

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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1. The Romance Philologists

The making of human culture is, put banally, a complex negotiation. So too, on a smaller scale within that overarching process, is the reconstruction of texts that survive from long ago. To be received by later audiences, such artifacts must be transferred from the formats in which they were recorded in bygone centuries. Most forms from earlier periods were handwritten with utensils, on surfaces, using scripts, and, last but not least, in languages that all differ from what we encounter nowadays. Consequently, they must be reconstituted if they are to be read and interpreted in other media by people today.

The transference from medieval manuscripts into modern printed books or today's computer bytes is not an automatic or automatable endeavor of one-to-one, word-for-word transcription: editing from such sources has seldom been simple and straightforward. On the contrary, the transaction has generally required repeated reassessment and refinement. The whole enterprise has mostly been carried out by specialists. Where literature is at stake, codicologists study physical manuscripts; paleographers, writing systems; and philologists, constitution of texts.

In the case of the medieval poem that would in due course metamorphose into "The Juggler of Notre Dame," the key early contributors to the collaborative venture of establishing and refining the text formed a pan-European rogues' gallery. The cast of characters from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries embraced, if we apply national labels that can be anachronistic when taken from the twenty-first, an Austrian (about whom more will soon be said), a [Finn](#), and more than one [German](#). Indeed, until the twenty-first century German speakers produced the only scholarly editions.

The first in this international roster was an expert in medieval French who usually published under the name [Wendelin Foerster](#) (see Figure 22). He lived from 1844 to 1915. [In 1907 he reminisced](#) about a eureka moment decades earlier, when while examining a thirteenth-century codex he chanced upon a manuscript of our poem. The piece had gone unremarked for the better part of a half millennium. Foerster described this finding and the influence it exercised on his subsequent interests:

Since discovering the charming jewel, "The Juggler of Notre Dame," in the fall of 1872 in the [Arsenal Library](#) in Paris and publishing it in the following year, I was the whole time constantly on the search for similar pieces, in which performers attempted to put their profession in the requisite light by way of legends of the saints or miracles.

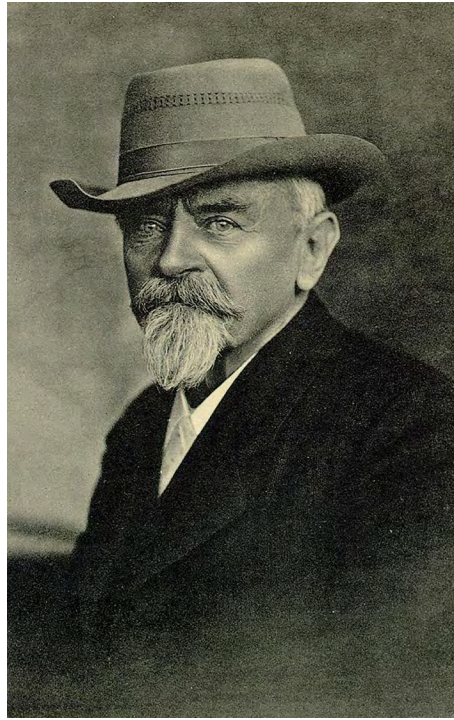


Fig. 22: Wendelin (Wilhelm) Foerster. Photograph, date and photographer unknown. Image courtesy of Universitätsbibliothek Graz. All rights reserved.

In the short run, the happenstance prompted Foerster to bring out the first modern edition. He could hardly have been more fortunate in the manuscript that had fallen into his welcoming hands. Eventually, four additional witnesses would be identified, but only one of them preserved the poem in even a slightly better form. Medieval writings that are extant in multiple codices, in this case five, often have family trees that split into two trunks, from which branches sometimes shoot out that require separate attention. The arboreal diagrams that chart the genealogies of manuscripts are called stemmas. The one for "Our Lady's Tumbler" shows a neat ramification. In its branching, the codex Foerster followed stands at only one remove from the hypothetical original and has an entire side of the split trunk to itself, whereas the others are thought to descend from two lost intermediaries. Thanks to Foerster's good fortune, the Old French of all subsequent editions has remained substantially unchanged from the text he presented.

