

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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11. The Mid to Late Twentieth-Century Poets

A. Patrick Kavanagh

Patrick Kavanagh was raised as a devout Catholic. His family frequented the parish church of Saint Mary in Inniskeen, a small village in County Monaghan, Ireland.



Fig. 48: Patrick Kavanagh Centre, former Catholic St. Mary's church, Inniskeen, Ireland.
Photograph from Wikimedia, 2009, CC BY-SA 1.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kavanaghcentre.jpg>

The Irishman, who was born in 1904 and died in 1967, grew up to be a devotee of the Virgin himself. His favorite prayer was the Marian hymn "Hail Queen of Heaven, the Ocean Star," by Father John Lingard. Not surprisingly, Kavanagh often referred to the Mother of God in his poetry.

In 1959 the poet composed "Our Lady's Tumbler." How he became exposed to the medieval tale remains an open question, but the vocabulary of his piece hints that he had read and borrowed from the translation by Eugene Mason, first printed in 1910. In any case, Kavanagh appropriates the story or rather its leading character to suit his personal circumstances. To be more precise, he assumes that his readers already know

the narrative and have no need of a recapitulation: the title of his own poem and the repetition of the same phrase in the final line are the only references he makes.

In "Our Lady's Tumbler" Kavanagh expresses thankfulness for his physical recovery and poetic rebirth after surgery he underwent in 1955 to remove a cancerous lung and rib. In his gratitude he celebrates the joys of life. In particular, he concentrates upon the beauties and pleasures that the canals of Dublin had to offer in spring and summer. Whereas earlier in his career the poet sometimes cast the Irish city as a hellish place, he now portrays it as a [locus of redemption](#).

Elsewhere in his oeuvre Kavanagh wrote poems that are called his Grand Canal sonnets, though this is not one of them. The lyric comprises ten couplets of iambic tetrameters. The main body consists of sixteen lines. An envoi of four more, with a summary and dedication, caps the composition—and directs the reader's attention to the devotion that the entertainer in the thirteenth-century French displayed to the Mother of God.

For all his attachment to the story of "Our Lady's Tumbler," Kavanagh in general rejected what he called "tales of French-hot miracles," such as the fervor associated with the cult of Mary in Lourdes, France. More broadly, he disapproved of the Romanization that from his vantage point was eroding the defining character of Irish Catholicism. Instead, he advocated his own practice of seeking out the miraculous in the quotidian, meaning the mundanities of daily life, especially in his native Ireland. In that spirit, he seemed to have no reluctance in overlooking any intrinsic Frenchness of "Our Lady's Tumbler" and instead to regard with favor the wonder of a nameless performer who gave expression to his piety through physical performance and thereby elicited approval from the Virgin.

"Our Lady's Tumbler"

- My verse though light I hope is not
 A trivial thing facetious or
 Inclined to doggerel at times.
 I come to you with verse's chimes
 5 For Easter's sake when tulip time
 In [Stephen's Green](#) is yours and mine;
 Once more, [deck chairs](#) and all the knowledge
 That's learned in summer's sunny college,
 The grass to lie on by the gate
 10 Where we can see down [Grafton Street](#)
 And get to know new blades of grass
 Particular personal visions as
 You last year on the [Grand Canal](#)
 Got to know the mystical
 15 View of [Leeson Bridge](#), the view
 That happens to no one else but you.

I come to you to verse my thanks
 To parks and flowers and canal banks
 I bring you this verse interlude
 20 Our Lady's Tumbler's gratitude.

B. W. H. Auden

W. H. Auden was born English in 1907 but naturalized American in 1946, more than a quarter of a century before his death in 1973.



Fig. 49: W. H. Auden, age 60. Photograph by Jill Krementz, 1967.

However we pigeonhole him in nationality, he rates among the major poets of the twentieth century. He was drawn to the Middle Ages, especially poetry of early medieval England and Iceland that contained themes of Germanic mythology and heroism. But his interests in literature also ran to Middle English, Old French, and Medieval Latin. In 1971 he wrote an "Ode to the Medieval Poets" that singles out by name four who left their marks in Middle English and Scots as well as the "anons" who remain nameless to us.

