

The illustration is a medieval-style painting. In the center, the Virgin Mary is depicted in a long, flowing white robe 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 a reverent expression. In the background, 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



<https://www.openbookpublishers.com>

© 2022 Jan M. Ziolkowski



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International license (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the work for non-commercial purposes, providing attribution is made to the author (but not in any way that suggests that he endorses you or your use of the work). Attribution should include the following information:

Jan M. Ziolkowski, *Reading the Juggler of Notre Dame: Medieval Miracles and Modern Remakings*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0284>

Copyright and permissions for the reuse of many of the images included in this publication differ from the above. This information is provided in the captions and in the list of illustrations.

In order to access detailed and updated information on the license, please visit <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0284#copyright>. Further details about CC BY-NC-ND licenses are available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at <https://archive.org/web>

Digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0284#resources>

Every effort has been made to identify and contact copyright holders and any omission or error will be corrected if notification is made to the publisher.

ISBN Paperback: 9781800643680

ISBN Hardback: 9781800643697

ISBN Digital (PDF): 9781800643703

ISBN Digital ebook (EPUB): 9781800643710

ISBN Digital ebook (AZW3): 9781800643727

ISBN XML: 9781800643734

ISBN HTML: 9781800646698

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0284

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.

Cover design by Anna Gatti.

Overview

How does the tale about the juggler of Notre Dame go? The story just about always runs something like this: a medieval performer grows weary of wayfaring and sick of sideshows. Instead, he longs for the opportunity to settle down and express his faith. Alienated from the secular milieu, he joins a monastery. Unfortunately, this about-face leaves him not a bit happier. Once cloistered, he soon recognizes how hopelessly unqualified he is for monasticism. The erstwhile entertainer does not know the liturgy, the Latin language, or such rudiments of monkish etiquette as when to keep silent and when to speak. The realization of his utter unsuitability leads him to despair of his present monastic life, as much as he had done recently of his prior worldly one. But eventually he finds a way out by devising a ritual thoroughly his own that makes him feel less useless: whenever his fellow monks chant the divine office together in the choir of the church, he slips down by himself to the crypt and tumbles or juggles before an image of Mary there.

The brethren, once aware of this unconventional conduct, denounce their comrade. When they bring the head of their community to spy on his routine, the little gang is at first outraged. What arrant blasphemy! The newcomer's dancing not only violates the decorum of their worship through its irreverence but, still worse, conflicts in its individualism with the strict conformity that monastic obedience requires. Yet shortly thereafter, they behold a miracle that forces them to rethink. First their colleague collapses, bathed in sweat from the rigors of his performance. Then the Mother of God reveals herself and comforts him. The abbot, in his wisdom, perceives and explains the significance of the Virgin's apparition and intercession. Under his guidance, the other monks concede how misguided their assumptions have been. No longer condemning the tumbler as sacrilegious, they go on to extol and emulate him as saintly.

This narrative secured a modest toehold in the written records of France from the early thirteenth century up through the late Middle Ages, first as a poem and later as a preaching exemplum, only to vanish from view from then until 1873. After its rediscovery, the tale scaled the cultural ladder. Early on, it escaped from the confines of scholarship by being paraphrased, translated, and transformed into short stories and versifications. Rung by rung, it made the transition from opera to radio, television, and film. Simultaneously, poets, both major and minor, laid claim to it.

At first blush, the story may look too straightforward to allow much scope for creativity. Nonetheless, for a hundred years after its recovery in 1873, it evidenced

remarkable malleability and multiplicity. Not a single retelling or reenactment of it in any medium failed to introduce unexpected elements and angles. Nowadays, however, the juggler's miracle has not demonstrated much of a capacity to survive and even thrive through adaptation. On the contrary, it has slipped far down from the privileged post in cultural literacy it once occupied. A few charming specimens of it linger in children's literature, but otherwise it shows faint signs of life.

