

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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Cover image: Leon Guipon, 'Lightly down from the dark descends the Lady of Beauty' (1907), published in Edwin Markham, 'The Juggler of Touraine', *Century Magazine* (December 1907), p. 231.

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## 2. The Medievalizer Félix Brun

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A general principle of cultural exchange holds that to gain purchase in a later culture, a literary work from a distant time or place requires translation and adaptation. Especially privileged masterpieces of literature have the good fortune to attract more than one editor, translator, and adaptor. Each edition, translation, or adaptation purveys the perspectives of its producer: knowingly or not, every single one is an interpretation. The earliest such endeavors may fall flat or have little effect. Before a beachhead may be established, repeated efforts are often required, like successive bombardments to soften enemy defenses or waves of infantry to advance a battle.

Félix Brun, the author with whom we are concerned here, was never a household name and is today still less so. It may never prove feasible to amass the requisite database and employ an algorithm for graphing mathematically the role he played in propelling “The Juggler of Notre Dame” before the grand public in France or a general one in what more than a century ago was the forerunner of the present-day Anglosphere. Yet despite these concessions, we should consider seriously the different ways in which this modest man laid the groundwork for the future prominence of the story.

Brun, whose life stretched from 1851 to 1926, was the first who attempted to put the medieval poem, even abridged and adapted, into prose in any modern language. In 1883 his paraphrase, spread across three columns in a popular [illustrated weekly](#), was presented to the newspaper readership. Anything but fortuitously, the release fell in late May—the month in which the Virgin Mary received special veneration. Four years later, in 1887, he printed an expanded but still by no means complete version of the story. He did this on his own initiative, in a limited run of fifty copies.

In this case the medium was a booklet that bore the title *Le Jongleur de Notre-Dame* or, in English, “The Juggler of Notre Dame.” (Be forewarned: deciding between the English words “juggler” and “jongleur” is particularly tortuous in translating Brun’s French.) Three years after that, in 1890, he reprised his lovely adaptation in nearly identical form, this time as the title piece that stood front and center in what is now an exceedingly rare book, with a French title equivalent to the English [The Juggler of Notre Dame: Seven Legends for as Many Friends](#).

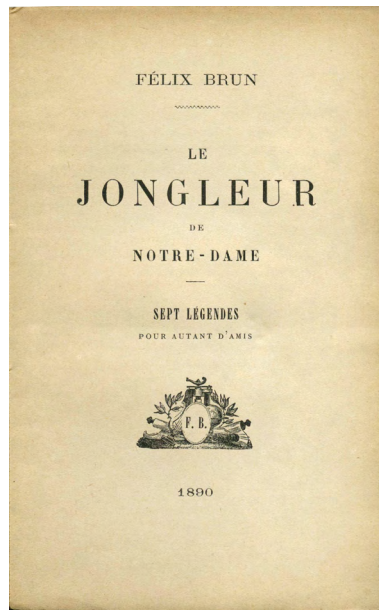


Fig. 24: Title page of Félix Brun, *Le Jongleur de Notre Dame: Sept légendes pour autant d'amis* (Meulan, France: A. Masson, 1890).

Among his other contributions to the tradition, Brun took the lead by devising and using the title that in the 1890s became standard in French, "Le Jongleur de Notre-Dame." The wording was not meant to put readers in mind of the cathedral Notre Dame in Paris or of the Victor Hugo novel with the hunchback who made his home in the same soaring house of worship. We may be very certain that Brun did not have in mind the capital city of France or any of its many churches, not even its chief one. Rather than a reference to a building, the phrase pointed to Our Lady, by the customary denomination for the Virgin Mary in French.

Who was this Félix Brun? By vocation, he was an archivist. In that capacity, he seems to have been liked and respected. Even so, he made no pretence of having the formal training or prestigious credentials possessed by the philologists and historians who attained mandarin-like status in Paris in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War. On the contrary, he struck a pose of being an old-school antiquarian: he presented himself as an amateur, not a professional.

This is not to say that Brun was inexperienced about medieval texts or that he lacked the drive and discipline to research and write. In 1876, he published [a book on the Song of Roland](#). In the first quarter of the twentieth century, he turned out study after study on topics relating to the [town of Soissons](#) and his hometown of [Bucy-le-Long](#), located not quite 100 kilometers from Paris.