In 1958 Auden produced the narration for the performance with music of the *Play of Daniel*, a Medieval Latin liturgical drama. Eleven years later, he returned to the Middle Ages and music. In this reprise he crafted "The Ballad of Barnaby" as the libretto for a musical performance put on by the pupils at a girls' school in Connecticut, the now defunct Wykeham Rise School in Washington. The score was composed by Chuck Turner, a friend of his who taught music there.

Also in 1969, Auden's lyrics for the ballad were printed on the sheet music. At roughly the same time, the text without musical notation graced the front of the *New York Review of Books*. As we have seen often before in other adaptations of the story, the piece was tied to the holiday season: this December number of the semi-monthly magazine was identified explicitly as the Christmas issue. To acknowledge the

associations of ballad with oldentimes, the cover page was styled as a kind of updated broadside with six decorations by the American artist Edward Gorey. At the same time, the format pays tribute to the [broadside ballad](#), a subgenre within the form. The same presentation was adopted, after Auden's death, as a handout for the memorial service in St. John the Divine on October 3, 1973.

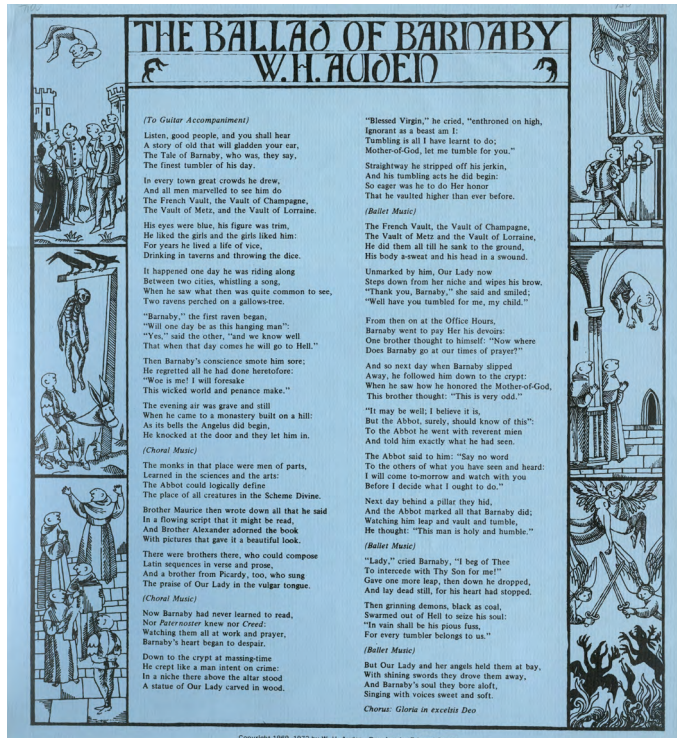


Fig. 50: W. H. Auden, *The Ballad of Barnaby*, illus. Edward Gorey. Pre-existing poem and artwork, distributed to complement the Memorial Service in St. John the Divine, New York City, Wednesday, October 3, 1973. All rights reserved.

Ballad, as a species of folk song, is commonly qualified as being [popular and traditional](#). For centuries now, it has been seen as having arisen from the [oral culture of western Europe](#) and as having been handed down by illiterate or partly literate singers who eventually carried the genre to the New World, where with the passage of time it entered the realm of folk song. Though Auden's poem is indisputably a literary ballad, he emphasized the oral and aural in the opening couplet. Despite choosing not to reuse many phrases, he repeated verbatim two whole lines that catalogue the four specific vaults that the tumbler performs in his routine. Metrically, he opted for four-line stanzas. In his quatrains the lines are four-stress, while the rhyme pattern is aabb.

"The Ballad of Barnaby" was a favorite of its author's. In fact, after he died on September 29, 1973, copies of it were distributed at a two-hour memorial service conducted in his honor in New York City. In the poem, Auden blended elements of

the thirteenth-century French version, with which he was acquainted through the translation by Philip H. Wicksteed, and Anatole France's short story. As the title of Auden's piece indicates, he appropriated the name of his protagonist from the nineteenth-century writer, but he made the leading character a tumbler and not a juggler, and likewise he drew from "Our Lady's Tumbler" the names of specific vaults performed by the young acrobat.

