

**Performing Alterities: Apes as Jesters  
in Medieval Imagery and the Triumph of the Body**

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In the composite, fanciful world of medieval *drôleries*, apes occupy a conspicuous part. Scattered all over the margins, they are engaged in many different human actions, such as fishing, hunting, riding, jousting, teaching, preaching, playing music, doing acrobatics or other performances. In medieval iconography, the ape is the most recurring animal, particularly in the marginal grotesques, in which a satirical purpose prevails. But they are to be found also in the reliefs of Gothic cathedrals, where they usually occupy external places such as the portals and the capitals of the cloisters –a collocation clearly suggesting their marginality in the world of creatures. Not surprisingly, just like the profane and ridiculous subjects, apes are sometimes carved in the stalls of the choir, the misericords, hidden to the believers attending mass and reserved to the choristers.

Apes and bears are frequently depicted also in marginal miniatures as trained animals accompanying the jesters. Since the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the exhibitors of tame animals had become a frequent view in the streets, during the markets and in any occasion of show, where the monkey was one of the animals most appreciated for its performing skills. Exotic animals could easily arouse the interest of passers-by; moreover, apes were particularly fit to be carried by strolling jesters and could easily learn to execute acrobatics and to dance. Domestic monkeys were also a common presence at courts, as exotic pets demonstrating the opulence of the aristocrats (Buquet).<sup>1</sup> Late Medieval and Renaissance iconography show them with several realistic details, such as the leashes or chains used to tie the animals or the blocks to prevent them to run away, and in most cases no symbolic purpose seems to be implied.<sup>2</sup> During the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, jesters accompanied by trained apes became more and more frequent in the marginal miniatures of the manuscripts, witnessing the recurrence of this genre of everyday life scenes on the one hand and the success of the motif in iconography on the other. Among the animals mentioned and depicted in medieval sources, the monkey is also the one with the most symbolic and metaphorical implications. And yet, curiously enough, specific studies on the apes in medieval art are not numerous.

In his fundamental study *Apes and Ape Lore in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, H. W. Janson has singled out four iconographical typologies, though admitting that these categories can sometimes overlap: apes parodying human actions, performances by trained apes, fable and anecdotes involving apes, apes versus birds (Janson, 164-165). The distinction between the first and the second category can be sometimes ambiguous. Moreover, as I will try to demonstrate, performing apes can often be seen as a parody of the entertainers, especially when the animal is depicted without the trainer. As it is known, the multilevel character of medieval imagery allows several possible interpretations of a same image, depending on the observer's culture or point of view. Different levels of significance can coexist in the artist's imagination and mingle in iconography, giving birth to an elaborated network of signs. In fact, a comprehensive story of medieval perception is still to be written. The apes making music sculptured in the outside doors of the cathedrals, for instance, could be seen by the lower class observers entering the sacred

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<sup>1</sup> For an informative survey of topics related to apes from ancient Egypt to modern times, see Tompkins.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance the apes forced to make a somersault in the *Luttrell Psalter* (London, British Museum, ms. Add. 42130, f. 73) and in the *Breviary of Marguerite de Bar* (London, British Library, ms. Yate Thompson 8, f. 297v).

place as a diverting scene casting a ridiculous light on the strolling players but also as an admonition against an improper use of secular pleasures. Analogous images decorating the manuscripts could be interpreted as a satiric re-elaboration of the polemic about strolling musicians, that is the professional players criticized in literary sources for their lack of knowledge of the musical laws, or as an echo of the condemnations addressed to the entertainers by the Christian writers (Pietrini 2011, 236-248).

Generally, the consideration of apes in medieval culture is rather negative and this prejudice reflects on iconography. In medieval art, apes are often employed as a deformed, corrupted image of man, representing the degeneration of humanity after the Fall. This interpretation of the ape became widespread from the 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards and was inspired in particular by Bernardus Silvestris: in *De Mundi Universitate sive Megacosmus et Microcosmus*, he lists the monkey as the last animal created by God before man. As ugly copies of humans, apes could not avoid being considered degenerate creatures. Their antics, mimicking human actions and attitudes are seen as a disturbing imitation of the noblest of living things created by God, a distortion of human and an inversion of values. Since during the Middle Ages physical deformity was considered a sign of moral degeneration, the ape, an ugly copy of man, was a perfect example of the human subjection to vice and sin. This conception is an inheritance of the early Middle Ages and his persistence impacted the large iconographical production of the following centuries. Though in some specific contexts apes can assume a positive meaning, in most cases they are employed to hint at negative qualities, such as sinfulness, dullness and stupidity. In *De Universo*, Hrabanus Maurus affirmed for instance that these animals represent shrewd men fetid of sins: “callidos mente, et peccatis fetidos homines” (VII, I) and such negative qualities attributed to apes will be re-elaborated and repeated for centuries on.

Starting from the negative consideration of apes in medieval culture, the association of this animal with the jesters casts a sinister light on the world of secular entertainments, to the extent of configuring a performative and choreographic alterity. As I will try to demonstrate, also music is part of this monstrous exhibition aiming to kill spirituality and propose a negative model of the triumph of body and beastly appetites. Conceived as a satire of entertainers but also as a warning against the lack of spirituality and faith, the depictions of performing apes relate to the concept of a disturbing otherness. I will try to illustrate these concepts using various examples taken from the figurative arts, in particular from miniatures in Gothic manuscripts. For obvious reasons of space, I shall omit bibliographical references to single manuscripts cited, unless they are particularly relevant to the iconographic analysis.