Why did the tale exercise such intense appeal seven hundred years ago, only afterward to be relegated to obscurity? Why did it regain or even intensify its magnetic hold over audiences in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and maintain it through the close of the twentieth, but then lose its magic touch in our own twenty-first? In sum, why did it twice emerge from a void to prosper, when countless other stories were ignored and even perished?

This collection is envisaged as a treasure chest partitioned into two well-stocked halves. If you throw open the lid of this stout coffer (and it is meant never to be locked but instead always to stand open to all prospective admirers), the first item to greet your eyes will be a gem of verse from early thirteenth-century France, not record-breakingly huge but brilliantly multifaceted. The precious stone in question has been commonly called "Our Lady's Tumbler" (after *Del Tumbeor Notre Dame*, the medieval French name for the poem that the first editor appropriated) and "The Juggler of Notre Dame" (after *Le Jongleur de Notre Dame*, the present-day French title that rapidly displaced the original one).

However we designate the story, it looks at first glance to be short but sweet and simple as can be. For all that, more minute inspection proves that the seeming simplicity is illusory. In modern metamorphoses of the tale, both the earthly and heavenly protagonists have varied. The principal male part has been not merely a juggler, jongleur, and tumbler, as the titles previously quoted would imply, but also an acrobat, clown, dancer, and jester. He has dedicated his craft to another heavenly power such as God or an angel, not to the Virgin Mary. The variability is reflected in titles of children's literature such as *The Clown of God*, *The Acrobat & the Angel*, and *The Little Jester*, where the modification of both roles obscures the relationship of new treatments to the old story. Adults who have never heard of "Our Lady's Tumbler" or "The Juggler of Notre Dame" may carry within them hazy childhood memories of one or more of these other books, but the very elasticity of the tale, so long one of its strengths, has interfered with its recognizability. Nor does the heterogeneity stop there with the hero and the object of his veneration. The image for which he gives his all may be a painting, statue, or some other artwork. The miracle bestowed on him may take the form of a flower, a gesture of the hand, a smile, or the swipe of a towel to wipe away sweat. So much for simple.

A moment ago, this volume was likened to a jumbo-sized jewelry box. The top tray within it has three bays. The first offers, as already mentioned, a translation of the thirteenth-century poem. But that is not all: next come possible sources of inspiration

from the Bible and from a medieval work known as “The Life of the Fathers.” Another space in the tray can assist readers who are curious to compare the tale of the minstrel with other miracles, mostly relating to Mary, from medieval western Europe that show strong similarities to the tale of the minstrel. Lastly, a third area of this first level makes accessible, for the purposes of comparison, parallels to the basic components of this tale that can be identified in texts and traditions from very different places and times. These artifacts, mostly literary but from time to time biographical, are generally far removed in miles from Europe and in centuries from the Middle Ages; a few even lie distant both geographically and chronologically. Did they share any of our story’s ancestry, influence it, or arise altogether autonomously?

Beneath the top tray in this compilation resides a second compartment that encourages readers to explore how audiences and artists have reacted to the thirteenth-century French narrative poem since the excitement that greeted its recovery in the late nineteenth century. Within a few decades, the original was eclipsed by modern re-creations. They had one heyday after another as the tale seeped from one medium into the next, until its final glory days in the middle of the twentieth century. Since then, the leading man and the miracle in which he participated have persisted worldwide mainly in the subculture of children’s books.

Put together, the two parts of this compendium bring home the benefits and delights that the study of cultural and literary history can deliver through the reading and analysis of premodern texts in tandem with their subsequent recasting. Culture, counting literature, operates according to its own elaborate, unpredictable, and not seldom mystifying principles. For much of the twentieth century, the appearances and reappearances of a given story were regarded as conforming to laws of cause and effect, termed “source and influence” by literary critics of those days. Later, beginning fifty years ago or so, the newer models of reader-response criticism and especially of [reception theory](#) instead sought to emphasize the fresh contributions and innovations that each perusal produces. The thinking became that every individual who interprets a text generates novel meanings.

