

The illustration is a full-page background image. It depicts a scene from a medieval manuscript. The Virgin Mary, with long blonde hair and a halo, is shown in a white robe with a blue mantle. She holds a white lily in her right hand and her left hand is extended towards a man kneeling before her. The man is wearing a dark tunic with a red and black diamond pattern and is looking up at her with a reverent expression. In the background, several men in white robes are watching the scene. The setting appears to be a church or a similar religious building, with stone walls and a large window or altar area visible on the left.

JAN M. ZIOLKOWSKI

READING THE JUGGLER OF NOTRE DAME

Medieval Miracles and Modern Remakings



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9. The Dancer Musa

A. Gottfried Keller, “A Little Legend of Dance”

Gottfried Keller, a nineteenth-century Swiss author of both poetry and prose fiction, was born and died in Zurich. After abandoning his initial aspiration to become a painter, he channeled his ambitions into literature. His novellas soon enjoyed notable success. Though employed fulltime from 1861 to 1876 as a clerk to the canton of Zurich, he continued to write.

Among other accomplishments during those fifteen years, he published his *Seven Legends* in 1872. He had begun drafting them from 1855 to 1858, while living in Berlin, and attempted without luck to see them into print in 1862. In 1871 he picked up the strands again, making further revisions.

Among his works, these tales of the Virgin Mary and of conversion were Keller’s personal favorites. The final element in the collection is a short story entitled “The Little Legend of Dance.” Thanks to its artfulness, this composition has been called “the pearl” of the *Seven Legends*. Whereas the other pieces in the cycle form contrastive pairs, this seventh stands by itself as the *keystone to the little book*. It is also the only legend in the group whose very title advertises it explicitly as being legendary. Setting aside the generic term of legend makes it easier to accept and read each of the fictional narratives as a *Novelle*, the distinctively German manifestation of what would be called the short story in English.

To whatever extent imprecise labels for artistic and cultural movements can help increase our understanding of this story, Keller tends to be bracketed as a *realist rather than a late romantic*. This tale by itself supports fully neither classification. In it, Keller wrestles with the meaning of life on earth (which suggests realism) even while situating much of the action in heaven (an artistic conceit that accords better with romanticism). Throughout the *Seven Legends* but perhaps especially in the concluding one, he displays much of the same delicacy and grace that Anatole France achieved in his account of “The Juggler of Notre Dame.” To fix on one specific, Keller’s personal lack of religion makes itself palpable, but his secularism is never infused by any ridicule of those who have faith. Irony and imitation about Christian dogmas and writings do not degrade into polemic and parody. Despite being a non-believer and inclined to a restrained antagonism toward Catholicism, he seems to have taken

pains to be gentle and fair in his [treatment of Christianity](#). He treats religious devotion respectfully but all the while allows for ribbing humor, striking a balance [between sacralization and secularization](#), neither exalting nor mocking unreservedly the saintly figure with whom he concerns himself.

In the legend of Musa as retold and further embellished by the Swiss author, its main character suffers from just one weakness: a passion for dance. For her, such lively movement verges on being itself a form of prayer. The young woman indulges in this compulsion even when standing before the church door or while walking to the altar. Finally, an elderly gentleman appears who reveals himself to be King David. He proves to be the best partner with whom the girl could ever imagine being paired. No mention is made of the episode in which the Old Testament ruler made a much less dignified impression by cavorting seminude before the ark (see above, Part 1, Chapter 2), but Keller could have expected many in his audience to be [familiar with this detail](#). In any event, the big man of the Hebrew Bible promises Musa eternal bliss in dancing, provided that during her lifetime she renounces all earthly pleasures for penance and devotion.