Could Auden have been acquainted with Kavanagh's "Our Lady's Tumbler"? The two poets knew and were influenced by each other's writings, presumably more [Kavanagh by Auden](#) than vice versa. Yet this particular composition by the Irishman was so little known, as indeed it remains to this day, that the odds seem slim. Auden's interest in the medieval French is likelier to have been piqued by his reverence for Henry Adams, which centered upon *The Education of Henry Adams* but extended also to *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres*. The poet's engagement with the American man of letters and historian surfaces repeatedly, above all in an essay entitled "The Virgin & the Dynamo."

In the hands of the great twentieth-century poet, the tale becomes one of rejoicing in art and hoping for salvation. The joy and redemption dispel the ominousness, reminiscent of a late medieval French ballad by François Villon, of two ravens on a gallows-tree. The raptors discuss how the tumbler Barnaby is destined for hell, and indeed black demons come to seize his soul when he drops dead of heart failure.

To the end, Auden shows a light touch, with flashes of comedy. The last-mentioned owe in part to his preoccupation with the theory of the carnivalesque that the Russian literary critic [Mikhail Bakhtin](#) had adumbrated in two books, one on the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky and the other on the French writer François Rabelais. At the same time, it is tempting to read Auden's death back into the poem and to wonder if while grappling with his mortality, he reflected on the deliverance he hoped to attain through his art.

"The Ballad of Barnaby"
(*To Guitar accompaniment*)

Listen, good people, and you shall hear
A story of old that will gladden your ear,
The Tale of Barnaby, who was, they say,
The finest tumbler of his day.

- 5 In every town great crowds he drew,
And all men marvelled to see him do
The French Vault, the Vault of Champagne,
The Vault of Metz, and the Vault of Lorraine.

His eyes were blue, his figure was trim,
 10 He liked the girls and the girls liked him;
 For years he lived a life of vice,
 Drinking in taverns and throwing the dice.

It happened one day he was riding along
 Between two cities, whistling a song,
 15 When he saw what then was quite common to see,
 Two ravens perched on a gallows-tree.

"Barnaby," the first raven began,
 "Will one day be as this hanging man":
 "Yes," said the other, "and we know well
 20 That when that day comes he will go to Hell."

Then Barnaby's conscience smote him sore;
 He repented of all he had done heretofore:
 "Woe is me! I will forsake
 This wicked world and penance make."

25 The evening air was grave and still
 When he came to a monastery built on a hill:
 As its bells the Angelus did begin.
 He knocked at the door and they let him in.

(Choral music)

The monks in that place were men of parts,
 30 Learned in the sciences and the arts:
 The Abbot could logically define
 The place of all creatures in the Scheme Divine.

Brother Maurice then wrote down all that he said
 In a flowing script that it might be read,
 35 And Brother Alexander adorned the book
 With pictures that gave it a beautiful look.

There were brothers there who could compose
 Latin Sequences in verse and prose,
 And a brother from Picardy, too, who sung
 40 The praise of Our Lady in the vulgar tongue.

(Choral music)

Now Barnaby had never learned to read,
 Nor *Paternoster* knew nor *Creed*;
 Watching them all at *work and prayer*,
 Barnaby's heart began to despair.

45 Down to the crypt at *massing-time*
 He crept like a man intent on crime:
 In a niche there above the altar stood
 A statue of Our Lady *carved in wood*.

50 “Blessed Virgin,” he cried, “enthroned on high,
 Ignorant as a beast am I:
 Tumbling is all I have learnt to do;
 Mother-of-God, let me tumble for You.”

55 Straightway he stripped off his jerkin,
 And his tumbling acts he did begin:
 So eager was he to do Her honor
 That he vaulted higher than ever before.

(Ballet music)

60 The French Vault, the Vault of Champagne,
 The Vault of Metz and the Vault of Lorraine,
 He did them all till he sank to the ground,
 His body *asweat* and his head in a *swound*.

Unmarked by him, Our Lady now
 Steps down from her niche and wipes his brow.
 “Thank you, Barnaby,” She said and *smiled*;
 “Well have you tumbled for me, my child.”

65 From then on at the *Office-Hours*
 Barnaby went to pay Her his *devoirs*.
 One brother thought to himself: “Now where
 Does Barnaby go at our times of prayer?”

70 And so next day when Barnaby slipped
 Away he followed him down to the crypt.
 When he saw how he honored the Mother-of-God,
 This brother thought: “This is very odd.”

75 **"I**t may be well: I believe it is,
 But the Abbot, surely, should know of this."
 To the Abbot he went with reverent mien
 And told him exactly what he had seen.

