The Juggler of Notre Dame and the Medievalizing of Modernity

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Focusing on such cardinal constituents of the human condition as tale and interpretation offers a golden opportunity for representing my branch of learning, which sometimes is still quaintly styled arts and letters. Many terms have been devised to designate our species: *homo sapiens*, *homo faber*, *homo ludens*, *homo ridens*, *homo loquens*, and *homo narrans*. Alongside them, *homo interpretans* could be put forward as a strong nominee. At work and play, we human beings constantly recount and interpret. Understanding these activities holds increasing urgency, with the rapid and radical transformation of outlooks on story and history, fact and fiction, and text and image.

Traditionally, the humanities impart materials and methods for reaching and refining insights about such matters. Equally, they generate pleasure and facilitate progress from knowledge to wisdom. As a group, humanists have preferred particulars over percentages, generally the domain of the social sciences. On that principle, let us assemble a pattern from specifics. Fifteen years ago, I became enthralled by an anonymous poem from the 1230s. In a medieval French dialect, these 342 rhyming couplets tell of a professional acrobat or dancer who wearies of wayfaring, gives up worldly possessions, and enters a monastery. Once having joined, he despairs: his peers comprehend Latin, can worship properly, and have other skills he lacks. The erstwhile entertainer judges himself a failure, not certain even when to stay silent or to speak. His solution to the crisis? In the crypt, he happens upon a likeness of the Virgin Mary. Whenever the brethren enact the liturgy in the choir above, he dances as he once did outside. His

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1 Read 26 April 2019.
confreres remark on his absence, and two of them tail him. After spying him strip down to his underwear and execute his floor exercise before the Madonna, they run off and denounce him. Their abbot accompanies them below, where he too is shocked by the blasphemy—until a miracle transpires: Notre Dame, through the sculpture depicting her, soothes the tumbler by wiping away his sweat and fanning him.

The piece of poetry survives in five manuscripts from the Middle Ages. In one of them, a single miniature illustrating this jewel appears at the foot of a folio side—as a so-called bas-de-page (Figure 1). The painter alters the climax freely. He adds an angel, who extends a towel-like textile downward from a heavenly cloud; he portrays the gymnast as fully clothed; and he supplies a forebear of the fiddle on a baize cloth at the foot of the altar. Besides the French, a brief Latin exemplum of unknown authorship is extant from the 1270s (Figure 2). Like the illumination, but verbal rather than visual, this later thumbnail has distinct features. Whereas the vernacular emphasizes repentance, the
prose version in the learned tongue is subsumed under the heading of joy. More revolutionary, it suppresses Madonna for God.

While studying this story in its evolution from the 13th into the 21st century, I rebelled against stale dictates about a book’s ideal length. While Frank Sinatra has never been my role model either vocationally or avocationally, his “I did it my way” resonated as I conducted the search-and-destroy mission of reading scholarship and writing a monograph. My top priority was to explore not only the 13th-century poem, but also its manifold reinventions after being unearthed in the late 19th century. Next came lodging the reception within the framework of medieval revivalism. The third step involved setting analysis of the literature and its context in dialog with images. The final product comprises six tomes, totaling close to 2,500 pages and 1,200 figures.\(^3\)

The research demanded publications tied too closely to popular culture for research libraries to have collected them, but too antiquated and exotic for public ones to have bought or retained. Surveying my de facto archive, I resolved to mount a temporary museum exhibition

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in the institution that I have directed since 2007 in Georgetown.⁴ Realizing that Dumbarton Oaks possessed extraordinary assets for the undertaking, I set out to achieve the most modest objectives: to connect past and present, Europe and United States, humanities and arts, high and low culture, Middle Ages and medievalism. The exhibition afforded a novel opportunity to tell tales and to attain grander audiences. Toward that end, I coordinated translations and reprints along with story readings, conversations with authors, music concerts, and more.⁵

