

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, several men in white robes are watching. The scene is set in a church 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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10. The Roman Report of “The Old Mime-Player”

Later a saint in the Catholic Church, Augustine served in his lifetime as a bishop of the city Hippo in what was then the Roman province of Numidia (today the nation of Algeria). Among the most famous of his voluminous writings in Latin is *On the City of God against the Pagans*, often called for short *The City of God*. He composed this long philosophical tract between 413 and 427, to rebut claims by opponents of the Christians that the sack of Rome in 410 resulted from the abolition of paganism.

At one point in *The City of God* Augustine quotes a brief anecdote about a mime-player from *On Superstition* by Seneca the Younger. In the interim the treatise by the first-century Roman philosopher has been lost. Even without the benefit of whatever additional context the original might have supplied, the passage as transmitted by Augustine makes sense. In it, Seneca satirizes a superannuated performer. Though impoverished and old, the man had been in his prime an affluent star, no mere *mimus* but in fact an *archimimus* who surpassed all his peers in miming. Despite now being decrepit he persists in doing his routine daily on the Capitoline Hill in Rome.

Nothing is said of payment by passersby. Rather, the artist’s custom of putting on a show reflects a commitment to honor the chief of the pagan gods, since Jupiter was worshipped in the sanctuary on the Capitolium, the most important temple in ancient Rome. Since no mention is made of payment by priests, the habit likely attests to an assumption by the entertainer that ultimately artists such as himself perform not for human but instead divine audiences.

The anecdote that Seneca tells and that Augustine repeats could well have described an actuality. Professional actors who practiced pagan worship may have rendered performances in honor of their gods—and centuries later their Christian successors may have done the same for God, the Virgin, saints, and others. Afterward, events may have ensued that came to be credited as miracles. Both the fragment quoted by Augustine and the actions narrated in “Our Lady’s Tumbler” present entertainers, once at the pinnacle of success but now down-at-the-heels, who have withdrawn from their trades but who nonetheless offer their acts in homage to divinities.

Similar incidents have been widely attested across time and space, inside as well as outside western European Christian culture. How do we account for the likenesses? In this instance the two could have been bound together directly: the teller with whom

the key elements of "Our Lady's Tumbler" originated could have been inspired by perusing this moment in *The City of God*. Both the accounts could be tied together, then, through the narrative equivalent of cause and effect. In the past, literary historians often conducted research into sources and influences. Among folklorists, the process by which tales pass from one person and place to another has been called diffusionism. Though hope rarely exists of pinpointing all the evidence that would be required to map every movement in the passage of a given tale from its origins to all its eventual destinations, enough dots can often be jotted down to justify connecting them into lines.

But do we need to presume such an etiology? Alternatively, we could credit the existence of a story in multiple places around the world to polygenesis. According to this other theory, not all narratives need to be passed on by direct transmission from one teller to another or from one culture to another. Rather, one and the same tale can spring into being independently in different places at different times, because it deals with phenomena of human existence that are widespread, if not universal.

We cannot always ascertain whether the tellers or writers of this or that version believed that the events they described really happened or whether they merely deemed them good enough to be considered true and to deserve being retold. Likewise, we will often be unable to determine for sure whether the same individuals had encountered either a written source or an actual performance that inspired the gist of their narrative. The imagination of storytellers may not need such direct incitement.

A leading mime-player, an old man already grown decrepit, used to perform his mime-play daily on the Capitol, as if the gods gladly watched a performance human beings had abandoned.