

The illustration is a medieval-style painting. In the center, the Virgin Mary is depicted in a long, flowing white gown with a blue mantle. She holds a white lily in her right hand and has her left hand resting on the head of a man kneeling before her. The man is wearing a dark tunic with a red and black diamond pattern and is looking up at Mary with an expression of awe or devotion. In the background, to the right, a group of men in white robes are watching the scene. To the left, there is a large, ornate golden altar or shrine. The overall style is characterized by soft, blended colors and a focus on religious iconography.

JAN M. ZIOLKOWSKI

# READING THE JUGGLER OF NOTRE DAME

Medieval Miracles and Modern Remakings





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# Introduction

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This part of the book is pitched at all those who are interested in or at least open to cultural and especially literary studies. While ushering readers step by step forward across time, it aims to promote scrutiny of the responses that the thirteenth-century poem elicited from the late nineteenth up to the late twentieth century. Concurrently, this section shuttles its users back and forth across the Atlantic Ocean between Europe and the United States. The whole gives insight into the vagaries of success that a narrative undergoes in the constant Darwinian struggle for survival within culture. Above all, these pieces offer testimony to the broad swath of hearers and readers to whom the medieval period in general and this tale in particular have appealed.

For almost a hundred years, the story popped up everywhere. In France the original was not properly translated verbatim until the late twentieth century. That dearth did not impede its popularity at all. In the *fin de siècle*, the poem prompted one paraphrase and another poetic re-creation in French by authors who have now faded from memory. Each of these two treatments confirms that in the waning years of the nineteenth century the tale was deemed attractive. Its audiences ranged from the mass readership of newspapers through the more elite membership of national cultural academies and regional intellectual coteries.

The reception of the medieval poem begins in earnest with a short story by the Nobel Prize-winning author, Anatole France, and with an opera by Jules Massenet, who attained the greatest commercial success of all French composers in his lifetime. Today these two artists, especially the musician, are all but forgotten, above all outside their native country, but during the Belle Époque they commanded high esteem, not merely within their own nation but internationally as well. Anatole France's short story came out first in 1890. Two years later it achieved much greater impact at home and abroad after its inclusion in a volume bearing the title *L'étui du nacre* or "The little box of mother-of-pearl." The opening night of Massenet's opera fell in 1902. Its libretto, by a little-known collaborator of the composer, was inspired by both the poem from the Middle Ages and France's story.

In English, the star of the medieval French miracle has often been styled, somewhat quaintly, a tumbler. By what names did such a professional go in the thirteenth century? What would his shows have looked like? Would the typical busker of this kind have been poor or rich? How predictable would it have been for such a person to concentrate on dance and acrobatics, as opposed to being a generalist who could

sing, tell stories, flip and somersault, pull funny faces, play musical instruments, and amuse in other ways as well? How much competition would a tumbler have felt with other vagabonds? Would the pros of traveling together in troupes, almost like proto-circuses, have outweighed the cons?

Both the brief fiction by Anatole France and the musical drama by Jules Massenet were called *Le Jongleur de Notre Dame*. The first noun can refer either to a jongleur, which is to say, an all-round medieval entertainer along the lines of minstrels, mime-players, jesters, jokers, acrobats, and dancers, or specifically to a juggler. The English words *joker*, *jongleur*, and *juggler*, like the Latin forms from which they and their French cognates derive, are all intimately related.

Such performers probably never vanished, not even in the radical transformations of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, but they would have been less numerous than they became from the twelfth century on. The rock musicians of their day, they sometimes had unsavory reputations. Even among the ancient Romans they had been held suspect. The demands of their lives both allowed and compelled them to move about, and the itinerancy in itself made them questionable. They traveled in bands that were suspected of pursuing illicit activities. Similarly, their trade raised many of the red flags that have often been raised by the presence and profession of actors. For one thing, it caused these virtuosos often to exhibit their physicality, to take on the appearances and attitudes of others, not excepting even women, and to talk of bodily functions and sex or even to imitate them.