In the reliefs of Romanesque churches, chained apes are sometimes depicted as captive animals subjugated by the hunters. According to a recent study by Mónica Ann Walker Vadillo, the chained apes first appeared in Romanesque capitals in northern Spain (Walker Vadillo, 68). But they soon became a subject often depicted also in French sculpture, mostly in the region of Auvergne. The image of a man with a chained ape can imply a moral meaning: the animal symbolizes the sinner in the chains of vice, that is enslaved by the evil forces, represented by the hunter.<sup>3</sup> The *Physiologus* is at the origin of the relationship between the ape and the devil, based on its lack of a tail (like the devil, the ape does not have a good end). But in fact the tradition of the ape as the sinner, that is a victim of the devil, is much more rooted in literary sources than the tradition of the ape as the devil. This association is confirmed by iconography, though it tends gradually to lose its original emphasis. Apes' antics are only a deformed and ridiculous imitation of

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<sup>3</sup> On the topic, see Janson, chapter “The fettered Ape”.

human behaviour, hinting at an individual debased to the lowest level because of his despicable attitudes. The association with vice and the temptations can be seen also in the motif of the ape holding an apple, as an allusion to his sensuous appetite and greedy attitude to earthly pleasures, but even as a hint to the apple of sin.

In the reliefs of Romanesque cathedrals, when the ape is associated with the world of entertainment, the signs of diversity and sin can be revealed with particular evidence, though not always immediately decipherable. In a capital of the French church of St.-Genou, we can see two trainers with enchained apes (fig. 1): one of them wears a close-fitting costume and a pointed cap, while the other holds a club in his hand. Both the apes are much bigger than their masters, but look visibly scared: one rests his paws on the back of a pig, the other is obliged to balance on two balls. The scene has a grotesque connotation, since the ape on the pig makes a gesture of fear, while the other covers his head with his front legs as to defend himself from beating. One of the two trainers has a diabolic smirk and the other, with a bald head, has his mouth open as to shout at the animal. Both have beastly features, while on the contrary the apes adopt human attitudes, with an interesting metamorphic osmosis of signs. One of the apes, for instance, has thick hair, while this element is removed from the representation of the two trainers. In any case, the comic connotation of the scene does not preclude a metaphorical interpretation related to the moral reprobation against the strolling entertainers. An even more disconcerting iconography is to be seen in the relief of a capital in the church at Droiturier (fig. 2), where the ape has prominent genitals, a detail more than unusual in the representations of these animals, who very rarely show their sex organs in medieval sculptures and miniatures. The man standing at the side of the ape holds a bolt cutter, perhaps as an instrument of a symbolic castration-extirpation of evil. As a confirmation of the devilish character of the scene, the head of a monster opening wide its jaws is represented behind the ape.

Tied or enchained apes often accompany the jesters in depictions that can be defined 'realistic' for their adherence to everyday life. This simple fact does not imply that they are devoid of any moral, symbolic or metaphorical meaning. The observers of the sculptural reliefs of the cathedrals were a heterogeneous multitude, composed by the common people but also aristocrats and educated men, who could understand the metaphorical meanings conveyed by such representations. Depending on the culture or knowledge about the subject, preconceptions and bias were always ready to be activate and combined with the aesthetic pleasure. But in fact, the look of medieval men was influenced by the dominant culture even when they were not aware of the literary and iconographical heritage of an image.

Moreover, even the contemporaries were not perfectly aware of the significance of the elaborate imagery who surrounded them, as we can assume from a letter often quoted by St. Bernard of Clairvaux to Abbot Guglielmus. Bernard wonders about the meaning of the multi-shaped hybrids, monsters and exotic animals represented in the cloisters, among which the "immundae simiae". He defines these odd creatures as "deformis formositas" and "formosa deformitas", oxymoron revealing all his embarrassment faced with this blameworthy diffused practice, which was in addition very expensive (Bernard of Clairvaux, 106). During the next century, the scenes described by St. Bernard became more and more diffused also in the manuscripts, confirming their success among the upper classes. In fact, if they could be conceived as moral admonitions at the entrance of the churches or in marginal places, they could hardly keep this strong significance in the margins of Gothic manuscripts. These were reserved to an aristocratic minority and the *drôleries* were mostly conceived as a temporary distraction from the didactical program of the religious scenes represented in the initials, as an ironic gloss to the text or as a

parody of a specific category of people, such as the performers. In any case, for the manuscripts' owners, performing jesters and apes were part of an inferior, debased and crawling world, amusing and despicable. Bringing together the exotic and the familiar, apes were among the most diverting subjects for marginal miniatures and their depictions often superpose to those of the jesters. And yet, in most cases, the performing apes represent the materiality of everyday life, an otherness that re-emerges even from the performances directly inspired by court dances and apparently devoid of a strong negative connotation.

As it is known, until the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century secular workshops producing manuscripts were very rare and one could wonder how the monks illuminating them could know the features and feats of strolling entertainers, who were only occasionally stopping by the monasteries (where they could be housed in the last part of their life). But precisely the vagueness surrounding the jesters' antics could contribute to the unfolding of a fanciful, odd imagery about them, in fact assimilated to the hybrids and monsters populating the margins of manuscripts. The proliferation of comic scenes completely unrelated to the iconography of initials –and often representing performing ape-like creatures– clearly shows the interpolation of levels in the same *folium* and the coexistence of different perceptions in the observer's eye.

During the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, apes were so frequently employed in fine arts that it would be improper to expect to find a unique, precise significance for any category or recurrence. They are sometimes represented doing acrobatics and dancing, or being threatened by their master with a stick.<sup>4</sup> They are shown as more or less skilled in doing acrobatics and they sometimes execute arduous performances. We must remember that during the 13<sup>th</sup> century performing apes exhibited by strolling jesters had become a familiar sight. So it is not surprising the rise of interest for the subject by figurative artists. As an example of 'realistic' depiction we can look at a relief in the outside door of the Bayeux Cathedral, dating the mid-12<sup>th</sup> century, where the jester seems to admonish with his finger the animal, who foolishly repeats the gesture (fig. 3). The scene has a humoristic vein added to the realism of the details, such as the heavy chain used in order to prevent the animal to escape. A similar specimen of a trained ape is represented in the Portail des Libraires at Rouen (fig. 4), where it is part of a more elaborated iconographical scheme. The scene is carved in one of the medallions representing monsters, hybrids and devilish creatures of different kind, dancing, playing music or standing in odd attitudes. According to Michael Camille, the monkey with the jester could be "an allegory of the soul trapped within the body" (Camille, 87). But in fact, the scene is perfectly recognizable as a glimpse of real life; even the trainer's attire is the common clothing of the lower-class entertainers, with a short dress and a hood, while the animal wears a cape hinting at a spectacular exhibition.