But we should begin with revivalism, or what could be identified as the medievalizing of the United States. The iconic American Gothic by Grant Wood (1930) (Figure 3) makes a perfect start. The clothing of its primly banal couple echoes the pointed window above, itself preposterously incongruous against the otherwise altogether different façade of the plain and unpretentious frame house. Why did this fenestration penetrate to the prairie? For one thing, the kind of architecture it embodied conferred a means of controlling the unfamiliar and threatening. Think of the disruption that a person born in 1840 would experience before dying in 1920. In technology, telegraphy spread rapidly from 1844 through the completion of the first transcontinental telegraph line in 1861, photography took root shortly after the invention of the daguerreotype in 1839, motion photography took off from the late 19th century, acoustic recording began in 1877, and radio arrived not too much later. In science, X-rays were discovered in 1895, radioactivity a year later, and the electron in 1897. In transportation, the transcontinental railroad was constructed between 1863 and 1869, the Wright brothers made four brief flights at Kitty Hawk in an airplane in 1903, and the first Ford automobiles rolled off a moving assembly line in 1913. These leaps coincided with the rise of corporations,

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⁴ The essence of the installation can be gleaned from the paperback catalog, Juggling the Middle Ages: An Exhibition, October 15, 2019, through February 28, 2020, written and edited by Jan M. Ziolkowski and Alona Bach (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2018), exhibition catalog.

concentration of wealth, mechanization of agriculture, surge of immigration, and rush of urbanization. The changes ushered in new political movements (labor unionism springs to mind) and ideologies: Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) published *The Communist Manifesto*, on what they termed “scientific socialism,” in 1848.

Against a backdrop that makes the past 75 years seem downright tranquil, people worldwide resorted to the Middle Ages conjured up by Romanesque and Gothic for its imagined serenity. In English, Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832) and Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809–1892) reigned supreme as novelist and poet, respectively; in French, Victor Hugo (1802–1885) earned acclaim for his novel *Notre-Dame de Paris*. In the United States, the same nostalgia for the faith of innocent and not-so-innocent olden times shows in mass consumption: even beer brewers made cathedrals selling points in promoting their wares (Figure 4). Mass-manufactured items, from pickles and pepper sauce to ink, were bottled in cathedral glass (Figure 5). Cathedral-style cases for bracket clocks (Figure 6) were then appropriated for radios (Figure 7), the home entertainment centers of the 1930s.
In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the United States flexed its newfound wealth and might on the world stage. With all the reserves at its disposal, it sought out and modified its cultural precedents. Its decisions can be readily detected in the nation’s capital. At first glance, Washington resembles a Greco-Roman theme park. Take the Capitol building, substantially finished by 1863; then the Lincoln Memorial, dedicated in 1922; and finally, the Jefferson Memorial, put into service in 1943. These choices carry conviction: as America modeled its government and judiciary on Athens and Rome, it adopted architectures associated with them. But the DC theme park also exudes an unmistakable medieval character.
Figure 5. Cathedral bottles, clear blue, for pickles, late 19th century; and cobalt blue, Carter’s ink, early 20th century. Photograph by Joe Mills, 2018.

Figure 6 (Left). Gothic mahogany bracket clock, manufactured by Waterbury Clock Company, 1914. Photograph by Joe Mills, 2018.

Figure 7 (Right). Cathedral radio, R102a, manufactured by Stewart-Warner, 1932. Photograph by Joe Mills, 2018.
The 19th century witnessed successive architectural revivals as the country went through the dress-up of a protracted costume party, trying on the construction styles of bygone eras and far-off places. Robert Dale Owen (1801–1877), the Scottish-born congressman who propelled the conception of the Smithsonian Institution Building (“the Castle”) and oversaw the selection of its designer, favored the Middle Ages. The frontispiece of the prospectus he disseminated (Figure 8) made clear his perception of Gothic as inherently natural and by implication—here is a surprise—intrinsically suited to the New World. The naturalist John Muir (1838–1914), also Scottish by birth, plausibly described the continent’s physical resources of immense geological formations (Figure 9) and gigantic trees (Figure 10) as cathedrals.

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Figure 9. Postcard of Cathedral Spires, Garden of the Gods (Colorado Springs, CO).

