

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

Part 1 of this collection enables readers to immerse themselves in a generous cross section of weird and wonderful written materials. All these constituents relate to the thirteenth-century French tour de force typically called “Our Lady’s Tumbler.” To set the stage, the opening subsection offers a brand-new, heavily annotated translation of the poem and the exemplum related to it. Afterward follows a concise chapter with episodes from the Hebrew Bible, New Testament, and apocrypha that could well have informed the poet and other storytellers contemporary with him in their thinking about the dancing of the tumbler. This first cluster is capped by selections from a medieval work known as *The Life of the Fathers*. All of these extracts show tantalizing similarities to the piece about the tumbler.

The next cluster of texts brings together miracles that have been culled from across medieval Latin Christendom. This medley has been put into English from Latin, French, Galician-Portuguese, and German. Its contents depict monks, minstrels, or maidens who merit miracles from Mary or other powerful intercessors.

Complementing the reports of miracles from western Europe in the Middle Ages is a third cluster with parallels from other cultures, including Roman, Persian, Hungarian, and French, in which entertainers persist in performing for God or the Virgin, despite the opposition of traditionalists. These analogues extend in their chronological range all the way from classical antiquity through the Middle Ages and early modernity to the second half of the twentieth century. If religious context is of interest, these materials were the products of pagans, Muslims (both Sunni and Shiite), Jews (both Hasidic and not), and Catholics.

Close engagement with this panoply of narratives lays the groundwork for exploration of many puzzles. What, if anything, that could have inspired these accounts is likely to have transpired in reality? In other words, are we discussing a swatch of actual history, a good yarn, or an interweaving of both? What may have been contrived for rhetorical or literary purposes, rather than supposedly experienced? Finally, whether fact or fiction, reality or legend, truth or lie, what did readers and listeners make of the poem and exemplum? Whether or not anything resembling the events recounted ever happened, did anyone seriously believe that they had? To arrive at our own determinations and verdicts, we will do well not to ignore the wealth of other texts from the late Middle Ages in which lay monks and minstrels apprehend

miracles that the Mother of God (to call her as they would often have done) effectuates through her apparitions and interventions.

What seems to have been transmitted by word of mouth, rather than as conventional literature in written form? What is owed to the laity, and what to the Church? To rephrase these questions slightly, which of the themes in the poem may we reasonably conjecture stemmed from oral tellings among everyday people and can accordingly be interpreted within the framework of [folklore and folktales](#), and which were instead composed by literate, educated, Latinate, and ecclesiastic authors whose writings cry out for literary analysis?

In most of the pieces in the first part, the key events are miracles. In the ones from Latin Europe of the Middle Ages and modernity, these wonders often involve visions of the Virgin. As time passed, the Catholic faith developed to shield the Mother of God ever more from any impurity of earthliness. The dogma of the Immaculate Conception freed her from original sin from the moment of her conception. At the other end of her existence, the doctrine of the Assumption taught that at the end of her earthly life Mary was taken bodily into heaven. Because of the last belief, the relics of the Virgin's physical presence on earth were, make no bones about it, less immediate than for most saints. In compensation, she rendered herself visible and even tangible constantly in visions.

Tales in which Mary intervenes and sometimes even materializes miraculously made themselves evident first in the East. After modest success there, they sometimes received much louder fanfare in the West. One case in point that comes up now and again in versions of the juggler story is Saint [Mary of Egypt](#). The essentials of her legend are that she was an Egyptian who as a young girl turned prostitute and as a woman was moved to take up an existence of extreme asceticism in the desert. The stimulus for her transformation is an icon of the Virgin that mesmerizes her, at which point she receives instruction to cross the Jordan and commence her new life.

In later apparitions, such people as musicians and monks received signs of celestial grace via Mary. From time to time she bestowed her favor upon devotees as lowly as lay brothers, despite opposition from others loftier than them in the social hierarchy. In many cases the wonders take place in or are otherwise connected with cathedrals and monasteries in France, such as Rocamadour and Arras, and in Italy, such as Lucca.