I am not suggesting that the inclusion of such everyday scenes within a context of monstrous creatures is devoid of any symbolic or metaphorical meaning. The ape and the jester could stand as they were –a scene evoking the performances of real life– and at the same time they could be imbued with a negative connotation hinting at mean entertainments and a beastly promiscuity. Realistic, moral and ornamental levels sometimes overlap, giving birth to a composite universe of signs not so easy to decipher, because we must deduce its alphabet mostly from the iconographical documents

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, in the *Breviary of Marguerite de Bar* (London, British Library, ms. Yate Thompson 8, f. 297v); in the *Metz Pontifical* (Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, ms. 298, f. 8); in the *Luttrell Psalter*, London, British Library, ms. Add. 42130, f. 73; in the *Maastricht Hours* (London, British Library, ms. Stowe 17, f. 204); in a late 13<sup>th</sup> French Book of Hours (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms. Lat. 14284, f. 64v).

themselves, that is from the objects of our analysis. Sometimes the depictions of monkeys engaged in acrobatic or musical performances have a more fantastic character, which moves away from the realism of the scenes of everyday life to privilege the function of humorous divertissement for the eyes of the reader. Also in this case, the character of moral condemnation seems to be diluted, but it remains in the background as an implicit reference related to the animal, particularly through the negative concept of imitation.

In Franco-Flemish manuscripts, wandering jesters carrying one or more apes in a basket on their backs are rather common. Offering an icastic view of the performers' everyday life, these miniatures are sometimes enriched by details belonging to the abstract world of ornamental decoration. Jesters carrying apes on their backs are particularly frequent in Franco-Flemish 14<sup>th</sup> century manuscripts, as in a tiny Bodleian Book of Hours in two volumes, where the trainer wears a cap with a point which ends in a bell extending up to the right side of the *folium*.<sup>5</sup> Some realistic details of the miniature, such as the offering plate and the stick, but also the typical tight hose tied under the feet, probably very useful for acrobatics, intertwine with the decorative, ornamental frame. The basket with a monkey is represented in several miniatures, testifying the recurrence of this practice among the strolling entertainers. In the *Rothschild Canticles*, the apish jester is partly naked and only wears a short blue mantle, while the ape he carries in his basket has a long red fool's hood, that recalls the image of a buffoon.<sup>6</sup>

Despite of its recurrence the subject did not become a real *topos*, as the variety of representations and their variants clearly show. In some cases, the figure of the jester carrying a monkey overlaps with that of beggars and marginalized characters with some impairment or deformity, as in a mid-15<sup>th</sup> century mural painting in the Swedish church of Vaksala (fig. 5). Regardless of the realism of most scenes, the theme acquires new connotations if we reconsidered it in relationship to the satirical iconography of infernal creatures, who sometimes carry a basket full of children who died before being christened. According to the tradition, they were carried by the "mesnie Hellequin", as can be seen in a French manuscript of the *Histoire de Fauvain* (a probable source of inspiration for the more known *Roman de Fauvel*). Here a devil holding a stick in his hooped hand and sporting a second face on his belly, both evoking his feral nature, carries on his back a basket containing a horse, that is, the sinful protagonist, and some children.<sup>7</sup> Due to medieval consideration for earthly entertainments and hellish punishments, images like these cast a sinister light on the depictions of men carrying apes or children in their baskets. Nevertheless, some images show a clearly shifting towards a comical-grotesque meaning. A pannier with children is to be found for instance in the depiction of a devil in the *Roman de la Rose* manuscript illuminated by Richart and Jeanne de Montbaston around the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup> This miniature shows a punishment inflicted on sinners, who are boiled in a cauldron; the action is performed by two horned demons with burning eyes: one of them, crouched, is poking the fire, while the other is standing and carries a child in a basket on his back, representing the poor souls of the unbaptised, doomed to remain in hell. Such depictions of the infernal world seem to be more parodic than dreadful, but their comic connotations did not exclude a probable function of moral

<sup>5</sup> Oxford, Bodleian Library, ms. Douce 6, f. 153. A very similar figure is to be seen in a Flemish Psalter and Book of Hours, dating early 14<sup>th</sup> century (Baltimore, Walters Art Gallery, ms. 82, f. 207), while in a Franco-Flemish Breviary dating the early 14<sup>th</sup> century (Oxford, Bodleian Library, ms. Laud. Lat. 84, f. 227) the image of the trainer carrying two monkeys on his back is less characterized, since he wears the simple robe and plain bonnet typical of the lower class people.

<sup>6</sup> *Rothschild Canticles*. New Haven, Yale University, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, ms. 404, f. 188.

<sup>7</sup> *Histoire de Fauvain*. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms. fr. 571, f. 150v.

<sup>8</sup> *Roman de la Rose*. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms. fr. 25526, f. 71.

admonition. In addition, they cast an uncanny light on the images of jesters carrying apes in a basket on their backs.

It is worth noticing that in Gothic *drôleries*, human performances done by apes are much more frequent than trained apes accompanying the jesters. When apes perform acrobatics, they are frequently naked, because they represent themselves, that is a trained animal engaged in a spectacle appreciated by the audience. On the contrary, when they replace a specific human category, they are often clothed, with a comparison stressing the negative implications of the qualities commonly attributed to the animal, such as the imitative attitude and the ugliness / monstrosity of the body, mirroring the *turpitude* of the soul. Though the more 'realistic' images present interesting details, from a certain point of view they are less intriguing compared to the images unfolding a prejudicial idea of the ape, sometimes employed as an alter ego of despicable human beings such as the entertainers. In other terms, in miniatures and sculptural reliefs, the reprobation of jesters often assumes the forms of a monstrous corruption of the body, through which they came to be associated with an animal considered sordid as the ape.