Figure 10. Postcard of Cathedral Group, Big Tree Grove (Santa Cruz, CA).
Beyond the Gothic of nature, the United States commanded two further forms. Original edifices were despoiled in Europe and transported to America in whole or part. The most considerable salvage operation along these lines resulted ultimately in The Cloisters, the medieval branch of the Metropolitan Museum. Figure 11 captures its first manifestation in Manhattan, while still in the hands of the popular sculptor and private entrepreneur George Grey Barnard (1863–1938), before being uprooted again to its present location. America built another flavor of Gothic from scratch, which leads back to the Smithsonian. The architect James Renwick, Jr. (1818–1895) submitted two medievalesque designs. One was picked for the 1855 museum (Figure 12); the other served for Trinity Episcopal (Figure 13). Although the church that jutted upward from 1849 at the northeast corner of Third and C Streets NW fell to the wrecking ball in 1936, Washington, DC, is still bracketed by medieval houses of prayer, two of its three highest inhabitable buildings. To the west, the National Cathedral stands above Georgetown. To the northeast, the visitors’ eyes light upon the National Shrine.

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Figure 13. James Renwick Jr.’s Trinity Episcopal Church, Washington, DC. Photograph by George N. Barnard, 1862. Washington, DC, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Brady-Handy Photograph Collection.
For most of its life, the third of the three tallest buildings has been referred to as the Old Post Office Building, completed in 1899 (Figure 14). Although towering only by DC’s low-rise standards, it belongs loosely to the category of skyscraper Gothic. Structures of this sort are sprinkled across the country. The manner held outsized significance as builders pivoted from the horizontal layout of classical basilicas and temples to the vertical thrust of burgeoning cities. A postcard of the Brooklyn Bridge with the Woolworth Building in the background (Figure 15) renders Manhattan medieval and brings home the suitability of Gothic to early 20th-century U.S. modernism. Before leaving Washington, peek at the consummately Victorian Gothic Healy Hall that looms over those approaching northwestern DC from the Virginia riverbank (Figure 16). This hulk, erected between 1877 and 1879, is the central monument of Georgetown University.

Gothic was a recommended idiom for religion, museums, education, and tall edifices. These kinds of constructions are easily dismissed as faux. But bear in mind that tourists typically mistake the modern for medieval across the Atlantic, too. Notre-Dame de Paris was largely finished by 1260. Yet its stone gargoyles (Figure 17), which define the city as much as the wrought-iron Eiffel Tower that was completed in 1889, date not from the Middle Ages but from the mid-19th-century renovation overseen by Eugène Viollet-le-Duc (1814–1879). Across the Channel we find such fixtures as the Palace of Westminster, the foundation stone for which was not laid until 1840, and Tower Bridge, not finalized until 1894.

Now let us tack back to the story, which endured through the late Middle Ages but then went dormant. Reformers would not have abided a narrative about monks and Marianism, especially since iconoclasm was the order of the day: first pan back for a full view of the oil painting of King Edward VI (1537–1553), England’s first monarch raised as a Protestant, with its subversive treatment of Pope Julius III (1487–1555) (Figure 18), and then zoom in on the backdrop in the upper right corner, where an effigy of Mary is being dismantled (Figure 19). Meanwhile, Counter-Reformers could not accept a layman holier than clergy, who sidestepped the hierarchy and made a beeline to the Virgin, not using Latin and, in fact, not even employing language at all. And so, the tale trail runs cold. The story of the story resumes after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871. A Romance philologist in present-day Austria chanced upon a codex of the poem. By good luck, his discovery turned out eventually to be the best of the five identified

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10 The article containing the edition was published under the name Wilhelm Foerster, but the scholar in question was known otherwise as Wendelin Foerster (1844–1915): “Del tumbeor Nostre-Dame,” Romania 2 (1873): 315–25.
manuscripts. He submitted his edition to a brand-new journal, co-founded by France’s preeminent Romance philologist. This Gaston Paris (1839–1903) talked up the tale wherever he could.11

Through Paris, the trouvée drew the notice of the elite. A succinct story by Anatole France (1844–1924), first printed in 1890, converted the jongleur into his cousin, the juggler, and attached a name to the narrative, *Le jongleur de Notre Dame*.12 His retelling, incorporated into a bestselling collection of his short fiction in 1892,13 enjoyed an enormous vogue, especially in France and the Anglo-American world. It accorded well with Gothic revivalism. After the humiliating defeat by the Germans, France had to remake itself. It underwent wrenching


Figure 16. Healy Hall, Georgetown University (O St. NW & 37th St.) (New York: Artvue Postcard Company, date unknown).