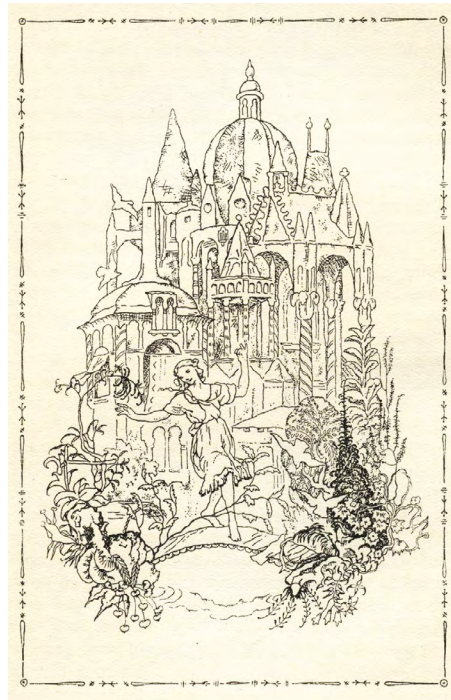


Fig. 13: *Musa dances in heaven*. Drawing by Gustav Traub, 1921. Published in Gottfried Keller, *Sieben Legenden* (Munich, Germany: Franz Hanfstaengl, 1921), p. 139.

Through self-abnegation of all sorts but especially through mortification of the flesh, she rises to the ascetic challenge. In quick order, she ascends to heaven itself.

In Greek and Roman mythology the Muses were nine goddesses, daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, who oversaw the arts and sciences. In the celestial crescendo to the tale, Keller puns on the name of his leading lady by bringing these classical divinities on stage in person. In fact, he goes so far as to seat the new arrival to paradise at a table with the ninesome, together with Cecilia, patron saint of music. Yet the bonhomie—or bonnefemme, because we are talking about an all-female cast—is shortlived. Complications ensue, since the classical deities have been permitted to enter the pearly gates only on sufferance. When given the opportunity to sing a song to voice their appreciation, the sisterly choir produces pandemonium: their seductive singing, which caps an [eroticism](#) that permeates the story and indeed the whole collection, makes the denizens of heaven long for the joys of earth. As a consequence, the legend comes to a melancholy conclusion in which the Muses are condemned forevermore to the underworld.

Unlike the nine sisters, Musa endures no ejection from paradise, but the reader is left to compare heavenly and earthly delights and to wonder whether the first do not come up short when set against the second. The virgin forwent earthly pleasures in exchange for heavenly ones, but the ending seems to foil her posthumous reward. If the number seven that Keller chose for his cycle alludes to the [days of creation](#), the parallel injects a sadness into the everlasting rest that the heroine has earned. Not all sabbaticals turn out well.

The translation of Keller follows the text in the 1991 [standard edition](#) of *Sieben Legenden* (Seven Legends). One challenge is the word *Jungfer*. The King James Bible is used here in place of the German Luther Bible quoted by the Swiss author. This adjustment requires rendering *Jungfer* as *virgin* in the epigraph and in mentions of the Virgin Mary. For consistency, I have resorted to the same noun in reference to Musa, even though the English “young lady” or another such synonym might be slightly more natural in many contexts today.

“A Little Legend of Dance”

O virgin of Israel: thou shalt again be adorned
with thy [tabrets](#), and shalt go forth in the dances ...

Then shall the virgin rejoice in the dance, both
young men and old together.

Jeremiah 31:4 and 13

According to the account of Saint Gregory, Musa was the dancer among the saints. The child of good people, she was a charming young virgin who served the Mother of God diligently, moved by only one passion, namely, by so uncontrollable a passion for the dance that when the child was not praying she was, without fail, dancing. And indeed

on all occasions Musa danced with her playmates, with children, with the young men, and even by herself. She danced in her little room, in the big hall, in the garden, in the meadows. Even when she went to the altar, it was more a pleasing dance than a walk, and on the smooth marble flagstones before the church doors she did not fail to try out quickly a little dance.

In fact, one day when she found herself alone in the church, she could not refrain from executing some figures before the altar, and, as it were, dancing a pretty prayer to the Virgin Mary. She became so oblivious in the process that she imagined she was merely dreaming when she saw an elderly but handsome gentleman dancing opposite her, who complemented her figures so skilfully that the two together performed the most expert dance imaginable. The gentleman wore a royal purple robe, a golden crown on his head, and a curly beard, which was gleaming black but had been dusted by the silvery frost of age, as if by distant starlight. At the same time music sounded from the choir, where a half dozen small angels stood or sat on its balustrade, with their chubby little legs hanging down over it, and fingering or blowing their various instruments. The youngsters were very comfortable and skilful at it. They let their music books rest on the stone images of angels (there were just enough) which were to be found as adornment on the choir-screen; only the smallest, a puffy-cheeked piper, was an exception, by sitting cross-legged and managing to hold his sheet music with his pink toes. He was also the most assiduous; the others dangled their feet and, now one and now another, kept spreading out their pinions with a rustle, so that their colors shimmered like doves' necks, and they teased each other while playing.