The consequences of the serendipity did not end with the text in the *editio princeps* or (to translate the Latin) "first edition," which has largely stood the test of time to be what we read today. The happy chance left a personal mark for years to come on Foerster's research agenda, which was already geared to editing French literature from the Middle Ages. As it turned out, he prowled unendingly for an encore of the epiphany he had achieved as a young man. His yearning to relive his earlier feat

stimulated him thirty-five years later to grapple with an Old French narrative on the Holy Face of Lucca.

Who was Foerster? A native German-speaker, he would be hard to pigeonhole by today's categories of nationality. He was born in Wildschütz near Trautenau in the Riesengebirge district of what is now the Czech Republic. As an adult, he studied in Vienna, with an intermezzo in Paris. He remained in the Austrian capital city to gain what is known in German as the *Habilitation*. The "habilitation" is a qualification for advanced research and supervision of students that in many European countries must be attained before a person may qualify for the office of a professorship. After holding for two years in Prague a rank roughly equivalent to an associate professorship in the US system, he was duly appointed a full professor in the Rhineland university of Bonn.

In the four or so decades that intervened between the crushing defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War and that of Germany in the First World War, the citizens of the two nations engaged in a cultural competition that paralleled their rivalry in the military, political, and economic spheres. Yet whatever other frictions may have embroiled their countries, these editors generally cooperated across borders to build upon each other's investigations and to collaborate in furthering knowledge. Literary critics could be true to their homelands while still professing allegiance to a world of learning that admitted to no boundaries.

Against this backdrop, few would have been surprised or offended when Foerster chose to publish his find in *Romania*. The Paris-based periodical had been launched only months after the end of the short-lived War of 1870, in which a coalition of German states under the leadership of Prussia trounced France. The Prussian victory led to the birth of a unified Germany and to the annexation within it of Alsace-Lorraine, a historical region that had belonged to France and would return to it after World War I. On the other side, the French defeat led to the collapse of the Second French Empire, the insurrection known as the Commune of Paris, and the establishment of the Third French Republic, which was dissolved only in 1940.

When Foerster's article was printed, *Romania* was only in its second year of existence. Still, it had already established itself among the foremost vehicles for the dissemination of research on the French language and literature of the Middle Ages. It presented the fruits of Romance philology. The title of the journal has nothing to do with romance and romantic as connected to love. On the contrary, it is a learned and Latinate term meaning "Romance languages" that also refers to the collectivity of the regions, especially in Europe, in which they are spoken. As a term in linguistics, the word designates a family of Indo-European languages that descended from Latin after the dissolution of the Roman empire. Think of French, Spanish, Catalan, Portuguese, Italian, Romanian, and so on.

And philology? As applied to the study of medieval languages and literatures, it denotes the establishment, improvement, and interpretation of texts. These processes often require application of paleography and codicology, morphology and syntax,

lexicology, and various other skills with arcane names constructed from Greek elements. The discipline has passed in and out of vogue. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, it was highly regarded. Philology was essential in charting and validating the origins of the national languages. In the context of the rivalry between the French and the Germans, its fruits were essential in the nation-building underway in Europe and beyond it in the construction and maintenance of world empires.

The cofounders of the periodical were the two leading lights of Romance philology, the field and discipline, in France at the time. One was Paul Meyer, who lived from 1840 to 1917; the other, [Gaston Paris](#), from 1839 to 1903.

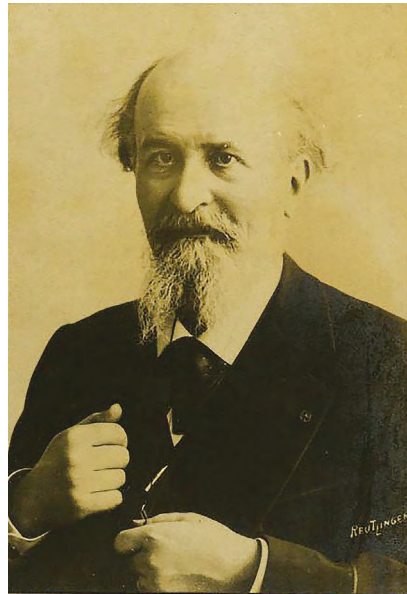


Fig. 23: Gaston Paris, age 61. Photograph by Léopold Reutlinger, 1900.