Being a native Picard, Brun had every reason to be interested in [Gautier de Coinci](#). The poet of the *Miracles of Our Lady* was monk and abbot at Soissons, first just a monk but later the abbot, and, between those roles, the prior at Vic-sur-Aisne. Both

foundations were located near Bucy-le-Long. All three locales lay within the northern French region of Picardy. He placed into this context, alongside the poet of “Our Lady’s Tumbler,” Gautier. Bear in mind that one of Gautier’s miracles involved the minstrel Peter of Sieglar at Rocamadour.

Unprovincial provincial that he was, Brun made a deliberate decision in his version not to translate the medieval French verbatim but rather to abbreviate it. This move was partly in keeping with the aesthetics of his generation. Additionally, the “naïve language” of the original likely seemed to him impossibly out of keeping with the world he inhabited in fin-de-siècle France. At least sometimes, he also claimed to operate on memory rather than to have the sources spread out before him as he worked. In the first of two paragraphs with which he prefaced his little book in 1890, he confessed, with a coyness that would not be out of place in fiction writing:

None of the tales that follows really belongs to me. Every reader who is a little versed in the literature of the Middle Ages will be able to say easily from where I have drawn them. But he will see also that I have not been an extremely meticulous translator in every instance. Sometimes it has been my lot to reconstitute these naïve stories without having before my eyes the texts, Latin or Romance, which had transmitted them to me at the outset. Has my recollection always served me faithfully? I have reason to doubt. Have I not forgotten something here, added something there? It could be.

Brun knew enough not merely to be aware but even to make use of the heavy-duty journal in which Foerster had brought out his edition of the medieval poem. At the same time, he recognized that even though the learned organ sometimes preserved cultural showpieces, it was too rarefied in its focus and circulation to serve general readers. If put behind lock and key in a vault of such erudition, a jewel like “The Juggler of Notre Dame” would remain inaccessible to most people. Though harboring no disrespect for the likes of Gaston Paris, he wished to tend to different ends and a distinct audience from those served by the card-carrying philologists. In contrast to them, he presented himself, despite being a salaried archivist, as a dilettante who wrote for likeminded souls. In this pose, he belonged to a separate class of enthusiasts from those who were technically proficient and university-certified. His circle was, by choice, not Parisian but provincial. Its members, late romantics in their love of the Middle Ages, belonged to an outgoing generation that was losing control to rising young technocrats, medievalists with more formal study but perhaps less heart.

The archivist discerned and comprehended the transition that was in train. In the second paragraph of the preface that led into his collection from 1890, he admitted, with as much pride as ruefulness:

Here then is a little book that the [École des Chartes](#) would not recommend at all, I imagine: Oh, don’t believe that I take pleasure in that! I am the very first to agree, the most respectfully in the world, that this School has not been established for the fostering of such fantasies. It forms [medievalists: I am only a medievalizer](#).

As such a lover of the Middle Ages, he had good reason to identify with the lay brother of the medieval poem. Brun too had an innocent simplicity of belief, even if he risked losing it in the degenerate multiplicity of late nineteenth-century life. He opined: "Our faith has no longer, can have no longer, the simplicity of his."

The reach to which Brun aspired is brought home by the engraving that graced the cover of *La France illustrée* or "Illustrated France," the French Catholic weekly in which his translation was printed. The art depicts a spring scene. In the background loom Gothic ruins, while in the foreground a wanderer wends his way across a landscape full of flowers and birds. Who is the wayfarer? Can he be the juggler or jongleur himself? Or is he rather a nineteenth-century time-traveler to the Middle Ages? Or does he have all of these identities at once?

### "The Juggler of Notre Dame"

To the [Abbé Auguste Riche](#)

[Once upon a time](#) there was a juggler who, tired of roaming the world, was seized by revulsion for the world and determined to enter into religion. Having chosen the abbey of Clairvaux, he relinquished to it all his property—the good horse that had carried him on so many journeys and also the beautiful clothes, jewels, and furs, with which lords and townspeople had the custom of paying for his talents. Unfortunately he knew nothing of what they expected in these pious houses. Up until then, he had never done anything but juggle, vault, and dance for the amusement of people. In that he had become an expert; but conversely he did not know psalm-singing, the sequence of rituals and prayers, and, in general, everything relating to the holy liturgy.

So he began by remaining completely flabbergasted, completely dumbstruck, among the others. The choir monks and the lay brothers served God, each according to his rank and employment; the priests officiated at the altar; the deacons sang the Gospel and the subdeacons the Epistle; some said the versicles and others the responses; the lay brothers recited at the bare minimum the [Miserere](#); and there were none, down to the lowliest clerks, who did not know their Our Fathers. But he, too old to learn, was good for nothing, and whereas he came across brothers everywhere engaged in praying or working, he could only wander around uselessly alongside them. Because of this he was distraught with all his soul, at great risk of being sent off, since he did not even earn his board.