For all these reasons, jongleurs had a complicated relationship with the ecclesiastic hierarchy. Often they aroused its distrust. Churchmen damned them repeatedly in canon law for being immoral, akin to prostitutes. Clerics felt grave ambivalence about their song and instrumental music, in contrast to the redemptive chant of the liturgy. In an environment in which the soul was privileged over the body, the corporeality of their profession counted against them.

To make matters worse, popular preachers, such as Franciscan and Dominican mendicants, now and again felt in competition for audiences with street buskers. At times the temptation could have been irresistible to preaching friars to cultivate exempla that presented jongleurs in an unfavorable light and admonished against frequenting and financing them.

Yet sometimes jongleurs with a knack for storytelling, poetry-making, and song-singing specialized in recounting or reenacting tales about the Virgin or saints. Especially when plying their trade on pilgrimage routes, they earned recognition as propagandists for cults: their performances increased the numbers and whipped up the fervor of the faithful who crisscrossed Europe on roads to saintly sites in cathedrals and other churches.

The connection could be mutually beneficial, even symbiotic: more pilgrims meant more rewards for both minstrels and churchmen. The itinerant entertainers had every reason to spread word of fresh apparitions and miracles, while ecclesiastic writers had

equally sound cause to return the favor by making the figure of the jongleur central within a subset of their narratives. So it happened that at one moment these crowd-pleasers could be taken to task for living in a manner Mary could never condone, but at the next be deemed laudable for their service to the Virgin.

In some instances they were credited with having a method to their madness. Fools for Christ (a label taken from the Pauline epistle, 1 Corinthians 1:25), they were thought to possess a wisdom behind a misleading surface of idiocy or madness. In this capacity, they gained validation from the assertions of holy men such as Bernard of Clairvaux and Francis of Assisi that they too were jongleurs or fools for God. No wonder that like jesters and jugglers, jongleurs have become fixed within pop fantasies of medieval life. They crop up routinely in portrayals of the entourages of kings and noblemen.

Notre Dame is the French for “Our Lady,” byword for the Virgin or Mother of God. All four of these are formal appellations for Mary. For understandable reasons, the Gallic epithet for the woman has become confused and conflated with churches hallowed in her name. People in both France and globally default unthinkingly into associating the events in the story with the preeminent architectural Notre Dame, namely, the cathedral of Paris, emblem of the country and its capital alike.

The first few chapters in the second part of this book are translated from the French. They lead into English-language poetry, for the most part but by no means exclusively by Americans. One celebrity who was not a writer must be mentioned and given her due: Mary Garden. After taking Paris by storm, this Scottish-American diva repeated the feat in New York and Chicago across the first thirty years of the twentieth century—throughout the golden age of opera. Because she left no new literary text of musical composition of our story, Garden has no chapter of her own here, but it would be impossible to dispute that she did more than anyone else to establish the standing of “Our Lady’s Tumbler” and its offspring throughout the United States for decades to come. The seductive vitality of her performances may not come through in the few crackly audio recordings or the two stagey silent films we still have, but many firsthand accounts convey how very much her own she made the part of the jongleur.

Think about the story a moment: all the main actors, excepting the Virgin, are men. This one soprano, through her insistence on singing the role of Jean en travesti—meaning “dressed as a member of the opposite sex”—ensured that the medieval story, already boosted by the fame of Anatole France, reached a mass audience. Her star-power paved the way for the tale’s entry into vaudeville, radio, television, and other formats. Last but not least, she blazed a trail for innumerable later women to act, dance, and sing in adaptations of “Our Lady’s Tumbler” and “The Juggler of Notre Dame” from which they would otherwise have been precluded.

As odd as it may seem to us these days, the French monk and his thirteenth-century miracle passed muster as suitable fare for consummately American and modern consumption. In 1893 Katharine Lee Bates, a writer on the faculty of Wellesley,

composed a poem that she revamped fifteen years later as the lyrics to the patriotic song "America the Beautiful." But this professor's passions extended beyond national pride and what was then the present day. In 1904 she published further verse in which she paid homage to the medieval story of the gymnastic jongleur. She valued her piece about the tumbler enough to reprint it at a minimum four more times through 1930.