The analogy between jesters and apes is confirmed by the literary sources, particularly in the words of Christian writers. Around the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Dominican Guglielmus Peraldus considered the goat and the ape as *foetida* animals, which he associated with the buffoon, because all of them are instruments used by the devil to make people laugh: "Notandum ergo quòd scurra est velut capra, vel simia, cum quibus ludit diabolus, & homines excitat ad risum. Capra animal foetidum est. Simia animal deforme. Sic tales valde foetidi sunt & valde deformes" (Guglielmus Peraldus, 589 [but 590]). By altering their natural appearance, jesters lose any human resemblance to God, making themselves similar to beasts. Guglielmus also defined laughter as a sort of ebullition at the fire of concupiscence, through which the buffoon inflates the wind of vanity.

The simile, which qualifies the jesters as instruments of the devil through the assimilation to apes and goats, would be restated in the next century in the *Pungilingua* by Domenico Cavalca, who refers to the entertainers' speeches as dishonest and sinful (XXVII). It is worth remembering that hypothetical reconstructions of the jesters' repertory mostly draw from strongly prejudicial sources of information: the condemnations by Christian writers, who often mention jesters as examples of moral perversion.<sup>9</sup> Because the entertainers incite to worldly pleasures and sensual joys, they are considered accomplices of evil forces and defined as "ministri Satanae" and "apostoli daemonum" (respectively, by Honorius de Autun, *Elucidarium sive dialogus de summa totius christianae theologiae*, II and Petrus Abelardus, *Theologia Christiana*, II, 129). Described as degenerate and corrupt creatures without any hope of salvation, the entertainers are also compared to the most despised animals. Exciting men to pleasure, they divert them from more important occupations and meditations, that is, from thoughts of punishments and rewards beyond this world.

The signs of diversity and evil reflect on iconographical documents in the edifying program of churches and cathedrals, a sort of *Biblia pauperum* for the unlearned. As admonitions against the devilish forces menacing the Christian world, feral and demoniac regularly intertwine. To a certain extent, a moralizing purpose can be found also in the manuscripts' miniatures, where however a much more heterogeneous and varied scenes are reproduced. In medieval iconography and in literary sources, apes can be employed in the place of entertainers, extending a similarity full of negative consequences: just as this animal imitates everything without understanding the meaning of anything, jesters and popular players do not know the laws of music and make themselves ridiculous.

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<sup>9</sup> On Christian condemnations of jesters in medieval imagery see Pietrini (2011).

Referring to the difference between musician and chorister, Guido di Arezzo had stated around the year 1000: the former knows the art of music, while the latter only has the practice, and “qui facit quod non sapit diffinitur bestia”<sup>10</sup> (“the man who does not know what he does can be called a beast”) – a concept that had been already expressed by St. Augustine.<sup>11</sup> This conception remained for centuries as the underlying basis for the iconographic re-elaborations of performing apes: these are often represented as dull or ludicrous players of musical instruments, the same shown in the hands of the strolling jesters.

The analogy between the entertainer and the ape is based on the idea of imitation. At the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Alexander Neckam, after stating that the ape is like the hypocrite who imitates the characteristic signs of virtue, assimilates the jester to this animal:

Nonne item histrio nunc lugentis vultum praetendens nunc ridentis, vultumque in diversa commutans, ut inspicientes ad risum compellat vel invitos, simiae officium gerere videtur? Vae, vae! Nobilis creatura homo videri simia laborat. Naturae dignitatem dehonestat histrionatus, ob infelicis lucelli turpem quaestum (Neckam, 210).

Although the art of counterfeiting, typical of pantomime, is not a skill necessary for all entertainers, the concept of pretending is nevertheless connected to the image of the jester. Just as the hypocrite feigns an attitude he does not feel and reproduces the appearances of virtue to deceive men, so the jester can pretend to be what he is not. And the ape perfectly embodies the concept of imitation.

The association between the hypocrite and the monkey drawn by Alexander Neckam is also found in the figurative arts. In an illustration of the already mentioned *Bible moralisée*, from the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, this animal is counted among the impure animals and represents the *deceptores*, that is, those who deceive, the hypocrites. *Leviticus* (XI, 1-47) makes no mention of this animal, but the copyist inserted it in place of the swan, perhaps because he found it strange that a royal bird could be part of the species to be despised, or more simply because of a misunderstanding of the term (*symius* for *cygnus*) (Janson, 114).

The ape is often employed as an *alter ego* of the entertainers and the assimilation acquires a more poignant meaning when it represents an animal trainer. It is a sort of iconographical *mise en abyme*, reinforcing the metaphorical significance of the association between man and beast. In a marginal miniature from the *Maastricht Hours*, an ape plays the pipe and a tabour and gives the rhythm to the dance of a couple, suggesting a metaphorical reversal of roles.<sup>12</sup> Apes are in fact the leading characters in the marginal miniatures of this tiny, precious Book of Hours. As in other devotional manuscripts, they are engaged in many activities and performances typical of human beings. The cartoon-like miniatures disseminated along all its margins have a comic connotation, often inspired to the idea of the world upside-down, but can acquire a further moral meaning if we put them into the context of jesters' harsh condemnations. In Gothic manuscripts, the reversal of role between trainers and animals is a frequent occurrence. To give just one more example, in the Bodleian tiny Flemish psalter already quoted, a

<sup>10</sup> Guido di Arezzo, *Regulae rhythmicae* (vv. 1-3): “Musicorum et cantorum magna est distantia: / Isti dicunt, illi sciunt, quae componit musica. / Nam qui facit, quod non sapit, diffinitur bestia”.

<sup>11</sup> Augustinus, *De ordine* (II, 19): “Deinde quis bonus cantator, etiamsi musicae sit imperitus, non ipso sensu naturali et rhythmum et melos perceptum memoria custodiat in canendo, quo quid fieri numerosius potest? Hoc nescit indoctus, sed tamen facit operante natura. Quando autem melior et pecoribus praeponendus? quando novit, quod faciat. Nihil aliud me pecori praeponit, nisi quod rationale animal sum”.