In the complex of miracles to which *Our Lady's Tumbler* belongs, white monks are salient. So called owing to the color of their clothing, these brothers were [Cistercians](#). Their order took its name from Cîteaux, the location in Burgundy where their first monastery was located. Not far from it was Clairvaux, the most significant site in the story of the jongleur. A favorable disposition to the white monks stands out in many tales related to ours. The main runner-ups to them are the Carthusians, monks whose head monastery was (and remains) the Grande Chartreuse, in an isolated French mountain valley twenty miles from Grenoble. Both orders arose during the period of

experimentation in monasticism that stretched across the long twelfth century, from the final quarter of the eleventh century through the first of the thirteenth.

The translations with which the first part begins bring home ways in which Jesus, saints, and, first and foremost, Mary materialize from heaven to aid and comfort those, including jongleurs, lay brothers, and women, who proclaim devotion to them. The focus of these reports often rests on folk who have little or no power within either the Church or nobility. The tumbler was doubly powerless, first as a professional entertainer and later as a lay brother.

A lay brother was a man who operated at the boundary between the world and religion as well as between physical toil and prayer. He was known now and again by the Latin term *conversus* or its medieval French derivative *convers*, to betoken that he had converted or (to break down the verb etymologically) turned around from secular life. Yet his turn did not take him all the way to religion as full monks, often called choir monks, were bound to practice it. If such a convert had a stability, it came from being stuck at the midpoint between the two statuses of lay and monastic.

Lay brethren were obliged to cultivate a distinct appearance from choir monks. Even in grooming, these converts stood apart. Whereas regular monks were clean-shaven and had the crowns of their heads especially shorn, their lay counterparts wore beards (giving them the name *barbati* or “bearded ones”) and had no such [tonsure](#). The lay monks wore a kind of uniform, but it amounted to work clothes rather than a monastic habit.

In sum, the lay brothers were neither fish nor fowl or, to transpose the proverb into more monastic terms, neither fully physical nor completely cowl. On the one hand, they undertook a commitment not to fulfill their potential worldliness by marrying. On the other, they agreed not to exceed their humble perch in the religious pecking order by aspiring to become full monks or clerics. In their daily round, they were tasked with executing heavy labor that choir monks could not have accomplished while also carrying out the many hours of chanting that *The Rule of Saint Benedict* prescribed. In return, the lay brothers were expected to adhere to a drastically reduced set of prayers.

The linguistic situation in medieval monasteries was unlike what most of the world’s population experiences today in daily life. A working command of Latin was essential since it was the language of worship and Holy Writ. In it, the monks performed the liturgy of the hours, which consisted of psalms, hymns, readings, and other prayers. The canonical hours obliged the brethren to fulfill these duties in seven (or eight) stretches spread across the day and night. At many other hours, the brothers were supposed to uphold silence. The strict wordlessness was broken, when necessary, by limited exchanges in sign language. Sometimes the monks would have had to converse in Latin or in the vernacular. What has just been described does not map well onto bilingualism, in which two living languages live alongside each other. Instead, it qualifies as diglossia, in which one or more mother tongues coexist with a

father tongue—a language that no one knows from the cradle but that everyone must learn who engages with Scripture and achieves any sort of formal education.

In the Middle Ages, being lay, ignorant of Latin, and illiterate were frequently overlapping categories. Individuals who could communicate only in their own tongue and not in the learned one were *idiotae*, from which derives the modern "idiot." Latin, only half-dead, possessed great prestige and its grammar was held in such awe that it gave us, by way of Scottish English, the word *glamour*. By not knowing the learned language, those in monastic communities who were not choir monks risked being second-class citizens who could be disrespected, exploited, and mistreated. In fact, sporadic uprisings bore out how real those risks were. Yet a sunnier case could be made for mutual respect. The work and worship enjoined upon the lay members of the monastic communities were restricted but rigorous. The combination contained a capacity for holiness, so long as the untensured brethren held true to their simplicity and sincerity.

But where does the tumbler fit? He is a lay brother but, to all appearances, he does not wish to be consigned to the grange as a purely manual laborer. On the contrary, he likes his liminality at the edges of the cloister and in the crypt beneath the church, much as he once relished his marginality while busking outside. He redefines work on his own terms. En route to saintliness, he comes to prize his peculiar outlet for physical asceticism. Likewise, his command of the most demanding dance steps and of the terminology to describe them endows him with a language of his own for prayer and empowers him to transcend his illiteracy and Latin-lessness in a unique fashion.