80 **T**he Abbot said to him: "Say no word
 To the others of what you have seen and heard.
 I will come to-morrow and watch with you
 Before I decide what I ought to do."

Next day behind a pillar they hid,
 And the Abbot marked all that Barnaby did.
 Watching him leap and vault and tumble,
 He thought, "This man is holy and humble."

(Ballet music)

85 **"L**ady," cried Barnaby, "I beg of Thee
 To intercede with Thy Son for me!,"
 Gave one more leap, then down he dropped,
 And lay dead still, for his heart had stopped.

90 **T**hen grinning demons, black as coal,
 Swarmed out of Hell to seize his soul:
 "In vain shall be his pious fuss,
 For every tumbler belongs to us."

(Ballet music)

95 **B**ut Our Lady and Her angels held them at bay,
 With **shining swords** they drove them away,
 And Barnaby's soul they bore aloft,
 Singing with voices sweet and soft.

Chorus: Gloria in excelsis Deo.

C. Virginia Nyhart

This poet, born in 1934, is a longtime resident of Massachusetts. Under the first name Nina, she published **two books of poetry** and **coedited an anthology** of contemporary poems that were selected and presented to encourage children's writing. As the publications suggest, she split her career between writing poetry and teaching it across

the whole pedagogic spectrum, from elementary school through college to adult education.

Like Kavanagh, Nyhart also composed a piece entitled “*Our Lady’s Tumbler*,” which appeared in 1973 in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, a literary magazine that was founded in 1925. In it she retells the tale in nine skilfully crafted six-line stanzas. The lines vary in syllabic count, with the shortest placed at the beginnings and ends of stanzas and with the longest in the middle. These stanzas are unified by rhyme, near rhyme, and loose assonance in an abccba pattern. Last but not least, in their typography they are presented on the page so that their visual shape becomes part of their nature as *concrete poetry*: they form a pattern poem, as the reader will see.

The poem opens with the words “It was time to turn,” which set the stage for the wheeling of the tumbler’s gymnastics. Nyhart plays in various ways on the arches or bridges that gymnasts form with their bodies during their routines. Here the performer’s thoughts are presented in the first person. The gender of the acrobat is left indeterminate. At the start she or he, hitherto successful, trips during a performance and feels ashamed of this failure. After contemplating suicide, the performer takes the advice of a bridge that spans a river and resolves to enter Clairvaux. Inside the monastery the athlete feels inadequate and useless until seizing the initiative by tumbling (and tumbling down) once again, this time beneath “Our Lady’s arch.” A miracle, unseen even by the tumbler, ensues, but we are left uncertain as to whether anything happens outside the performer’s personal perceptions.

“Our Lady’s Tumbler,” with its richly subjective perspective, makes the narrative a true lyric. The poem assumes that its readers are already conversant with the gist of the medieval tale. Word-choice suggests that Nyhart may have consulted all three of the most frequently read and reprinted English prose translations of the thirteenth-century original, the decades-old ones by Philip H. Wicksteed, Isabel Butler, and Alice Kemp-Welch.

“Our Lady’s Tumbler”

It was time to turn.
 They honored me in courts and streets
 and cheered until I tripped one spring night
 cartwheeling, upended by a dog’s bark and the sight
 5 of a star spiraling between my feet.
 My cheeks burn

to recall their jeers
 the gutter smell, and under my fingers
 slime. A child skipped over me, boasting a better
 10 style. I backed down to the river, invited the water
 to embrace me. But the longer
 I faced that mirror

the more I endured,
 shame ebbed, and the bridge, my fellow
 15 arch, befriended me, saying, "Give up your horse,
 your money, and your clothes. Go left at the cross,
 take the road to Clairvaux,
 that holy order

where they sing
 20 the ancient [psalms](#)." So I entered their service
 and they gave me meat and a bed. Daily, in prayer,
 at lessons, and in chant, they praised Our Mother.
 Fancy words for a simple novice,
 unschooled, tongue-

25 tied. "Read
 palms," they whispered, laughing. Once more
 my bones unhinged. Night after night the dank wall
 listened: "I do not earn my bread, have no call
 here. How can I serve her
 30 whom I need?