<sup>12</sup> *Maastricht Hours*. London, British Library, ms. Stowe 17, f. 35v.

monkey playing the bagpipes makes a dog dance.<sup>13</sup> The animal that replaces man and imitates his behaviour alludes to a sort of moral equivalence through parody. Images of this kind are linked to the theme of the world upside-down, with hares running after dogs and mice that hang cats, or illustrate narrative episodes also widespread in popular culture, such as the fox disguised as a prelate who attempts to catechize farm animals, obviously to eat them. But when the animal performs the function of a trainer, the iconography of the upside-down world combines with the parody of entertainers through the image of the ape.

As has been observed, while the monkeys in the Romanesque art often symbolize the virile and lecherous sinner, those depicted in Gothic miniatures can sometimes refer to sexual inversion and sodomy (Wirth 2000, 440-441). No wonder, then, if they are the main victims of anal assault. In a late 14<sup>th</sup> century codex of the *Decretals of John XXII*, a man puts a bellows in the anus of a monkey, which plays tambourines supported on the back of a dog.<sup>14</sup> The theme of derisive inversion is evident, with air being blown into the body instead of outwards (Cluzot, 53). Moreover, the musician animal replaces the jester, with the dog used in place of the usual child holding tambourines on his back. The image thus suggests a kind of equivalence between the three characters, who perform futile, ridiculous and obscene actions. It is not perchance if in most cases we find wind and percussive musical instruments in the hands of the anthropomorphised apes. Medieval classifications of instruments were mostly founded on a well-established classification: high and low, key and non-key instruments. Percussion instruments were placed on the lower level of this hierarchy, since they do not require the knowledge of music.<sup>15</sup>

The parody of musical instruments can be associated to the theme of the upside-down world and the staging of a carnivalesque disorder, a subject too vast to get through in this article. The ape is frequently employed also to symbolize certain sins or reprehensible behaviour. It assumes for example a clear metaphorical meaning when he rides an improper animal, as in an English 14<sup>th</sup> century Book of Hours, where the animal wears a cap and plays the tambourine astride a fox.<sup>16</sup>

Very frequent are also the humorous allusions to the anal threat, with parodic images casting a negative light on base musical entertainments performed by stupid creatures. In a miniature from a 14<sup>th</sup> century manuscript of *Lancelot du Lac*, an ape plays the trumpet against the behind of a mate, visibly scared by the action.<sup>17</sup> As in this case, the comic purpose is often a matter of fact, but in some representations it seems to be conceived as a more specific satire addressed to a particular category of entertainers. The use of improper instruments can allude to the ignorance of jesters, who exhibit their practical musical skills without really knowing music. This would explain the recurrence of the playing ape, and the frequent mingling of human and beastly features, with animals dressed as jesters and entertainers resembling animals – a topic found in miniatures and reliefs through at least the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Apish players are rather frequent in late medieval illustrations and they sometimes assume clumsy attitudes, as a confirmation of their bestiality and improper use of the body. Once more, the mingling of human and beastly features suggests a devilish connection. Sometimes the scene can acquire a more elaborated meaning, depending on the iconographical context. In a marginal miniature from the *Maastricht Hours* (f. 173v), an ape rides a wild boar playing a ladle as a trumpet. It wears a sort of red mantle with a cap that evokes the typical costume of jesters. Its

<sup>13</sup> Oxford, Bodleian Library, ms. Douce 6, f. 191v.

<sup>14</sup> *Decretals of John XXII*. Karlsruhe, Baden Landesbibliothek, ms. Aug. perg. 1, f. 1.

<sup>15</sup> See Hammerstein and Pietrini (2017).

<sup>16</sup> *Grey-Fitzpayn Hours*. Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, ms. 242, f. 55v.

<sup>17</sup> *Lancelot du Lac*. New Haven, Yale University Library, ms. 229, f. 147.



incongruous attire makes it appear even more obscene and ridiculous, because it is unseemly, like the unjustified nudity of human beings. These negative allusions combine with a possible metaphorical connotation, since the ape, an impure and stupid animal imitating the actions of a musician, is riding a wild boar, which, according to the Bible, ravages the vineyards (*Psalm 79*, 14), destroying the fruits of God: “Exterminavit eam aper de silva et singularis ferus depastus est eam” (“The boar out of the wood hath laid it waste: and a singular wild beast hath devoured it”). The negative sense of this player-ape is emphasised by its juxtaposition with a harp-playing angel depicted in the lower margin. Sacred music, celebrating the praise of God, is opposed to ridiculous profane music, ravaging the spiritual harvest by corrupting human souls, inciting them to sin.

In another manuscript of the *Lancelot du Lac* a harp-playing ape with a jester's cap is accompanying a battle of sex, that is, fighting between a man and a woman.<sup>18</sup> More puzzling is the marginal miniature of a *folium* from the Bodleian *Roman d'Alexandre*, where a humanized ape, precariously perched on a decorative shoot, plays an ass's jawbone and opens its mouth wide to sing, displaying a long and pointed tongue resembling that of a snake.<sup>19</sup> This latter animal is also evoked by the unnatural turning of the monkey's body, a distortion which clearly hints at a monstrous turpitude and the concept of self-transformation for spectacular purposes. The ass's jawbone is a puzzling instrument sometimes depicted in marginal miniatures in order to replace the *vielle* or the *guitern*. The presence of this improper musical instrument is likely to be something more than a mere allusion to a lack of musical knowledge and ignorance of the laws of harmony. It seems rather to be a reference to the dangerous power of music as an irrational force, employed as a means of seduction and murder of souls. The substitution of the *vielle* by an ass's jawbone clearly confirms this shift from simple parody to moral judgement. The object has in fact very bad connotations, since in many depictions of medieval western art an animal's jawbone (sometimes replacing the sickle for harvesting) is the weapon used by Cain to kill his brother in the fields.<sup>20</sup>

Knowing the negative character attributed to apes in medieval imagery, it is not surprising to find in his hands this object, an ass's jawbone, replacing a musical instrument. An animal as sinful and dirty as the ape can play only cacophonous music, clearly showing in its aspect the hellish character of this form of entertainment, inspired by the infernal forces. It is not by chance that this soul's murdering music accompanies the chess game of a courtly couple in the lower margin. The condemnations of this pastime are repeated by Christian writers during the entire Middle Ages and the game is often depicted in miniatures as a means of economic ruin and moral perdition.<sup>21</sup> The courtly context does not weaken the sharpness of moral judgement, while replacing music with a despised animal casts a sinister light on worldly entertainments. On the other hand, the strong negative implications towards the entertainers do not weaken the humoristic connotations of the whole scene, which has been probably conceived as a multi-targeted parody.

