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ARTICLE

Laughing with Sacred Things, ca. 1100–1350: A History in Four Objects

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Exploring the range of circumstances in which medieval Christians laughed with, against, at, and through religious topics, this article investigates four objects: an ivory cross, an ampulla of a saint's blood, a preaching codex, and a pilgrim's badge. While these objects are taken to illustrate a diversity of attitudes to religious humor, they are also, in light of recent work citing the productive power of medieval matter, scrutinized as agents in their own right. The article suggests two significant patterns. On the one hand, the objects point to laughter's use as a unique mode of spiritual practice. Through amusing miracles, through the provocative work of comic sermons, and through the playful humor of pilgrimage badges, Christians from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries were able to use humor to relate to their faith in sophisticated and often counterintuitive ways. Yet as the four objects and their use also attest, these modes of comic relation were also subjected to clerical reduction and regulation. Harnessing the pedagogical potential of laughter especially, preachers, hagiographers, and clerics all worked to redirect more anarchic forms of religious humor toward functional ends. While tracing how laughter with Christian topics was increasingly encouraged, the article suggests that the price of this encouragement was that laughter was often brought into a more policed domain of orthodox Christian practice.

Reading through the recent edition of *fabliaux* compiled and translated by Nathaniel Dubin, students are often scandalized.[1] There they find tales of castrated priests, of a soul who tricks Saint Peter into letting him into heaven, and of a bishop who finds a ring that gives him unexpected erections. In one of the most shocking stories, Saint Martin grants a woman's wish that her husband should be covered in penises.[2] As students encounter these texts, they often ask important questions about

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[1]Nathaniel E. Dubin, ed. and trans., *The Fabliaux: A New Verse Translation* (New York: Liveright, 2013).

[2]For discussion of the comic elements of these stories, see Thomas D. Cooke and Benjamin L. Honeycutt, eds., *The Humour of the Fabliaux* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1974); and

how seriously medieval people took their Christian beliefs. After reflecting that many of these stories were produced by clerics, they also ask questions about the location of laughter within Christian culture. Under what circumstances was it acceptable to laugh with sacred things in medieval Europe? And under what circumstances was this kind of laughter actively encouraged? When, where, and how was potentially blasphemous humor controlled by religious authorities? Should we think of works that mocked Christian ideas, figures, or artefacts as being subversive or as otherwise undermining an ecclesiastical moral monopoly?

Medievalists once imagined a narrative of a Christian "liberation" of laughter in the High Middle Ages. As Joachim Suchomski, Jean Verdon, and Jacques Le Goff all argued, religious authorities became more relaxed about humor in the thirteenth century.[3] While earlier writers had been totally opposed to laughter at holy things, they argue, by the 1200s theologians such as Thomas Aquinas and preachers such as Jacques de Vitry were endorsing the manipulation of laughter at (or with) religious topics, primarily as a tool for spreading the orthodox message of the faith.

In the past two decades, however, scholarship has shifted. One recent trend has been to stress the continuous importance of laughter as both a mode of internal critique and as an avenue of clerical fun. As Michael Camille pointed out in his celebrated work on marginalia, playful joking typically worked in a constructive dialogue with "serious" medieval discourse.[4] Noting how a majority of the literature that mocked Christian institutions was actually produced by the most devout clerics, both Martha Bayless and Mark Burde have invited us to imagine a more complex relationship between laughter and religious power.[5] Laughing at hagiographies, the liturgy, or sermons was not so much a way of "subverting" them, Bayless has argued, as much as it was a way of *playing with* them. By opening up "multiple ways of seeing," this kind of gentle mockery arguably allowed people to get closer to God's omniscient point of view.[6] Yet, as the recent work of Olga Trokhimenko has shown, many among the clerical class remained conflicted about humor. While some authorities may have "embraced" comic forms for didactic or reflective purposes, many others were deeply uncomfortable in permitting laughter, and particularly the laughter of women, in the 1200s and beyond.[7]

Brian J. Levy, *The Comic Text: Patterns and Images in the Old French Fabliaux* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 239–252.

[3]Joachim Suchomski, *"Delectatio" und "Utilitas": Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis mittelalterlicher komischer Literatur* (Munich: Francke, 1975); Jean Verdon, *Rire au Moyen Age* (Paris: Perrin, 2001); and Jacques Le Goff, "Laughter in the Middle Ages," in *A Cultural History of Humour: From Antiquity to the Present Day*, ed. Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), 40–53, originally published as Jacques Le Goff, "Rire au Moyen Age," *Les Cahiers du Centre de Recherches Historiques* 3 (1989): 1–19.

[4]Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (London: Reaktion, 1992).