Figure 17. Postcard depicting a Notre-Dame gargoyle and the Eiffel Tower (Paris: Chantal, date unknown).
Figure 18. Unknown artist, *King Edward VI and the Pope*, ca. 1575. Oil on panel, 62.2 x 90.8 cm. London, National Portrait Gallery. © National Portrait Gallery, London. All rights reserved.

Figure 19. Inset from the top-right corner of *King Edward VI and the Pope*. © National Portrait Gallery, London. All rights reserved.
social debates in the Belle Époque. The medieval period furnished a safe space. French culture of the Middle Ages contributed loser heroes, foremost among whom were the legendary male lead from *The Song of Roland* and the real female saint Joan of Arc. The juggler became a minor divinity in this pantheon. To confirm the last point, we need look no further than one publishing house. In 1906, the French artist who called himself Malatesta (Henri Malateste, 1870–1920) profusely calligraphed and illustrated France’s short story in the guise of a pseudomedieval manuscript retailed to connoisseurs. 14 Not two decades later, Maurice Lalau (1881–1961) redid the mini-masterpiece for the same publishing house in 1924, but this time in the full swing of art deco (Figure 20). 15

Anatole France’s few pages might have halted the ascent of *The Juggler of Our Lady*. Few other authors would have dared to redo the little gem after he won the Nobel Prize in 1921. They might have been further discouraged after his oeuvre earned an extra fillip of notoriety from being inscribed on the Catholic Church’s Index of Forbidden Books in 1922. 16 But creative agents in other media did not labor under this anxiety of influence. Jules Massenet (1842–1912), the most commercially successful French composer of his day, concocted an opera on the subject of the story: his *Le jongleur de Notre-Dame* premiered in 1902. 17 After opening in Monte Carlo, his smash hit soon had runs not only throughout Europe but also in North Africa and the Americas.

In the United States, Massenet’s musical drama soared courtesy of both Oscar Hammerstein I (1847–1919) and the soprano around whom the impresario formed the Manhattan Opera House to compete with the Metropolitan Opera. This diva was Mary Garden (1874–1967), born in Scotland, bred in the United States, and trained in France (Figure 21). 18 After she took Paris by storm, Hammerstein prevailed upon her to try her fortune in the Big Apple. Though forgotten today in comparison with other celebrities like French actor Sarah Bernhardt (1844–1923) or the American and French dancer Isadora Duncan (1878–1927), Garden did more than anyone for the

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16 *Index librorum prohibitorum* (Rome: Typis polyglottis Vaticanis, 1922).
Figure 20. The Virgin descends to bless the juggler. Illustration by Maurice Lalau, 1924. Published in Anatole France, *Le jongleur de Notre-Dame* (Paris: A. & F. Ferroud, 1924), 23.
story’s subsequent success in the United States. The result impressed spectators hugely. Performances and adaptations passed into radio and audio recordings (Figure 22), dance (Figure 23), and movies. In the early 1950s, the bandleader Fred Waring (1900–1984) included it annually as Christmas fare in his TV variety show. In 1960, the Hollywood star Tony Curtis (1925–2010) produced his own take on it in a made-for-television movie (Figure 24). Of the films that have been made, the best is a short released in late 1957 by the otherwise undistinguished animation studio Terrytoons. It animates, with voice-over by the English actor Boris Karloff (1887–1969), a book by

Fred Waring’s America ran on the CBS network from 1949 to 1954. The program offered performances of “The Juggler” in at least four years (1950, 1951, 1952, and 1953). Kinescope recordings of these segments, lasting roughly 15 minutes each, are held by the Fred Waring’s America Collection, The Pennsylvania State University in University Park, Pennsylvania.


Figure 22 (Left). John Nesbitt, *A Christmas Gift: The Story of the Juggler of Our Lady, Narration with Choir* (Decca Records, no. 357, 23M Personality Series, 1943).

Figure 23 (Right). An Orchesis dancer performs in “The Juggler of Notre Dame” at the University of Oklahoma. Photograph, 1947. Photographer unknown. Norman, OK. Image courtesy of the Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries, OUPS 27144. All rights reserved.

American artist R. O. Blechman (1930–) often considered the first graphic novel (Figure 25).22 Two big questions have dogged the story since the 20th century: is it intrinsically religious or not, and is it best targeted at young readers or not? The tale has commonly become quarantined in children’s literature. An American woman initiated the practice in 1917 with *The Little Juggler*, which made the protagonist a young boy (Figure 26).23 Over the past century, the fiction has sometimes been reduced to triviality, as in a pop-up from 1991. More often, it has elicited loving creativity.