The courtly context of the scenes depicted in the Bodleian *Roman d'Alexandre* corroborates the hypothesis of a predominant parodic vein even in the presence of sharp negative signs, such as the presence of a deformed ape with a sinister musical instrument. Resorting to this last detail, the artists who illustrated the manuscript, introduces a second-level quotation for the learned (the ass's jawbone) winking to the condemnations of the

<sup>18</sup> *Lancelot du Lac*. Manchester, John Rylands Library, ms. fr. 1, f. 82.

<sup>19</sup> *Roman d'Alexandre*, Oxford, Bodleian Library, ms. Bodley 264, f. 112.

<sup>20</sup> See Schapiro; Henderson; Barb. For a more detailed discussion on this subject see Pietrini (2017, 98).

<sup>21</sup> To give just one example, in a miniature from the *Maastricht Hours* (f. 111v) a half-naked chess player makes a gesture of desperation while a demon takes possession of his soul.

entertainers through humour, which is the first level, immediately visible even by the uncultured. Parody is thus put to use of moral judgement, but at the same time the artist's re-elaboration of the signs of diversity could be a sort of virtual dialogue with the aristocrats, aiming at a mockery of their own values –as if the negative signs were so strong to become ridiculous. The same effect is to be seen in another *folium*, in which an enormous, monstrous friar is menacing with his club the *carola* of a little group of dancers.<sup>22</sup> The women seem to belong to the household, while the men wear animal masks, suggesting a folkloric context. Dancing the *carola* was an entertainment currently spread at court and also among the lower class, tolerated in spite of the inevitable promiscuity between the sexes. In many illustrations, parody overtakes any moral judgement and seems to be rather an ironic learned reference to the harshness of reiterated sentences stated by the dominant culture.

In the margins of this richly illustrated manuscript, the Bodleian *Roman d'Alexandre*, we can see many scenes of apes dancing or engaged in other courtly amusements. They sometimes take the place of entertainers or courtiers who dance accompanied by a playing monkey (f. 81). Even in the 14<sup>th</sup> century devotional manuscripts, psalters and books of hours, it is not unusual to come across a depiction of a *carola*, terraced or in the round, in which the dancers holding hands or the head of a handkerchief are performed by apes –a clear parody of this collective pastime beloved by the young aristocracy.<sup>23</sup> In the *Salterio de la Reina María*, the four apes wear a hooded robe and their attitudes (such as a dancer's hand on his hip) reminds us of the holy dance of the four virgins accompanied by a playing angel in another *folium*.<sup>24</sup> Like many other manuscripts of the time, the Psalter contains many marginal depictions related to a court context, with aristocratic figures engaged in collective dancing. As it has been observed, from the one hand one should avoid the risk of over-interpreting the iconography with a “forcibly symbolic reading of very common images”, while on the other one it is to be recognized that the overall iconographic programme sums up the debate on dance (Buttà, 110). But how can we explain the coexistence of different and even opposite connotations of the *carola*, the holy one and that of monkeys?

Since the choreographic patterns are exactly the same, it is evident that the illuminator intended to play on a deliberate parallelism. Paradoxically, it is precisely the awareness of using a common and widely diffused imagery that may have led him to enrich the iconography of the manuscript's margins with several levels of interpretation. And since the didactic purpose of this Psalter, conceived in particular for women and young people, has been ascertained, it must be admitted that even the depictions of obviously sinful or monstrous dances had a function, as a warning against the risks of an ambivalent entertainment. This ambivalence recovers the sense of the holy dance of the angels that comes from the Christian tradition, as an almost ecstatic means of communion with the divinity, but it also shows the possible abuses and excesses of this very particular form of jubilation. Dancing can be a spiritual activity, almost a prayer in praise of God, but in some images the body prevails, with its baser appetites: the dancers turn into monkeys and devilish half-monkey resembling men, alluding to the devastating effects of sensual pleasures. It is not the type of dance that makes the difference, but the purpose.

In many manuscripts, however, the moral condemnations against dancing tend to dissolve, giving way to irony. The figure of the monkey can sometimes assume the

<sup>22</sup> *Roman d'Alexandre*, Oxford, Bodleian Library, ms. Bodley 264, f. 21v.

<sup>23</sup> See for instance the marginal miniature of a Psalter and Book of Hours coming from Ghent and dating 1312-1325: Baltimore, The Walters Art Museum, ms. 82, f. 193.

<sup>24</sup> *Salterio de la Reina María*. London, British Library, ms. 2 B.VII, f. 229. On the manuscripts see, among the others, Rudloff Stanton.

function of a parody rather than a moral warning. After all, we cannot really know how and to what extent these two aspects combined and were co-present in the perception of medieval men. In a 14<sup>th</sup> century Flemish Book of Hours we can see a satire of a rather new choreutic typology, which was beginning to diffuse at court, the dance of a couple, here replaced by two apes.<sup>25</sup> When marginal miniatures are conceived as a mild parody or ironical glosses for the learned, they seem to lose their original connotation of negative judgement towards worldly pleasures, giving rise to a more humoristic attitude. Just as it happens with the representations of the devils, medieval iconography tends to melt up the terror inspired by these figures transforming them in comic characters. In general terms, it can be said that “at the end of the Middle Ages, the image of the monkey was secularized from sin to folly” (Corbey, 9). But even before that, the issue is complex and cannot simply be traced back to the symbolism of sin and the dichotomy between spirit and flesh, spiritual versus material values.