Among other main functions that this book has been designed to fulfill, one of the most fundamental relates to the intrinsic nature of literature. The materials contained here sprawl across an impressive spectrum. Fast and furious, we have hurtled ever deeper into an era in which communication depends predominantly on pixels glimmering on screens along with sounds rumbling forth from speakers. The subject matter enclosed within these covers can empower us to gaze back and probe the problems and promises presented by earlier phases of culture, with their radically dissimilar media. Our forebears relied more heavily than we do on ink, first written on parchment and later pressed on paper, to record words in writing. Each mode, quills from birds plied across hides from animals (supplemented by styluses scratched into beeswax on wooden tablets), movable type imprinted on sheets of dried pulp, and dots glowing on flat panels, has had its own characteristic fragility, durability, and

dynamism. The medium may not be all the message, but the two are indisputably interconnected.

The question of why the literary materials pertaining to the tumbler or juggler warrant our attention can also elicit other responses. For one, these gleanings grant insights into the depth and diversity that characterize the cultures of western Europe in the Middle Ages. They also give glimpses into the manifold and sometimes mistaken understandings that those from later epochs have evolved with respect to that period. Like any other phase of human development, the medieval European one entailed its share of breathtaking good and evil, beauty and ugliness, and conservation and innovation. Such olden times should not be viewed solely through rose-tinted glasses. Then again, they should not be damned as nothing more than a dry run for the ills and wrongs perpetrated by successive civilizations, of course not excluding our own. Rather, they ought to be judged on their own terms. For obvious reasons, they lacked the benefit of hindsight: how could they have foreseen that they would commit injuries and injustices by not operating in alignment with our values? If misty-eyed nostalgia can have its pitfalls, so too can its inverse of sitting in judgment on bygone days and pinpointing in them telltale signs of what we now have the wisdom to censure as moral shortcomings.

A second justification for the subject matter selected and assembled here is that it enables its users to confront the age-old interactions and frictions between individuality and community. In this interplay, collective concerns within cultures stir craftsmen of words and other artforms to compose and recompose stories. A perennial chicken-or-the-egg asks how much of history is prescribed by the force of specific personalities, once labeled “great men,” as opposed to overarching trends within economics, politics, culture, and nature that sweep along nations and now and then even the whole of humanity. What owes to larger dynamics within societies, and what to the temperaments, talents, and wills of individuals? How much freedom do we really have to affect others, or even just to determine ourselves?

Third, the readings bring us up against the eternal mystery of body and soul. Under many circumstances worship hinges on prayer that adheres to fixed verbal formulas, while at other times it centers on rituals that fulfill prescribed bodily movements. Where does the athleticism of the tumbler’s dance fit? Are his motions the physical equivalents of words, are they his idiosyncratic expression of liturgical movements, or are they something totally separate?

The paramount objectives behind the book are comparative, impelled by a humanistic conviction that, as fellow human beings, we may learn from one another. By pinpointing and meditating upon similarities and dissimilarities among persons, objects, and actions, we may gain sensitivity to gradations and nuances. In this case, the points of departure for comparison happen to be literary—multiple versions of a single tale, along with analogues to it.

Thanks to mass culture and especially to the animation of the Walt Disney Company, many have heard of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* or seen it adapted on the screen, even

if they have little or no awareness that the hefty novel behind it was written in 1829 by a French man of letters. In contradistinction, the narrative behind “The Juggler of Notre Dame,” composed six hundred years earlier by an anonymous countryman of Victor Hugo’s (or is it anachronistic to retroject the concept of the nation-state onto the Middle Ages?), has fallen into oblivion. Why should anyone bother with a quaint text from so long ago? Life is devastatingly short, while books are dauntingly plentiful. What renders this tale noteworthy in its own right, as well as important in cultural history for the sway that it has held over later authors, composers, and other artists and their audiences? How can the story, and the story of the story, enlighten us about the essence and operation of literature and culture? Last but not least, what light can the narrative shed on the human condition—on human beings, human behaviors, and human values—in the Middle Ages, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and right now?