The last name of the second was pronounced not like that of the French city but instead Pa•rees, accentuated on the second syllable, with the final consonant sounded out, to rhyme with Matisse. The two friends and collaborators, Meyer and Paris, were motivated by the conviction that, beginning in the sixteenth century, the French had undergone a rupture with their medieval past and that repairing it through scientific study was a prerequisite to recovery from the debacle suffered by the nation in the recent combat. This belief that the Middle Ages held vital importance to their own country in their own times did not betoken that the two men who inaugurated the journal narrowed their sights solely to narratives, such as the *Song of Roland*, that could serve as patriotic rallying points. Nor does it presume that they were in any way closeminded about what scholars from the other bank of the Rhine had to offer.

In Foerster's introduction to his edition of what we now know as "Our Lady's Tumbler," the final line expresses gratitude to Gaston Paris. The Frenchman's direct personal contribution to the advance of editorial scholarship on the piece [was scant](#). Yet

since his views carried weight throughout the Western world, he achieved appreciable effect by broadcasting a sense that the story was a literary treasure. In the English translation of his best-selling guide to medieval French literature, [the thumbnail of the poem](#) given by Paris reads:

Some pious tales deserve to be mentioned because of their altogether mediaeval character, like the very charming tale, *The Tombeur of Notre Dame*. Among the jongleurs were so-called “tombeurs,” when their talent was limited to leaps and somersaults, a kind of exercise greatly appreciated and highly perfected. One of these “tombeurs” became a monk in an abbey consecrated to the Virgin, and for lack of any other skill, in her honor executed secretly before her statue his best tricks; the monks who followed him to spy on him saw with stupefaction Our Lady descend from her altar as he rested, and gently wipe away the sweat that rolled down his visage.

Paris amplified the impact of such written sentences by making oral pronouncements along the same lines in lectures and conversations. As a result, he became the authority most cited by those who promoted the miracle of the medieval performer. This state of affairs held true above all along the Anglo-American axis of the Gilded Age, where the author’s stock soared through the first quarter of the twentieth century. He elicits reverential mentions, among other places, in the introductions to English translations of the poem from the Middle Ages.

The précis calls for one side note. The medieval heading that Foerster rightly reported from the manuscript he followed, even as the title of his pathbreaking article, was *Del tumbeor Nostre-Dame*. When Paris deploys the modern derivative *tombeur*, he takes considerable pains to gloss it, because in nineteenth-century French it had acquired the unfavorable connotations of “lady’s man.” The three Frenchmen who revised and popularized the thirteenth-century tale all substituted for the questionable noun the term *jongleur*. This word carried none of the unseemly associations evoked by *tombeur* but was ambiguous in signifying either broadly “professional entertainer” or particularly “juggler.” Though it could comprehend many meanings, it did not bring to mind right away gymnasts, acrobats, tumblers, or dancers.

In the translation, the ellipsis immediately before the last sentence signals the omission of eight lines in which Foerster discusses four medieval French words that he finds noteworthy. In the notes, square brackets enclose my supplements to what is found in Foerster’s original.

Wendelin Foerster, Introduction to “Our Lady’s Tumbler”

People know that the Church, in the Middle Ages, did not consider it beneath its dignity to concern itself with minstrels, jongleurs, and comic actors of various sorts. Whereas it gave absolution to those who recited epics, those who performed these stunts of street acrobats, more or less decent, from which the Middle Ages derived such amusement, had to fear their excommunication. But grace does not always take into account the most serious decrees.