In fact, it is worth noticing that the prime and basic meaning conveyed by the monstrosity of apes mingles with a remarkable humour even when the art work has a completely different target, as the Gothic cathedrals’ reliefs, particularly in the stalls of the choirs, the so-called misericords. We must remember that these were invisible to the congregation during the Mass and were thus left to the free imagination of artists. For this reason, to a certain extent they can be assimilated to the manuscripts belonging to an aristocratic minority, with the difference that the choristers were supposed to laugh at the view all together and not in solitude. Finally, a history of medieval perception could possibly tell us that this laughing did not preclude reprobation and damnation, but on the contrary reinforce the mechanism of exclusion winking ironically to the well-established similitudes (jesters as beasts and beasts as demons, from which we can infer: jesters as demons).

This genre of prejudicial parody reaches a climax in a choir stall in the Norwich Cathedral, where an ape wearing a jester’s costume ‘plays’ an animal like a bagpipe, while another ape and a laughing dog with a psaltery observe the strange performance (fig. 6). Behind the humorous vein, a metaphorical meaning may creep into the beholder’s mind: the ape making music with an animal represents the jesters who abase themselves in contemptible performances as they were devil’s instruments to make people laugh. In fact, the 13<sup>th</sup> century preacher Berthold von Regensburg, in one of his sermons, defined the entertainers, in a figurative metaphor, as *tiuvels blâsbelge* (“devil’s bagpipes”) (Berthold von Regensburg, I, 319). Animals played as musical instruments cast a sinister light on the comedy of the scene, representing an inversion of the natural order of things and the triumph of senseless brutality. The playing beast is, moreover, tied down by the other ape, as though to symbolise the enslavement to sin of all these wicked creatures, simultaneously accomplices and victims of the devil.

During the late Middle Ages anthropomorphised apes became a recurrent motif in marginal miniatures. Jester-looking monkeys playing musical instruments are found in various artistic artifacts, including choir stalls in churches and cathedrals. In a chorus stall armrest in the Church of Santa Katerina, at Hoogstraeten, the apish player wears the typical buffoon’s donkey-eared hood (fig. 7). The most interesting aspect is the osmosis of signs: not only men disguise themselves as monkeys, but sometimes the opposite situation is also depicted, that is, the monkeys disguise themselves as jesters, confirming the interchangeability between men and animals. Sometimes the musician monkeys have a markedly humanized appearance, with a deliberate and significant ambiguity. For example, in two drawings from the *Salterio de la Reina María*, where in addition to

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<sup>25</sup> Baltimore, Walters Art Gallery, ms. 88, f. 158.

monkeys dressed in jester-like attire (f. 180) there are monkey-like players, one of whom performs an ungainly dance and opens his toothless mouth in a sneering laugh (f. 197). It is clearly a human being, whose somatic characteristics and attitudes have undergone an alteration in a bestial sense. The image of the monkey is only evoked, but the idea of physical and moral degeneration to which the character refers is even stronger. And the loss of spirituality through the representation of the bestial side is evident. A symbolic negative meaning has also the ape riding a goat in another *folium* of the manuscript (f. 194v), a scene rather frequently depicted in marginal Gothic miniatures. Sometimes such scenes allude to women's lust, such as in the *Grey-Fitzpayn Hours* where the ape rides a fox backwards and wears a woman's bonnet.<sup>26</sup>

A case in point is the Wrocław manuscript, populated by naked jesters engaged in various types of musical and acrobatic performances.<sup>27</sup> Most of them show ape-like features and a ridiculous attitude, whose beastliness traits might allude to moral degeneration. Even when a humorous connotation and an amused look at the world of entertainment prevail, the employ of an animal endowed with negative implications entails a more or less underlying satiric purpose, which sometimes targets a specific social category, a profession, an activity or a pastime. Apes musicians, as we have seen, are to be considered a parody of the lack of musical knowledge among the strolling players, while apes engaged in a typical court dancing mimic the entertainments of the aristocrats. The promiscuity between human beings and beasts in Gothic marginal miniatures is based on the principle of an inclusive universe, populated by creatures belonging to different realms, with a fanciful mingling of categories (hybrids, monsters, real and mythical animals) which appear neatly separated only in our minds. Human beings are always threatened by amazing, disconcerting possible regressions into a lower level in the hierarchy of creatures. Apes perfectly represent this risk of degradation. From another point of view, the triumph of bestiality is a sort of rescue from the well-established order of things, a sign of freedom from the rational worldly scheme. In other terms, a rebellion against the dominant religious power. The mocking parody lurking behind some images can thus reveal its revolutionary potential, suggesting a subversion of values.

The marginal imagery in the manuscripts can be sometimes inspired to sermon *exempla*. A review of the large number of miniatures showing performing apes clearly shows that sometimes the iconography does not have morals to teach and that the scenes can be put outside their original context in order to subvert the meaning, or overturn the values of their elements, according to the philosophy of the upside-down world. If the images of a fox preaching to a flock of birds are very common in marginal miniatures, also the ape-teacher before a class or the ape-doctor holding up the urine flask are frequent scenes in the edges of Gothic manuscripts.

In consideration of these occurrences, in which the erudition is the common feature, Jean Wirth has suggested an original explication: most of the devotional books in which these images appear belonged to aristocrats that could hardly read, so that they would spend much time to learn imitating the more cultivated, just as an ape (Wirth 2000, 436). This fascinating hypothesis is founded on the assumption of a virtual dialogue between the artists in charge of the decoration in the margins and the beholder of the book (often a pray book). This possibility is not to be discarded, but I would be very surprised to know that this dialogue could entail such a harsh satire of the patronage. The point is the assimilation of the ape to a debased human being on the one hand and to a stupid imitation on the other: the aping of gestures made by a cultivated man (teacher, preacher, doctor or musician) casts an ironic light on the profession itself, and in fact –as Wirth admits– the

<sup>26</sup> *Grey-Fitzpayn Hours*. Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, ms. 242, f. 55v.