The full title *Reading the Juggler of Notre Dame: Medieval Miracles and Modern Remakings* signals that the book will comprise two sections. The first half is devoted, for a start, to a thirteenth-century poem. From this one focal point, the camera pans back to situate this masterpiece in the setting of other miracle tales from western Europe contemporary with it. Then the aperture widens further, to permit comparisons with other traditions. The second half of the book zeroes in on how the medieval piece was received from 1873 on through the twentieth century, initially in France and later in America and elsewhere.

The Middle Ages, late nineteenth century, and twentieth century all look far removed, even beyond repair, from the perspective of the present. We have types (and hypes) of media, communication, and entertainment that precious few in earlier times could have anticipated even vaguely in their wildest dreams or nightmares. Yet certain puzzles recur constantly among people across time and space. What is art? What is faith? How do we express them? What is giving? What value should we place on gifts that carry no monetary value and may even be anti-materialist, rule-breaking, and authority-questioning?

By the same token, some topics of acute urgency in this century of ours are not without precedent but in fact were formerly anything but unknown. The questioning and rejecting of gender binaries, practicing of cross-dressing, and undergoing of sex changes: these considerations crop up again and again in versions of “Our Lady’s Tumbler” and in other stories connected with them. The same texts depict disabilities, both short- and long-term. They touch upon issues concerning classism and elitism, poverty and homelessness, ethnic identity and color, the perseverance of racial and religious minorities in the face of prejudice, and the disputed social status of artists.

At the same time, the literature of bygone times should not find its solitary raison d’être in serving as a mirror to our own preoccupations now. Our predecessors are already extinct. The past created by them is a threatened species, easily harmed, in acute need of respect, examination, and preservation. Its protectors, while endeavoring to keep it alive, will be rewarded by the delights that accrue from grappling with

similarity and difference. Each age through which humanity has transited has witnessed unprecedented change as well as unacknowledged continuity. The here and now has never been exactly identical with the bygone, nor entirely distinct from it. It behooves us to profit by learning from what has preceded us. Failing that, we can at least take pleasure from the days of yore, without leaving them damaged by misrepresentation.

The bundles offered in parts 1 and 2 position those using the book to reach their own opinions about the earliest extant form of the story and the world that engendered it as well as about more than a dozen ways in which the tale was revamped when reimagined by successive writers, from the late nineteenth century on. In the process, those who so desire can interrogate the selections while assessing them as imaginative reconceptions. The medieval era in Europe has been reinvisioned in this fashion ceaselessly in the popular culture of ensuing periods, down to ours at this very moment. Umbrellas tend to be at once cumbersome and indispensable. The word *medievalism*, marked by both of those qualities, has become a convenient shelter under which to collect and protect outlooks and art objects from this or that later time that were inspired by the European Middle Ages.

The body of evidence accumulated here equips readers to make their own case studies, by charting the trajectory that the story of “Our Lady’s Tumbler” has traced from the thirteenth century to today. Those who want or need further details, in analysis, images, or bibliography, relating to the medieval poem and its reception may refer to the six open-access volumes of *The Juggler of Notre Dame and the Medievalizing of Modernity* that were published in 2018 or to the freely downloadable booklet for [the exhibition *Juggling the Middle Ages*](#) that came on its heels in 2019 at Dumbarton Oaks. All the information and images have a higher end: great story is never-ending, and my hope is that this one will endure deep into this millennium.

Translation can furnish the first line of commentary. In that spirit, the prose of most selections presented here sticks deliberately close to the originals. Square brackets indicate that the words or citations encased within them are not part of the base text that has been put into English. For ease of reference, poems have been provided with numbering every five lines.

A further note on nomenclature is in order. The medieval French poem is here designated “Our Lady’s Tumbler,” a literal translation of the title that became commonplace from the late nineteenth century. To avoid confusion and repetition, the modern French short story is called “The Juggler of Notre Dame,” likewise in quotation marks, while the opera is *The Juggler of Notre Dame*, italicized but otherwise identical. The character is the juggler of Notre Dame, plain and simple—or not.