Musa found no time to wonder at all this until the dance, which lasted a fairly long time, had ended; for the merry gentleman seemed to enjoy himself as much with it as did the virgin, who thought that she was leaping about in heaven. But when the music ceased, and Musa stood there breathing deeply, she began to be frightened in good earnest, and looked in astonishment at the old man, who was neither panting nor hot, and who now began to speak. He revealed himself as being David, the Virgin Mary's royal ancestor, and her emissary. And he asked if she would like to spend eternal bliss in an unceasing pleasure-dance, a dance that in comparison with the one just finished could be called dreary slinking.

To this she promptly countered that she was aware of nothing better to wish for. Whereupon the blessed King David said again that in that case she had nothing else to do than to renounce all pleasure and all dancing for the rest of her days on earth, and devote herself solely to penance and spiritual exercises, and that without wavering or any relapse.

This proviso made the young virgin balk, and she asked whether she must then give up dancing altogether. She doubted whether there was really any dancing in heaven. For everything has its time; this earth looked to her good and appropriate for dancing on it; consequently, heaven would have very different attractions, since otherwise death would be a superfluity.

But David explained to her how much she was in error in this connection, and proved to her from many Bible passages as well as from his own example, that dancing was most certainly a hallowed occupation for the blessed. But now what was required was a quick decision, yes or no, whether she wanted to enter into eternal joy through temporal self-denial or not. If she did not want to, then he would go farther on; for they still needed some female dancers in heaven.

Musa stood, still doubtful and undecided, and played anxiously with a fingertip on her mouth. It seemed too hard to her, from that moment on to dance no more, for the sake of an unknown reward.

Then David beckoned, and suddenly the music played some bars of so incredibly blissful and ethereal a dance tune that the girl's soul leapt in her body, and all her limbs twitched; but she could not move one of them to dance, and she noted that her body was far too heavy and stiff for that tune. Full of longing she put her hand into that of the king, and pledged what he desired.

All at once he was no more to be seen, and the music-making angels rustled, fluttered, and crowded out from there through an open church window, after they in high-spirited, childish fashion struck the patient stone angels on the cheeks with their rolled-up sheet music, so that it made a slap.

But Musa went home with devout step, carrying that heavenly melody in her ear, and, having cast off all finery, she had a coarse garment made and put it on. At the same time, she built herself a cell at the back of her parents' garden, where trees cast a deep shade, made in it a little bed of moss, and lived there from then on as a penitent and saint, isolated from her housemates. She spent all her time in prayer, and quite often [struck herself with a scourge](#); but her severest penitential practice consisted in holding her limbs stiff and still; as soon as even one note sounded, the twittering of a bird, or the rustling of the leaves in the wind, so her feet twitched and suggested that they had to dance.

As this involuntary twitching would not forsake her, which at times seduced her to a little jump before she knew it, she had her tender little feet fettered together by a light chain. Her relatives and friends marveled day and night at the transformation, rejoiced at possessing such a saint, and guarded the hermitage under the trees as the apple of their eye. Many came to get counsel and intercession. In particular, they used to bring young girls to her who were somewhat clumsy on their feet; for they had noticed that everyone she touched at once became light and graceful in gait.

So she spent three years in her retreat; but, by the end of the third year, Musa had become almost as thin and transparent as a summer cloud. She lay continually on her little bed of moss and gazed longingly into heaven, and she believed that she could already see through the blue sky the golden soles of the blessed, dancing and gliding.

Finally, on a harsh autumn day it was said that the saint lay dying. She had taken off her dark penitential robe, and had herself clothed in dazzlingly white bridal garments. So she lay with folded hands, and smilingly awaited the hour of death. The whole garden was filled with devout people, the breezes murmured, and the leaves fell down from the trees on all sides. But suddenly the blowing of the wind changed into music, which seemed to be playing in the tree-tops, and, as the people looked up, look! then all the branches were clothed in fresh green, the myrtles and pomegranates blossomed and became fragrant, the earth decked itself with flowers, and a rose-colored glow settled on the white, frail form of the dying virgin.