<sup>27</sup> Wrocław, University Library, ms. I. F. 421.

satire of working categories and actions became very common in 14<sup>th</sup> century *drôleries*. The message is clear: stupidity is concealed even in the most apparently smart or cultivated actions, as the presence of this despised animal suggests. Any additional meaning should be discussed and verified, avoiding the risk of over-interpretation through a keen analysis of any single iconographical document in its context.

The employment of this despised animal, the ape, can introduce a more composite mingling of meanings when it involves holy figures or Christian rites. Some images introduce even a touch of blasphemy in the satirical, fanciful underworld of *marginalia*. In a miniature from a psalter that belonged to Geoffroy d'Apremont and Isabelle de Quiévrain, the harpist monkey goes so far as to mimic David, the holy exemplary musician,<sup>28</sup> while in a *folium* of the *Lancelot Romance* a nun sucks a monkey as a striking parody of the *virgo lactans*.<sup>29</sup> Apes are sometimes employed to parody the rituals of the Church, with ape-bishops celebrating the mass or worshipping profane, even obscene altars, such as in Flemish Book of Hours dating the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, where a beastly bishop wearing a red mantle is raising up an ape's skull instead of the consecrated host and is accompanied by a cat holding a broom.<sup>30</sup> Though apes are not the only animals employed in the anticlerical parody, their presence is remarkable both in devotional manuscripts and in romances. It is almost always a satire that is not connected to the content of the text, confirming the diffusion and success of these forms of parody, based on the principle of an undue, monstrous imitation. The shadow of sacrilege creeps into the parody of Christian rites through the image of an animal considered unclean and connected to the world of entertainment. In a Franco-Flemish, mid-14<sup>th</sup> manuscript of the *romance Voeux du Paon*, for instance, it is a donkey-priest to worship a quite unusual altar, represented by an acrobat's naked behind balancing a pot.<sup>31</sup> In this manuscript, the satire against the ecclesiastic hierarchy, and more in particular against bishops, is particularly harsh, and goes as far as to represent the *osculum infame*, with a hybrid bishop kissing an ape's anus (f. 72v), evoking satanic initiation ceremonies.

A milder satire is to be seen in a funeral procession of monkeys in the York Minster, in the lower border of the Pilgrimage Window, dating around 1325. The iconography is quite unusual for the stained-glass window of a church, whose function is to let in the light, emanation of God. The possible meanings of the scene have been put in relationship with late medieval apocryphal and literary texts, aiming to demonstrate its function as a pictorial gloss upon the main iconographical programme of the window (Hardwick).<sup>32</sup> As a matter of evidence, the iconography goes beyond mere decoration, but to catch the ultimate meaning of such uncommon scene on the glass of a cathedral would be a hard task.

In the miniatures showing a clear connotation of blasphemy, such as the ones above quoted, a sharp satiric aim seems to be the main purpose, but also in this case the parody can sometimes re-affirm the values of the dominant culture, attacking and denouncing the behaviour of single, degenerated individuals. The relationship between apes and the parody of Christian ceremonies deserves further investigation, since its spreading is only apparently a plain recurring *topos*. On the contrary, it shows heterogeneous re-elaborations, suggesting different approaches, depending on the context and requiring a subtle critical analysis for any single specimen.

<sup>28</sup> Oxford, Bodleian Library, ms. Douce 118, f. 101v.

<sup>29</sup> *Lancelot Romance*, cit. in Wirth (2008).

<sup>30</sup> Cambridge, Trinity College Library, ms. B.11.22, f. 4.

<sup>31</sup> Jacques de Longuyon, *Voeux du Paon*, f. 17.

<sup>32</sup> A mention of the scene also in Zaerr. More in general, see French.

As an interesting example, one can take into consideration a miniature from a manuscript of Ramón de Penyafort's *Summa de poenitentia*, dating to the beginning of 14<sup>th</sup> century, where we can see St. Francis of Assisi preaching to the birds.<sup>33</sup> Since the anecdote relating his imitation of a jester's way of playing a *vielle* is well known, the miniature can be interpreted as a provocative subversion of the values implied in the incitement he gives his brothers to sing the praise of God "tamquam ioculatores Domini".<sup>34</sup> Besides the saint, another Franciscan (unmistakably recognizable by his pointed cap) is listening to the sermon, while an ape playing a *vielle* sits on the ground behind him. The animal imitates the attitude of the friar, especially in the posture of its legs, and seems to mimic the gestures of the musician, offering to the observer a sort of negative *alter ego* of that figure. In doing so, it also hints at the despicable image of the jester –not an example of voluntary humiliation such as St. Francis, but a debased model giving a satirical hue to the scene. The replacement of the Franciscan with an ape is an unmistakably parody of the saint's followers, but on the whole it can be seen as a benevolent humoristic look upon the Order, pointing out the naïve attitude of his founder, his pantheistic identity with all creatures, even the most despicable, and a sort of utopic return to innocence through self-basement and self-spoliation.

As we have seen, from the mildest satire to the harshest of parodies, the iconography of apes imitating human attitudes or mimicking the behaviour of a specific category of people offers us a glimpse into the medieval consideration of profane entertainments. The influence of the dominant Christian culture is always present but it does not exclude *a priori* various forms of liberty by the artists, who reveal a not totally aligned conception and who can sometimes employ the mockery as a means of tolerated subversion of values. Within this context, the iconographical echoes of the jesters' condemnations can acquire more than one meaning, showing their potential as multi-targeted parodies. The association between the ape and the entertainer can be the consequence of the bad consideration of their performances and at the same time the pretext to elaborate the image of an alternative world in which everything is possible, and even the most honourable figures can be associated with ridiculous or beast-like attitudes.

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<sup>33</sup> Ramón de Penyafort's, *Summa de poenitentia*. Liège, Bibliothèque Alpha, ms. 137C.

<sup>34</sup> *Scripta Leonis, Rufini Et Angeli, Sociorum S. Francisci*, XLIII, 166.

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**Appendix of figures**

Photos by the author



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7