The same year in which the three-dimensional book appeared, a Swiss German author teamed up beautifully with a Czech-Italian illustrator (Figure 27).25 To return to the United States, two-time Caldecott Medalist Barbara Cooney (1917–2000) brought out her iteration in 1961 (Figure 28). Tomie dePaola (1934–2020), a rock star among the knee-high set, wanted the juggler as his inaugural volume but, because of Cooney’s crowding of the market, had to wait until 1978.26 American brothers, author Mark Shannon (1958–) and illustrator David Shannon (1959–), embraced the theme in 1999 (Figure 29), and Swedish author Helena Olofsson (1957–) followed suit in 2000 (Figure 30).28

Not for youths but for the young at heart is a miniature crafted in 2003. Its creator fashioned a unique homage when her son, American actor Timothy Hutton (1960–), married a French children’s book artist, Aurore Giscard D’Estaing (1966–). Adapting the dos-à-dos format, she used the same cycle of illustrations twice, in one direction for an English account of the story in the voice of an omniscient narrator and in the other for a French first-person recital of events by the very youthful juggler himself (Figure 31).

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Figure 26. Violet Moore Higgins, *The Little Juggler, and Other French Tales Retold* (Racine, WI: Whitman Publishing Co., 1917).
Figure 27. The juggler wanders through a valley. Illustration by Štěpán Zavřel, 1991. Published in Max Bolliger, *Jakob der Gaukler* (Zurich: Bohem, 1991), as now trans. Jan M. Ziolkowski, *Jacob the Juggler* (Trieste, Italy: Bohem, 2018), 8–9. © Heirs of Štěpán Zavřel. All rights reserved.

Figure 28 (Left). Barbara Cooney, *The Little Juggler* (New York: Hastings House, 1961). Image courtesy of Barbara Cooney Porter Royalty Trust. All rights reserved.

Figure 29 (Right). Front cover of Mark Shannon, *The Acrobat and the Angel*, illus. David Shannon (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1999). Image courtesy of David Shannon. All rights reserved.
The story’s high-culture apogee was a ballad by W. H. Auden (1907–1973), which was illustrated by Edward Gorey (1925–2000) when it was first printed on the cover of the New York Review of Books Christmas issue in 1969. Four years later, the poem and artwork were reissued as a broadside for the poet’s memorial service in the Gothic Revival splendor of St. John the Divine, the Episcopal Cathedral in Manhattan (Figure 32). In representational art, the motif was parodied by a French-American sculptor Arman (1928–2005). The statue, cast in 1994, belongs to a genre he labeled “transsculpture” (Figure 33). The most recent art is a magnificent panel of stained glass completed in June 2018 (Figure 34).

Cooney confessed that she “decided to name [her] next child, if it were a boy, after the little juggler.” So she did, as I verified by searching online. Her son, Barnaby Porter (1946–), was very nice about what could have seemed a creepy inquiry from a cyberstalker. His main response was a heartfelt interrogative: “What does the story mean?” Even after years of investigation I cannot answer for sure. I do know that, despite its simplicity, it probes deep matters, such as anxiety of

gift-giving, insecurity of would-be artists about artistry, nature of prayer, and danger of hasty judgment. One additional factor risks sounding corny but here goes: the atmosphere nowadays is frequently tagged as toxic. Who would argue? In this type of environment, the tale can serve as an antidote. The intellectual and cultural engagement of learning from the past and participating in compare-and-contrast interpretation is inherently good. To revert to my opening suggestion, human beings are, by instinct, tellers and interpreters. In that spirit, you the reader may rightly claim the mantle of *homo interpretans*: what do you make of the juggler?
Figure 33. Arman, *Jongleur de Notre Dame*, 1994, cast bronze statue with light fixtures of brass and glass, 231 x 90 x 82 cm. New York, Arman Studio. Photograph by François Fernandez. Image courtesy of Arman Studio, New York. All rights reserved.

Figure 34. Stained-glass window created by Jeffrey Miller, Sarah Navasse, and Jeremy Bourdois for Atelier Miller, Chartrettes, France, 2018. Photograph by Courtney Randolph, 2018.