In that instant, she gave up the ghost. The chain on her feet split apart with a sharp sound, heaven opened wide all around, full of endless radiance, and everyone could see in. Then they saw many thousands of beautiful virgins and young men in the utmost splendor, dancing in round dances farther than could be seen. A magnificent king rode a little toward earth on a cloud, on the edge of which a small performing group of six little angels stood, and received the form of the blessed Musa from before the eyes of all those

present who filled the garden. They saw, too, how she leapt into the opened heaven, and instantly vanished, dancing among the resounding and radiant ranks.

In heaven it was, to be exact, a high feast day. On feast days it was the custom (contested in fact by the Saint [Gregory of Nyssa](#), yet maintained by the one of [Nazianzus](#)) to invite the Nine Muses, who otherwise sat in hell, and to let them into heaven, that they might afford assistance there. They received good sustenance, but, once business was done, had to go back to the other place.

Now when the dances and songs and all the ceremonies had reached an end, and the heavenly hosts sat down to table, then Musa was seized by the table where the Nine Muses were being served. They sat huddled together almost timidly and glanced about themselves with fiery black or dark-blue eyes. The [busy Martha](#) of the Gospel was caring for them in person; she had put on her most beautiful kitchen apron and had a dainty, little smudge of soot on her white chin, and in a friendly way pressed all sorts of good things on the Muses. But just when Musa and also Saint [Cecilia](#) and still other women skilled in the fine arts came over, and greeted the shy [Pierian goddesses](#) cheerfully and joined their company, they began to thaw, became trusting, and a charmingly happy atmosphere developed in the circle of women. Musa sat beside [Terpsichore](#), and Cecilia between [Polyhymnia](#) and [Euterpe](#), and all took one another's hands. Now the little music lads came too and flattered the beautiful women, so as to obtain the bright pieces of fruit that shone on the ambrosial table. King David himself came and brought a golden cup, out of which all drank, so that lovely joy warmed them. He went with pleasure round the table, not omitting in passing by to caress for a moment pretty [Erato's](#) chin. While things were going so famously at the Muses' table, Our Lady herself appeared in all her beauty and goodness, sat down for an hour or so beside the Muses, and kissed [Urania](#), majestic with her coronet of stars, tenderly on the mouth, when in taking leave she whispered to her that she would not rest until the Muses could remain in Paradise forever.

That of course never happened. To show themselves thankful for the kindness and friendliness that had been shown them, and to prove their good will, the Muses took counsel among themselves and practised a hymn of praise in a secluded corner of the underworld. They tried to give it the form of the solemn chorals which were customary in heaven. They divided themselves into two halves of four voices each, above which [Urania](#) sang a sort of descant, and they managed thus to achieve a remarkable piece of vocal music.

When now the next feast day was celebrated in heaven, and the Muses again fulfilled their service, they seized a moment that appeared favourable for their plan, took up their places together, and began their song softly, but soon it grew extremely loud. But in those expanses it sounded so somber, even almost defiant and harsh, and at the same time so heavy with longing and plaintive that first a frightened silence prevailed but then all were seized with suffering for earth and homesickness, and burst out into general weeping.

An endless sighing rushed through heaven. Dismayed, all the elders and prophets came hurrying up, while the Muses, with their good intentions, sang louder and more melancholically, and all paradise with all the patriarchs, elders, and prophets, and all who ever walked or lay in the green meadows, lost all composure. But finally the Most High Trinity itself approached to put things right and to bring the zealous Muses to silence with a long, rumbling clap of thunder.

Then peace and calm returned to heaven. But the poor nine sisters had to leave, and since then have not been allowed to enter it again.

B. Ludwig Theoboul Kosegarten, “The Legend of the Virgin Mary”

Gottfried Keller made no bones about the proximate source for all of the *Seven Legends*: he drew on the *Legenden* or “Legends” of Ludwig Theoboul Kosegarten. At first blush, it might seem peculiar that the Swiss writer chose to base his own tales on an equal number of narratives by a North German poet and Lutheran preacher. After all, the later author was raised not as a Catholic but as a Protestant—and in Zurich, of all places, a cradle of the reformation. Since in adulthood he was not merely unreligious but even atheist, he had no incentive to seek out an imprimatur, so to speak, from his predecessor’s Lutheranism. What is more, Keller found the contents of the *Legends* laughably at odds with *Kosegarten’s North German Protestantism*. In the retellings that the man of letters from Switzerland produced, he endeavored to peel away from the narratives any accretions, whether Roman or reformed, that masked what he regarded as their original pre-Christian vitality. To look at the process through a different optic, he heightened worldliness and eroticism wherever he could do so.