Roaming one day, sunk in thought, in the abbey, he happened by chance to go down into a crypt, and as he reflected on an image of the Virgin Mary there, on an altar, he heard the Mass ringing out. His fears and regrets redoubled: "Treason!" he cried out, "My brothers are going to say their office, each one will have his assigned duty in it, but I—I will be like an ox that people leave in the stable, to eat grass that it has not at all earned by its work. Well then, by the holy Mother of God, I will do, I too, what I know how to do, and he would be quite silly who could find cause to complain of it. Some serve God by singing; I will serve him by dancing."

Without delay he strips off his cloak and, keeping on only a light and supple little undertunic, he gets ready for his exercises. But first he turned himself humbly to the altar. "Gentlest lady, gentlest queen," he says, "I commit to you my body and soul. Do not

spurn what I know, I entreat you; with the help of God, I will try to pay you my tribute as I can. Knowing neither to read nor to sing, I will select my prettiest vaults to honor you, to honor also your son whom I see there, so lovely! in your arms. I will do it like a kid that, to amuse its mother, leaps and bounds before her in the middle of the meadow. You are hard to no one, you will deign to accept with grace my good intention, and perhaps my dances will delight your infant Jesus for a moment." After then making a big bow, he performs to the best of his ability a vault in the French style, then one in the Champagne style, then the Breton vault, the Spanish vault, that of Rome and of Loraine. He walks sometimes on his head, sometimes on his hands, and does not stop except to say a Hail Mary in the most devoted way in the world. The chants that reached him from the church rekindled his passion; he danced the whole time the Mass went on. Finally, overcome by exhaustion, he halts and collects his clothes. Then, hailing the Virgin again, "Farewell, gentlest mother, I am going off, because I cannot do any more; but I will come back each day to offer you this enjoyment, which is all that I can do. I would be so pleased to serve you! It is really a great shame that I do not know the psalter as the others do; I would recite it for you quite gladly. Gentlest of ladies, I commit to you my body and soul."

Just as he had promised, he returned many times and he never, no matter how tired he was, failed to honor in his fashion the blessed Mother of God. But no one, apart from Jesus and Mary, suspected what he went to do in the crypt, for he did not wish to speak of it, so much did he fear that they would send him away from the convent. He would surely have liked better to die than to return into this hateful world, brimming over with sins. A monk, having observed him, uncovered his secret and told it to the lord abbot. The latter, as one might think, was greatly astonished. He went to the crypt, hid himself behind a pillar, and kept watch. Our man came as he had become accustomed; he began to perform all the graceful vaults that we said, and so well and with such spirit that he finished by falling to the ground, exhausted, unconscious.

Now hear a most impressive miracle! From the vault came down, in a circle of light, a woman and a child, one hundred times more beautiful than a person could express. They were clothed entirely in gold and gems, but it was their very faces that seemed to create brightness around them. Angels and archangels, forming an entourage to flank them, lined up near the stupefied juggler and raised him up gently in their arms. The lady, with a very white cloth, fanned his brow; the child dried the sweat that washed over him. When they had cooled him well and looked after him beautifully, they made the sign of the cross over him and then went back up to heaven with the angels.

Then the abbot understood. From then on, he held the poor lay brother in high esteem and affection, thinking that he must be quite dear to the blessed Virgin to receive favor of this kind. One day, the former juggler, all in tears, expressed to him his fear of not being able to serve God as it was necessary, and he even spoke of forsaking the convent so as no longer to occasion others the scandal of his uselessness. "Rest assured, my brother," the abbot responded to him with a smile, "You are quite worthy of being in our order; would that we could be so, we, in yours!" And he ordered him, as penance, to fret no longer.

The good vassal of the Virgin—so the one who told us his story calls him—died some time from then. Mary and the angels came in person to receive his soul, at which the devils of hell became extremely enraged. His body was buried most honorably by the monks; they venerated his memory like that of a saint.

What God wants before all else is love in the heart. If he repaid the monk whose adventure you have just heard, it is not because the monk knew how to dance, but because in dancing he gave the only proof that he could provide of his love and good will. Now, ladies and gentlemen, let us ask Jesus not to serve him badly anymore.