One of these minstrels, jaded with the world, withdrew into the abbey of Clairvaux. All that he owned, he had given away to serve Jesus Christ and his mother, the Virgin. The society he had just entered no doubt must have seemed unique and painful to him; the strict rules of the order, the silence it enjoined, the Masses and the offices—all that was peculiar to our lay brother. Though he was animated by the most spirited piety, he could not take part in the divine service, knowing neither the Our Father, nor the Creed, nor even the Hail Mary. Racked by the thought that he was a useless member of the congregation and that he ate the bread that it bestowed on him without doing anything, fearing also to be hounded out of the monastery so as to have to return into the world of sinners, he addressed the compassionate Virgin, whom one never beseeches in vain. While bells summoned the monks to the office, he entered a [crypt](#) where there was an altar to the Blessed Virgin. He related to her at length his uncertainty, telling her how much he loved to serve her and to pray to her. But he did not know how to go about it. For want of other homages, could he not do for her the only thing that he knew to do? As soon as this idea came to him, he hurried to put it into action: he took off his robe and, clad in a mere tunic, he did before the Virgin all the stunts that he had the habit of performing before curious crowds. He continues this same routine for a long time, until finally one of the brethren of the monastery, surprised at not having seen him at Mass, spied on him and uncovered his secret. After having been witness of this unique divine service, he hurried to notify the abbot. That man, who could hardly believe his ears, proceeded to the crypt and arrived there to see a touching miracle: as the poor jongleur, having finished by losing consciousness out of fatigue, fell at the foot of the altar, Mary came down from heaven accompanied by her retinue of angels, and with a *touaille* or "towel" by way of a fan, she began to fan her minstrel gently, [who did not notice it](#). Soon afterward, the jongleur died and angels carried off his soul to the abode of the blessed.

Such is the story of this scorned minstrel, in its main outlines. It is remarkable at once for its simplicity and its frank naïvety. If the subject in itself makes a person smile, the childlike innocence, ardent faith, and absolute renunciation of worldly life with which the tale is imbued transcend all that the most pious soul can conceive, and takes the form of the most charming poetry. If it is a stunning attestation of faith, it is even more a true poetic jewel.

This piece is found in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, [MS Arsenal 3516, fols. 127ra–139rc](#), and we were astonished not to encounter it in the *Miracles of Mary* by Gautier de Coinci, who however does also tell us of the favor shown by the Virgin to a jongleur. Not having encountered this tidbit in the [edition by Abbé Poquet](#), we searched for it to no avail in five manuscripts that the Bibliothèque nationale owns of the same work and in two Latin texts of *Miracles of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, and we were not in a position to identify the source, even though the author claims to have drawn from the lives of the ancient fathers. Perhaps someone will be luckier than I in this research. Beyond this manuscript, there must be [another in the libraries of Paris](#), since [Carpentier](#) cites under the word *tombare* in his additions to [Du Cange's glossary](#) fifteen lines of the same piece, "from the first book of a manuscript of *Miracles of the Blessed Virgin Mary*," but I could not find it. In any case, this could not be the Arsenal manuscript from which we drew our piece, because its content does not accord with the title given by Carpentier and just these fifteen lines present some divergences from the text that we are publishing.

The manuscript has been badly mistreated: around fourteen folios have been cut out. Most of the miniatures have been taken out, with great harm to the text. One will find a listing of the pieces contained in this volume in the notice of manuscripts of the *Romance*

of the *Seven Sages*, compiled by [Le Roux de Lincy](#), who has also determined the dating of the manuscript with certainty by taking as the year of its execution the first year in the perpetual calendar at the beginning of the volume, which is to say 1268.

There are no indications that allow identification of the author nor exact determination of the time and place in which he lived. Nevertheless, the language justifies us in ascribing to him an approximate date at the end of the twelfth century. The dialect is that of Île-de-France; but the copyist, who incidentally handled the text with respect, seems to have been a native of Picardy. In truth, he only rarely put *k* instead of *ch* and *ch* instead of *ç* in cases where Picard uses these letters; but he regularly, with three or so exceptions, changed the French *z* into the Picard *s*. The glossary points out some noteworthy words. [...]

Here I take the occasion to thank Monsieur Gaston Paris, to whose expertise I have had recourse many times.