[5]Martha Bayless, *Parody in the Middle Ages: The Latin Tradition* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996); and Mark Burde, "The *Parodia sacra* Problem and Medieval Comic Studies," in *Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: Epistemology of a Fundamental Human Behavior, its Meaning, and Consequences*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 215–242.

[6]Bayless, *Parody in the Middle Ages*, 208–210.

[7]Olga V. Trokhimenko, *Constructing Virtue and Vice: Femininity and Laughter in Courtly Society (ca. 1150–1300)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Unipress, 2014). For continuing discomfort about laughter, see also Peter J. A. Jones, "Preaching Laughter in the Thirteenth Century: The *Exempla* of Arnold of Liège (d. ca. 1308) and his Dominican milieu," *Journal of Medieval History* 41, no. 2 (2015): 169–183.

My primary aim in this article is to expand our sense of the nature and range of Christian laughter in the High Middle Ages, adding a significant material dimension. Focusing particularly on how ecclesiastical authorities approached laughter, I will examine four different devotional objects: (1) an ivory cross, (2) an ampulla of holy water, (3) a preaching codex, and (4) a pilgrimage badge. I have chosen these objects not because they indicate any simple chronology of medieval humor nor because they speak to any connected targets of laughter. Rather, I have chosen them precisely because they demonstrate a variety of conflicts at play between laughter and theology, laughter and preaching, and laughter and individual belief. They manifest four different placements, practices, and performances of laughter with sacred things, characteristics that are representative of wider patterns in medieval Christian life. With the ivory cross, I will investigate how laughter against sacred things acquired apocalyptic and anti-Jewish dimensions, an attitude that was transmitted to the laity through the sermons of preachers as well as through works of literature and art. With the ampulla, I will address how laughing at and with religious objects came to be a way of expressing divine or miraculous contact with the divine. With the codex, I will explore how preachers used laughter as a unique mode for communicating and understanding sacred things in a closely controlled manner. Finally, with the badge, I will examine how popular Christian practices occasionally positioned laughter as a kind of sacred thing—or rather, as a particular way of devotion—in itself.

Taken together, these four examples reveal two significant patterns, patterns that in turn can tell us something new about the way ordinary people practiced their religion in the Middle Ages. On the one hand, they represent laughter's shifting use as a mode of spiritual practice. Through amusing miracles, through the reflection induced by comic sermons, and through the playful humor of pilgrimage badges, Christians from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries came to relate to their faith in sophisticated ways. Laughter became a unique way of expressing mystical ecstasy as well as a mechanism for lay Christians to reflect deeply on ethics. Yet although these uses of laughter may seem to have been liberating and anarchic, they were, in fact, carefully policed. As I will show, the period also saw a great tension between the *explicit* and the *implicit* clerical regulation of laughter. While authorities in the early 1100s that forbade Christians from mocking relics or saints may have operated an ostensible control of humor, it appears that this hold was made more comprehensive when authorities actually permitted religious laughter. For, by encouraging people to mock saints and relics, preachers and clerics in effect made laughter at sacred things a regulated part of the domain of orthodox Christian practice.

Within this wider history, the four objects—the cross, the ampulla, the codex, and the badge—serve as more than just symbols. This article has a secondary aim of drawing attention to the importance of objects in developing popular engagement with complex religious ideas in the Middle Ages. It is now well acknowledged that many medieval philosophers and theologians cited an essential inseparability of "immateriality" and "materiality," believing that seemingly human faculties, such as will, charisma, and even emotion, could at some level be shared with objects.[8] As Caroline Walker Bynum's work *Christian Materiality* has argued, matter was increasingly cited as a locus of miraculous transformation in devotional practices from the twelfth century

[8]Kellie Robertson, "Medieval Materialism: A Manifesto," *Exemplaria* 22, no. 2 (2010): 99–118.

onward.[9] Specifically, the recent work of art historians, such as Ittai Weinryb, has shown how medieval thinkers often ascribed cosmic agency and power to organic materials.[10] According to Elina Gertsman, these insights can extend into questioning how medieval objects "structure[d], prod[ded], and develop[ed] . . . emotional lives."[11] Drawing on these positions, I hope to illustrate how the four objects in this paper had an agency of their own, impacting medieval perceptions of the permissibility of religious laughter. Through aspects of their physicality and use in particular, these artefacts were able to articulate dimensions of Christian laughter in ways that, I will suggest, texts alone were not able to do. This study, therefore, attempts to be a genuine history in four objects: a history that can only be fully comprehended by encountering the objects themselves.