What more can be said about Keller’s point of departure? In 1804 Kosegarten brought out, in two octavo volumes, a gathering of 44 tales about the early Christian faith. In stock romantic fashion, he presented these stories as folk sagas, corresponding to the folk literatures of other nations. The English that follows translates the German in *Kosegarten’s Legends*.

There was a girl of noble-born stock who danced only too gladly. One day a preacher came into her father’s house; he asked what the girl’s favorite pastime and greatest pleasure was. They said to him, “Dancing.” Then he said to her, “Dear girl, would you like well to abstain from all gaiety one day long, so as afterward to live a whole year long in joy to your heart’s content? And would you like well a whole year long to be idle from dance, but if afterward you would be allowed all your life long to dance as often and as much as you ever only desired?” The girl said, “I would like that most gladly.” The monk continued, “Would you not give up love of the world, and spurn ephemeral, vain dancing, so that in the future you might enjoy eternal joy with God, and might dance and leap with his dear mother Mary and with all the heavenly hosts?” Then the girl fell silent and still for a long while, and sighed heavily.

Finally she spoke. “I would not want to swear off dance for the sake of some transient good, but so as to enjoy eternal dance with God and his saints. Could you now prove to me that they also dance and leap in heaven, then I will renounce all earthly dance, and I will do what you tell me.” Then the monk proved to her from the thirty-first chapter of *Jeremiah*, just as from the psalms of David, and from many other passages of Scripture, that dance also goes on in heaven. He also said, “It stands written that the *blessed in heaven* shall have full satisfaction in everything that they desire. Granted now that they arrived at a desire to dance and that there were no dance in heaven, then they would not have full satisfaction but instead one thing that they desired was lacking them; that would clearly be against God’s word.” When the girl heard, she pledged to the monk that she would leave off dancing out of love for God and his dear mother. Her father and

mother were very happy about this, and had made for her spiritual garb as she wished it; dressed in it, she served God in her parents' house with great devotion.

When four years had passed, she became gravely ill and began to withdraw from life. Friends and relatives advised her that they wanted to offer her the last sacraments. She said, "I will wait until my spiritual father comes; I am certain that I will not die so long as he is not present. I prayed to my bridegroom, Jesus Christ, about this, and he has granted it." Then the preacher came, through God's dispensation, from distant lands, and did not know that the girl was ill. The girl said to him, "Dear Father, with your permission I will now depart from here." Then the preacher provided her with our Lord's body and with holy oil. But she turned her eyes to heaven, looked happily at the preacher, and said, "Dear Father, when you converted me, you pledged to me that in heaven too there should be dancing and jumping; I release you from the pledge; for just now at this very hour I saw his dear mother and the saintly virgins in heaven in a beautiful dance; the same dance is also ready for me for eternity." As she said such things, she passed away in great joy.

Saint Gregory recalls a virgin named Musa who with pleasure danced beyond measure; and before and after the dancing she served Our Lady with great earnestness. Once, when she was in the process of praying, Our Lady came to her with many beautiful virgins, who danced with one another a very graceful dance. Mary asked the virgin if she would like to dance and play with the virgins eternally in this manner. She said, "Most gladly." Then Mary said, "Then leave off your dancing out of love for me from today on until the thirtieth day; and on the thirtieth day I will return to you, and I will lead you to the eternal round dance." With that, Our Lady disappeared. The virgin however went to confession and did penance, and took care from that hour on not to dance and not to commit other sins. And on the thirtieth day Our Lady came, as she had indicated, and took the virgin to eternal joy.

C. Gregory the Great, "The Passing Away of Young Musa"

Keller's source for the legend of Musa is Kosegarten. In turn, Kosegarten's version relies on the recapitulation of the tale in the 1502 printing of the German legendary *Der Heiligen Leben* or *The Lives of the Saints*, less commonly designated as the *Passional*. In *The Lives of the Saints* the German (and Latin) poet Sebastian Brant was given a hand by the printer Johannes Grüninger. But the genealogy of the tale about dance reaches back much further than even the early years of the sixteenth century. Ultimately the otherworldly adventure recounted by Keller and his predecessors derives from an anecdote about a saintly girl named Musa that is preserved in the *Dialogi* or *Dialogues* of the pope and saint Gregory the Great.