The miller's wheat
 is finely ground. The baker is proud
 of each golden loaf, the weaver of his careful cloth.
 The abbot cultivates his flowers. Even the bellows' breath
 35 makes a fire grow. What can be made
 with a heart and feet?"

The stones sighed.
 "Consider the slender birch,
 how it humbly bows." These words fell into my night
 40 like tears on dry earth, like summer rain, like light.
 Under [Our Lady's arch](#)
 again I tried,

stiffly at first,
 awkwardly, the Brittany trick,
 45 the stand of Champagne. And then the Roman vault,
 the leaps of Metz and Lorraine and the Spanish somersault
 and my heavy feet grew quick
 til my heart burst

with fervor
 50 and I tumbled down. I swear I felt
 her hand, yet waked to a still crypt. To this day
 I covet no other's rite or talent, knowing how I may,

by the simple spending of myself,
deserve her.

D. Turner Cassity

[Turner Cassity](#), an American poet born in Mississippi in 1929, went on to receive his undergraduate degree there.



Fig. 51: Turner Cassity. Photograph, date and photographer unknown. Atlanta, GA, Emory University, Robert W. Woodruff Library. Image courtesy of Emory University Archives. All rights reserved.

Following college, he left the South for a long while. For a start he earned master's degrees, one on each coast, first in 1952 from Stanford in English and later in 1956 from Columbia in library science. After being drafted into the US Army, he spent a stretch from 1952 to 1954 in Puerto Rico. Between 1956 and 1962 he worked as a librarian not only in his native state but also in South Africa. Thereafter he moved to Georgia to serve in the same profession at Emory University from 1962 to 1991. He remained in Atlanta until dying there at the age of 80 in 2009.

From the 1960s on, Cassity published voluminously, as a playwright and short-story writer but especially as a poet. "[Our Lady's Juggler](#)," first printed in 1976, comprises three quatrains with abab rhyme. Where did he encounter the story? As a well-read poet, he would have likely been familiar with "The Ballad of Barnaby." His choice of meter may even echo Auden's. He could have come across Kavenagh's poem, Nyhart's,

or both, though the likelihood is markedly lower. In any event, he departs from all of these possible predecessors in assuming the leading character to be a juggler, as in the literary lineage leading back to Anatole France and less remotely to R. O. Blechman, rather than a tumbler, as in the medieval poem. Furthermore, he does not feel obliged in his poem to retell the tale but rather takes as a given that his own readers will already know its basics. Like Nyhart's "Our Lady's Tumbler," his "Our Lady's Juggler" is in the first person, from the standpoint of the protagonist. In the process, the Virgin and her power are paradoxically effaced.

"Our Lady's Juggler"

The miracle is mine, My Lady.
Do not think [your lifted hand](#),
[Your so late simpler](#) count. The steady,
Prompted poise of no hoops in the hand

5 And some hoops in the air surpasses.
This I make for you of rest,
Eye, wrist—a going magic—grace's
Access neither harms nor much assists.

10 Grace is to have no need of grace,
And I who send out no prospectus,
Leave no memory, give [phase](#)
To fall, in giving [mass](#) my little [ictus](#).

E. Virginia Hamilton Adair

Though not published until 1998, "The Chapel at Mountain State Mental Hospital" was probably drafted three or even four decades earlier. At the very least its core idea became crystalized back then. Its author was Virginia Hamilton Adair, who lived from 1913 to 2004. Her career as a poet follows an unusual progression. In the 1930s she was educated at prestigious US women's colleges, with a B.A. degree from Mount Holyoke in 1933 and a M.A. from Radcliffe in 1936. In the 1940s she earned modest recognition from poems that were published in such major magazines as *The Atlantic*, *The New Republic*, and *The Saturday Review*.

After this promising start, she brought virtually nothing into print until reaching the ripe age of eighty-three years, when her first book, entitled *Ants on the Melon*, became an unlikely bestseller, and she found herself suddenly, though briefly, a media darling. The year was 1996, and the tale of her late-life success gained poignancy from the circumstance that not long before, she had lost her sight from glaucoma. From the

hoopla that ensued after publication, the press spotted an opportunity too tempting to forgo. A [second collection](#) of poetry by the blind octogenarian was put together from her unpublished oeuvre and printed in 1998. Largely devoted to religious themes, the collection failed to secure the warm welcome that its predecessor had received: Adair's fifteen minutes of fame had evaporated two years prior.