I. The Cloisters Cross (ca. 1150–1160)

Humor and devotion appear at odds in the Cloisters Cross (fig. 1), an intricate devotional object made from seven interlocking pieces of walrus tusk held together with ivory pins. Currently displayed in the Cloisters Museum in New York City, this cross was likely made in eastern England sometime around the middle of the twelfth century. With its expressive figures and natural sway, it has been celebrated as a fine example of early gothic art.[12] We can only speculate on the precise devotional role of the object, although it seems likely to have occupied a prominent place in the abbey church at Bury St Edmund's.[13] The cross features scores of intricately carved scenes. At the center is a panel showing Moses and the brazen serpent (from Numbers 21), surrounding which are three terminal plaques showing the Crucifixion (on the right), Christ's Ascension to heaven (above), and his Resurrection (on the left). On the reverse of these four plaques are the animal symbols of three of the four evangelists (the eagle for John, the lion for Mark, and the ox for Luke) with the slain lamb, representing Christ, in the central plaque.[14]

Nothing is particularly comic in any of the Cloisters Cross's panels, and none of the 108 carved figures appear to be laughing. In fact, the images are remarkable for their somber faces. Yet this might be precisely the point. What makes the object important for the history of humor is the contrast it offers between laughter and solemnity, articulated by a pair of oversized inscriptions found on the shaft's two narrow laterals. Although they are located at the margins, these inscriptions are eye-catching. Of the cross's sixty separate written inscriptions, these are two of the largest. Stretched out

[9]Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone, 2011).

[10]Ittai Weinryb, "Living Matter: Materiality, Maker, and Ornament in the Middle Ages," *Gesta* 52, no. 2 (2013): 113–132. See also Michael Camille, *The Medieval Art of Love: Objects and Subjects of Desire* (London: Laurence King, 1998).

[11]Elina Gertsman, "Matter Matters," in *Feeling Things: Objects and Emotions through History*, ed. Stephanie Downes, Sally Holloway, and Sarah Randles (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 27–42, at 29.

[12]Thomas P. F. Hoving, "The Bury St Edmunds Cross," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 22, no. 10 (June 1964): 317–340.

[13]This view was advanced in Hoving's article but was later furthered in Elizabeth C. Parker and C. T. Little, *The Cloisters Cross: Its Art and Meaning* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994), 109–206.

[14]For further details of the cross and its illustrations, see Elizabeth C. Parker, "Editing the 'Cloisters Cross,'" *Gesta*, 45, no. 2 (2006): 147–160.

Fig. 1. *The Cloisters Cross*, ca. 1150–1160. Walrus ivory, 22 5/8 × 14 1/4 in. (57.5 × 36.2 cm). New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters Collection, 63.12.

in large majuscules, they cover the entire 23-inch height of the cross. For the viewer, they effectively make a frame for the central images of Moses and Christ. Together, the inscriptions make a brief rhyming couplet: "Cham laughs shamefully when he sees his parent's naked private parts. The Jews laughed at the pain of God dying."[15]

This rhyme had been fairly popular in twelfth-century English manuscripts and would have been well known to some literate observers of the cross. Although its origins are unclear, it appears in the *Glossa Ordinaria*, the standard work of exegesis for biblical scholars in the twelfth century.[16] As an exemplification of the immorality of laughter, the rhyme makes a simple typological connection between two episodes in the Bible. According to early medieval biblical commentary on Genesis 9:20–27, Ham (or *Cham*) had been punished by God for laughing at his father, Noah, after he had found him drunk and naked.[17] By the early twelfth century, Ham's laughter was even coming to be associated with sin and blasphemy. The popular theologian

[15]Parker and Little, *The Cloisters Cross*, 242: "Cham ridet dum nuda videt pudibunda parentis / Iudei risere dei penam mor[ientis]." All translations in this article are my own unless otherwise indicated.

[16]Nina Rowe, *The Jew, the Cathedral and the Medieval City: Synagoga and Ecclesia in the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 72. This rhyming couplet can also be found in Gerald of Wales's *Speculum Duorum*. Attacking a nephew for joking too much and too frivolously, Gerald quoted the little rhyme as a way of warning him that people who mocked sacred things were on the side of evil. Gerald of Wales, *Speculum Duorum, or A Mirror of Two Men*, ed. Yves Lefèvre and R. B. C. Huygens, trans. Brian Dawson (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1974), 32–33.

[17]Paul H. Freedman, *Images of the Medieval Peasant* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), chap. 4, esp. pp. 86–88, 332.

