel.
 Now we pray to God, there is nothing equal,
 that he grant us to serve him so well,
 that we can merit his love.
 The Tumbler concludes;
 here ends “Our Lady’s Tumbler.”

B. *The Table of Exempla, in Alphabetical Order: “Joy”*

Forty years after the French poem was composed, *the same tale* shows up again but stripped down this time to two sentences of Latin prose as an exemplum. The key figure—really, the only one—in the barebones narrative is an entertainer who abandons the world to become bound by religious vows. Because of being illiterate and untrained, he decides upon his own way of praising God when his peers sing psalms: he dances and bounds about. When questioned about his behavior, he answers that he is celebrating God in the way he understands. Nearly a third of the roughly fifty words in the text are given over to this mini-speech made by the religious dancer—or the dancing religious.

What were *exempla*? As their name suggests, these brief stories were told to exemplify the general themes in sermons. Among other things, they satisfied the age-old need of teachers, preachers, and other public speakers for motivational material that can entertain and edify audiences. Material of a comparable sort in Christian preaching tends today to be called illustrations. Such narration is loosely related to the recounting of cases in legal contexts. The Dutch literary scholar André Jolles raised this consideration intriguingly more than ninety years ago in a study of “*simple forms*,” as he styled basic structures of literary narrative.

The exemplum version of our story appears in *The Table of Exempla, in Alphabetical Order*. This anonymous compendium was assembled around 1277. Whereas “Our Lady’s Tumbler” bore the imprint of Cistercian monasticism, *The Table of Exempla, in Alphabetical Order* owes to the influence of Franciscanism, the religious movement connected with Saint Francis of Assisi. Franciscans are friars, religious who take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, but who unlike monks of the traditional sort are bound to serve society, often in urban settings. The friars minor, as the members of this order have often been called, embraced preaching to the laity as a major constituent of their mission. For that reason, they needed tales that could serve as the stuff of their sermons.

Paradoxically, the very short exempla went hand in hand with the commensurately long compilations that assembled them and presented them so that they could be consulted for easy reference. The “table” with which the title begins is the table of contents that occupies the opening folios of the text. In total, the work contains more

than three hundred exempla. To help preachers in search of materials, these short anecdotes are classified under 151 headings, arranged alphabetically from the letter A all the way to X.

Our story, a mere two sentences for a total of a mere fifty words, is subsumed under the rubric for "Joy," in the Latin form of the noun.

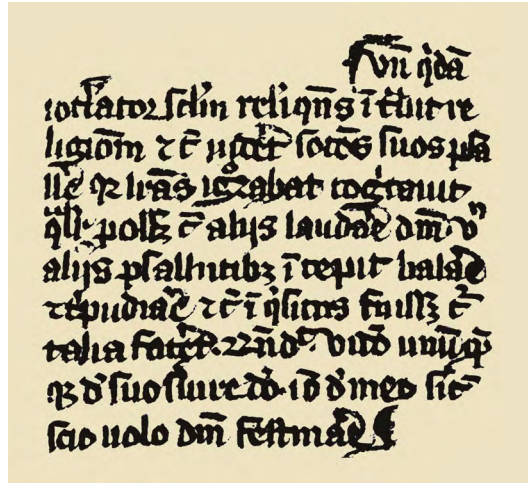


Fig. 3: Excerpt from *Liber exemplorum secundum ordinem alphabeti*, chap. 49, no. 28, "Gaudium." London, British Library, MS Additional 18351. Image courtesy of The British Library, London. All rights reserved.

That emotion accords well with the spirituality of Saint Francis. Tying the exemplum even more tightly to the founder of the Franciscan order are the facts that he had been an entertainer in his young manhood and that he presented himself later as being a "jongleur of God."

In 1911 an [American folklorist wondered](#), "Is this prose story the hitherto undiscovered original of the French poem?" The interrogative, a good one, is unanswerable. The exemplum could be similar or even nearly identical to a predecessor, oral, written, or both, that existed already before "Our Lady's Tumbler" was put down on parchment. Conversely, the extant prose could be a distillation and transformation of the literary work. A third possibility is that both owe to sources—once again, oral, written, or both—that have vanished in the long meantime.

In the study of literature as a whole and even more so of medieval literature as a subset, one delight (and desperation) is how much easier it can be at times to pose important and provocative questions than to be capable of pinpointing evidence for confident answers. Perhaps the biggest puzzle of the earliest evidence for "Our Lady's Tumbler" is whether the verse and prose are ultimately sheer fiction, fictionalized reality, or some hybrid of the two.

The tale has many qualities of an archetype. Such primal patterns involve personalities, situations, places, and shapes that possess deep psychological, mythic,

and literary importance. Their existence and significance have been explained variously. C. G. Jung hypothesized that they connected with the workings of what he styled the collective unconscious, Robert Graves and Joseph Campbell with myth, and Northrop Frye with literature. None of these thinkers wrote in their scholarship specifically about “Our Lady’s Tumbler” or “The Juggler of Notre Dame,” but the patterns in the story and its persistence across cultures make it a promising test case for interpretation according to the principles and procedures that they set forth.

A certain entertainer, forsaking the world, entered a religious order and, when he saw his peers singing psalms, since he did not know his letters, thought how he could praise God with the others. For that reason, when the others sang their psalms, he began to dance and leap for joy, and when asked why he did such things, replied, “I see everyone serving God in accord with his faculty, and for that reason I wish to celebrate God in accord with mine, as I know how.”