The sequel contains a piece that responds to the tale of "Our Lady's Tumbler." The poem is set in a chapel, not in a medieval monastery or cathedral in France, but in an imaginary mental hospital somewhere in what was then the present-day United States. The central figure in the cast of characters is named Jean, but do not be deceived into conflating this woman with the jongleur in Massenet's opera. Though the names may be homographs, they are not homophones. The pronoun used a few seconds ago says it all: this is a female /dʒin/ rather than a male /ʒɒn/.

Nothing is revealed about the previous life of this Jean, such as what profession she once practiced or even if she ever had one. She makes her mark by doing a cartwheel in a chapel during a service—and while wearing no underclothing. Though she creates the impression of being feeble-minded, in the end this dancer alone transcends the dichotomies between body and soul as well as between human and divine, like a fool of God. Through the impact of her physical moves, she brings her viewers closer to religious revelation than do the words of the man preaching, which go unreported and roundly ignored. The situation calls to mind "The Hasidic Jewish Tale of 'The Little Whistle'" (see Part 1, Chapter 12, above).

When did Adair write "The Chapel at Mountain State Mental Hospital"? From 1950 to 1953 she worked as a bibliotherapist at Eastern State Hospital, a facility devoted to mental healthcare in Williamsburg, Virginia. Those years may well have given her the germ of her idea. Perhaps she even composed the verse during that spell. Alternatively, she could have come back to the topic at a later date. In any event, the poem is more redolent of mid-century modern than of the waning twentieth century. Nothing gives the impression that she was responding to any modern poet, and indeed she may have drafted her piece long before Kavanagh, Auden, Nyhart, and Cassity produced theirs.

"The Chapel at Mountain State Mental Hospital" is not religious, if by the adjective is meant either Christianity in general or Roman Catholicism in particular. Adair eventually became a committed Zen Buddhist. The poem describes a congregation, supplemented by a bird, that has assembled for a service, but through a flurry of negatives it downplays formal religion. The first stanza informs us that the chapel contains no stained glass, no relics, no tomb, no brass, and no incense. Granted, reference is made later to the pulpit, opening prayer, hymn, sermon, collection, and

offering, but the preacher is mentioned only to emphasize how he pauses in his peroration when Jean performs her cartwheel. This humble action surpasses all words, except perhaps those of Adair's composition itself.

The piece is composed in iambic tetrameter. Its fifty-one lines follow a fluid rhyme scheme.

"The Chapel at Mountain State Mental Hospital"

The chapel boasted no stained glass,
no holy relics, *shroud of Turin*,
no marble tomb or funeral brass,
no *incense* for the reek of urine.

5 Attendants, prisoners on parole,
a pair of alcoholic sin-mates,
brought Alice in her camisole
and other oddly costumed inmates,
creaking and thundering on the stair,
10 the crash of a collapsing chair
competing with the opening prayer.

All types appeared, from crone to bimbo,
pimply youth to hoary *gaffer*,
chatty fools and ghouls in limbo,
15 weeper, curser, groaner, laugher,
stylish Steve with arms akimbo.
A dove flew in and out the window
trying to catch *a moth* and gulp it,
building a nest above the pulpit.
20 Diane in *purple trimmed with ermine*
called the male patients "swine" and "vermin"
during the *hymn* and then the sermon.

A radio was turned up high,
two patients listening to a game;
25 the bird departed for the sky
when down the aisle an old man came
asking who took up the collection,
and laid an orange upon the lectern.
The sermon went on all the same.

30 Like *le jongleur de Nôtre Dame*,
Jean made her offering with aplomb;
passing the front row to the aisle,

she turned on God a dazzling smile,
with perfect cartwheels all the while
35 in a full skirt with streaming hair,
but not one stitch of underwear,
no top except a scarlet halter,
she somersaulted past the altar.
The preacher stopped his peroration
40 to marvel at each pure gyration;
so did the motley congregation,
and no one tried to make her stop,
till ending, with a bow and hop,
she moved, with hair and clothing neat,
45 demure and quiet to her seat.
Surely the *jongleur* would relate
to Jean, the cartwheel queen of Mountain State.

Gaffer and girl convert us with their motions
to greater freedom in our devotions;
50 the broken windows of the mind may give
the wingèd spirit still a space to live.