The medieval materials in Part 1 offer profound perspectives upon the means at the disposal of believers from long-ago times to manifest their religion and seek redemption. In addition, they pose conundrums about the very definition of sanctity. The tumbler in the medieval poem remains unnamed, and nothing suggests that any effort was ever mounted to have him beatified or sanctified. He is far from the elite, and practically at the bottom of the social hierarchy, at least within the Church. All the same, he is portrayed without question as being saintly.

The sources in the first part encompass a broad sweep of materials. Some are biblical and apocryphal, but many others comprehend Marian miracles. These other accounts relate wonders that Mary is reputed to have instigated after her death. The story came into its own as the cult of the Virgin was reaching its apogee in the European Middle Ages, with a multiplication of churches consecrated to her, pilgrimages undertaken in her honor, and tales of miracles set in motion by her, particularly in conjunction with apparitions of her. Among various features that distinguish the medieval poem and some of its closest comparanda is the representation to which the performer offers his distinctive devotion to the Mother of God. Carvings in wood of Mary with the infant Jesus were the first statues in the round that many viewers in western Europe had encountered in centuries. The story has much to say about the power of images and in its bigger context so-called Black Virgins loom particularly large.

The analogues from within medieval western Christendom mostly deal with entertainers who merit special acknowledgment from the Mother of God. Alongside the Christian depictions of such low-ranking figures may be considered those in other religious traditions, from Roman paganism through Islam and Judaism, who achieve commensurately privileged relations with God through some sort of program, often musical. Incidentally, many of these selections show the astounding range of mysticism across human experience.

The original, or at least the oldest extant, embodiment of the narrative comes in a poem in French dating from the first half of the thirteenth century that was brought to light in the immediate aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War and printed first in 1873. In the English language, popularizing translations of the medieval French, more often by enthusiastic amateurs than by trained professionals, were published repeatedly from the last decade of the nineteenth century on, in affordable but charming palm-sized hardbacks. This volume offers my own fresh rendering into English from the original.

Capping the first part is a French story published by Henri Pourrat after World War II. This iteration rehearses substantially the same sequence of incidents as do preceding versions, but it gives the principal character a new name. More important, it packages the narrative as a folktale from the Auvergne region. For want of any information about the teller, telling context, or date, the possibility remains that it is a faketale—the reshaping, either directly or indirectly, of Anatole France’s story, with trappings to coordinate it more tightly with the telling of an oral traditional tale.

One trait of culture in western Europe and maybe everywhere on earth is the constant give-and-take between folklore and literature. Perhaps related, debate has raged intermittently since the early nineteenth century over whether components of culture such as stories originate in the fervid imaginations of an educated elite and percolate from there down to mass audiences, or whether credit is owed to nameless tellers from lower classes whose creations are commandeered by individuals from the upper ones. The two viewpoints are summed up in the German phrases *gesunkenes* and *gehobenes Kulturgut*, which mean “sunken” and “elevated cultural material,” respectively. Is it shirking to speculate that both motions, sinking and elevation, take place, and that we need to assess each story on a case-by-case basis?

The susceptibility of human beings to binary oppositions in their thinking is no secret. One such dichotomy, reaching back to the nineteenth century, posits that folktales and other folklore which are attested in different places and times originated in two ways. At one extreme is *diffusionism*. This theoretical framework assumes, applying the concept of monogenesis, that a given item of narrative or lore is born in one location. From there spreads to other locales from one individual to another, as from one group to another. When sufficient information survives, the transmission from the place of origin may even be mapped by applying the techniques of the *historic-geographic method*. At the other end of the gamut, the theory of *polygenesis*

avows that similar tales may arise in different places because of shared human nature. In other words, people who are subject to similar wants, needs, and phenomena may cope with them by inventing narratives that are similar or even identical to those produced by others from the species of *Homo sapiens*. Let's keep our minds open to both hypotheses ... and to everything between them. Gray areas can turn out to be very colorful.