The onetime Harvard professor Henry Adams, great-grandson of the second US President John Adams and grandson of the sixth John Quincy Adams, gave a very different boost to "Our Lady's Tumbler" by incorporating into his *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* excerpts of the medieval French with his own translations in parallel columns. The private runs of 150 copies in 1904 that he had printed and the five hundred additional ones in 1912 in no way sufficed to satisfy demand. From 1913 until the end of the twentieth century, the book remained available through trade publishers. Adams's idiosyncratic contrasts between the twelfth century and the early twentieth—between the Virgin Mary and the dynamo—exercised powerful effects on readers. Among other things, the miracle of the tumbler reached a new public through its inclusion in this deeply personal meditation on the course of history from the European Middle Ages to American modernity.

A third, typical recasting of the narrative for the US market was produced by Edwin Markham. In 1898 he had bounded into the national spotlight with a poem entitled "The Man with the Hoe" that at once celebrated a French painting and advocated in a socialist spirit for manual laborers. In 1922 this same poet was selected to recite his "Lincoln, the Man of the People" at the dedication of the brand-new memorial to the president in Washington, DC. Like Katharine Lee Bates, Markham was engrossed in social issues confronting America in his day, but such engrossment in no way lessened his capacity to be entranced by the Middle Ages and our story. In 1907 he published "The Juggler of Touraine." His version of the miracle in narrative verse came out in the Christmas issue of a bestselling monthly.

From the very beginning, those recounting the tale of the tumbler or juggler have betrayed a strong penchant for explicitly citing their sources of information and inspiration. Every so often the citations are correct and truthful, while in other cases they are thoroughly or partly false and possibly fanciful. Indeed, occasionally authors deliberately misdirect their readers and even make unacknowledged appropriations that might warrant the charge of plagiarism. Among the versions served up in this section, Anatole France, Jules Massenet, and John Nesbitt were all intriguingly incomplete in divulging their sources. The same could be said for the wonderful books of R. O. Blechman and Tomie dePaola. Beyond the general principle of poetic license, the coy non-acknowledgments owe to the specific circumstance that from the outset this tale has been deemed to be common domain. No one can copyright the Middle Ages, least of all its oral traditional literature.

Not long before World War I ended and the Spanish flu pandemic swept from one continent to another, the story premiered in children's literature. Once again,

the pivotal author is an American—and again a woman, in this case an illustrator of children’s literature and later cartoonist, Violet Moore Higgins. Her rendition for young eyes and ears was published twice in 1917, once with her own illustrations and again with those of another artist. Though now cloaked in oblivion, her remolding of the narrative had the staying power to be reissued in 1934.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the short story by Anatole France was anthologized incessantly. Even as the golden age of opera waned, it held onto its popularity. In fact, in the second quarter of the century, his tale “Our Lady’s Juggler” attained ever greater numbers of new fans through broadcasting. Radio plays were heard on air and read in printed scripts that circulated as transcripts, pamphlets, and magazines. They facilitated the permeation of the story into such media as television, film, graphic novel, and cartoon, while extending its reach in children’s literature, where it remains most entrenched nowadays.

After World War II much creative energy for the jongleur, whether a tumbler or a juggler, manifested itself in English poetry. Though a ballad by the world-famous Anglo-American W. H. Auden has demonstrated the greatest resilience, the well-known Irishman Patrick Kavanagh, the late-blooming American Virginia Hamilton Adair, and still others from the US such as Virginia (Nina) Nyhart and Turner Cassity contributed one-of-a-kind lyric responses to the figure of the minstrel and the miracle that he occasioned. By sheer chance—or not?—when the tumbler puts in his final appearance in this section, he is a she, a denizen of a mental hospital whose antics casually reveal the private parts that most people keep carefully hidden from view. Though the Virgin offers no apparition in recompense, the setting is a chapel, and the athletic feats bring their doer joy.