In a brief account within that work, the sixth-century Father of the Latin Church introduces a girl named Musa who is the sister of Probus. The last-mentioned was a friend of the author, mentioned a few chapters earlier in the same text, and bishop of Rieti, a town in the central Italian region of Lazio. In Gregory's telling, Musa experiences a vision of Mary, in which the Mother of God shows the visionary other female children of her age clad all in white. The Virgin promises that the young lady may have them as her companions if only she refrains from the frivolity of laughing

and playing for thirty days. Not a word is breathed of dance, but the absence of this activity does not impede the usual course of events. No sooner said than done, the pious young thing dies on the thirtieth day and joins her saintly peers in heaven.

The chapter from Gregory the Great, which features Musa but as a very young girl and not as a dancer, is translated from the Latin of the *Dialogi* or *Dialogues*.

1. But I will not keep this silent, what the previously mentioned Probus, servant of God, was accustomed to relate about his sister, Musa by name, a little girl. He said that on a certain night the saintly Mother of God, the Virgin Mary, appeared to her in a vision, and showed to her girls her age in white clothing. When she desired to become familiar with them, but did not dare to associate with them, she was asked by the voice of Blessed Mary, ever the Virgin, if she would like to be with them and to live in her service. When the same girl said to her, "I wish that," she received immediately from her the command that she do nothing further frivolous and girlish, and that she refrain from laughter and jokes, knowing that she would come into her service among these very virgins, whom she had seen, on the thirtieth day.
2. Having seen these things, the girl was altered in all her behavior and with great application of seriousness wiped away from herself all frivolity of a girlish life. When her relatives marveled that she was altered, she, upon being asked, related the reason, what the Blessed Mother of God enjoined on her and on what day she indicated she would go to her service.
3. After the twenty-fourth day, she was taken by fever. On the thirtieth day, as the hour of her death drew near, she caught sight of the very same Blessed Mother of God coming toward her, with the girls whom she had seen in the vision. Musa began to respond to her as she was calling her, and to call out in an unmuted voice, with her eyes lowered respectfully, "Look, Lady, I am coming; look, Lady, I am coming." In saying this, she gave up the ghost, and departed from her virginal body to live with the virgin saints.
4. Peter: Since human kind is subject to many and countless vices, I think that the greatest part of heavenly Jerusalem can be filled up with little ones and infants.

D. Jacques de Vitry, *Sermons to the People*

The story of Musa, often but not always with outright acknowledgement of Gregory the Great as authority, appears in at least sixteen medieval assemblages of Marian miracles between the sixth and sixteenth centuries. In the long interim between Gregory and Brant, at least two major changes were made to the story. First, the female described by the Latin writer as *parva puella* or "little girl" becomes a little older, so that she is now a virginal young woman. Second, the conduct that the same character is persuaded to restrain in all three later vernacular forms is no longer the somewhat generic behavior of laughing and playing but instead the more particularized trait of dancing. A source that captures these two developments is found in the model sermons of Jacques de Vitry.

In addition to writings on history and theology, this French canon regular, who died in 1240, composed four cycles of model sermons. Whereas three follow the liturgical calendar, the fourth, written in the 1220s, is organized according to the social group of the audience to be addressed. This last cycle is known by the Latin title *Sermones vulgares* or by the Latin-English hybrid "*Ad status* Sermons." Whatever we call them, these sermons are replete with exempla. One of these illustrative tales retells in highly condensed fashion Gregory's account of Musa, with incidental mention of dancing. Many later recapitulations of the story expanded on the dance connection.

Gregory tells that a certain girl saw the Blessed Virgin with a multitude of virgins and longed mightily to be with them. The Blessed Virgin said to her, "Do not laugh for thirty days and you will be with us." After abstaining for thirty days from laughter, she died, and received the promised glory. Without doubt, if she had not ceased from laughter, songs, and dances, she would never have been received with the Blessed Virgin among the other virgins.