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Honorius of Autun (d. ca. 1154) went so far as to suggest that Ham's mocking laughter was something that could be used to justify the indenturing of serfs.[18] Paired with this on the cross was the idea, derived perhaps from the Gospels of Mark (14:65) and Luke (22:63–65), that Jewish priests and elders had mocked Christ while he was being crucified.[19] Just as Ham's laughter had been shameful and had resulted in punishment, so, too, the Jewish "laughter" at Christ was presented as a mark of the kind of blasphemy and treachery that would be punished in the Last Judgement.

In its marginalization of laughter, the Cloisters Cross built on some solid foundations of twelfth-century theology. During the period leading up to the making of the artwork, whenever devotional writers had considered laughter, they had nearly always connected it with sin or damnation. On the one hand, theologians saw laughter as detrimental to the individual soul. The *Glossa Ordinaria* most often glossed the issue by quoting Luke 6:25: "Woe to you who laugh now, for you will come to weep."[20] And as the Cistercian abbot Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153) suggested in his early work *The Steps of Pride* (ca. 1127), humor was one of the first ways that young monks fell into sin. By focusing on the flaws of others, Bernard said, their jokes gave them a falsely elevated sense of themselves.[21] Broadcasting these ideas to the laity at large, a number of preachers spread the idea that laughter was essentially contrary to the nature of Christ and that it would be punished at the time of the soul's judgement. As the Parisian writer and preacher Hildebert of Lavardin insisted in one of his sermons, Christ had never laughed while he had been on earth.[22] A preacher in Kent, closer to the home of the cross, circulated a vernacular sermon insisting that weeping at the time of death would be the certain consequence for enjoying laughter in life.[23]

These associations were reinforced in other genres. Cautionary tales of blasphemous laughter were a feature of both the historical and poetic works of the early 1100s.[24] Gilbert of Nogent (d. 1124) described how a monk in his community laughed at a lightning storm, only then to be struck by a wayward bolt. This was no coincidence for Guibert, who judged that the monk "was struck by the very fire he had scorned."[25] Another example is the story of the death of King William Rufus (d. 1100), as recorded in William of Malmesbury's *History of the Bishops of England* (ca. 1135). Apparently, Rufus had a checkered reputation for mockery and even gained the nickname "jeering prince."[26] According to the *History*, however, the king's blasphemous humor later triggered his illness and death. In one incident, William showed Rufus mocking Saint Anselm (d. 1109) before being suddenly struck down by a sickness of the stomach.

[18]See Valerie I. J. Flint, "Honorius Augustoduensis: *Imago mundi*," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge* 49, (1982): 7–153, esp. 125 (3.1); and cited in Freedman, *Images*, 99, 337.

[19]On this inscription, see Parker and Little, *The Cloisters Cross*, 169–171.

[20]For instance, *Biblia latina cum glossa ordinaria*, vol. 2 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1992), 697: "Tempus flendi nunc est. In futuro ridendi, beati flentes quam ipsi ridebunt."

[21]Bernard of Clairvaux, *De gradibus humilitatis et superbiae*, in J. P. Migne, Patrologiae cursus completus: Series Latina, 221 vols. (Paris: Migne, 1844–1864) (hereafter cited as PL), 182:964B–965A.

[22]Hildebert of Lavardin, *Sermones*, in PL 171:701B–C.

[23]Richard Morris, ed. and trans., *Old English Homilies of the Twelfth Century* (London: Early English Text Society, 1873), xxix, 174.

[24]For further discussion, see Peter J. A. Jones, *Laughter and Power in the Twelfth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), chap. 2.

[25]Guibert of Nogent, *Monodiae*, in PL 156:886C–D.

[26]Anselm of Canterbury, *Opera Omnia*, ed. Franciscus Salesius Schmitt, vol. 3 (Stuttgart: Bad Cannstatt, 1984), 101 (letter 2, "Principe suo irridente").

Regretting his mockery, the king decided to apologize.[27] Finally, Malmesbury described the king's disrespectful mockery of a monk as the central pivot of his death. Rufus "roared with laughter" (*at ille cachinnos ingeminans*) at the monk's prophecy, but the next day he was shot with an arrow and could laugh no more.[28]

Yet by focusing on Jewish "laughter" at Christ, the large inscription on the Cloisters Cross gave a unique social edge to these concerns. Both the text and images on the artwork feature a number of anti-Semitic themes, to the point that the critic Thomas Hoving commented: "It's almost as if Hitler and Michelangelo got together to make this thing."[29] Several Jews are depicted with stylized pointed hats and beards, and one of the central plaques shows blind Synagoga, a symbol of Judaism, turning her back on the slain lamb of Christ.[30] On the front of the shaft, another rhyme appears: "The earth trembles, defeated Death groans with the rising of the buried. Life has been purified, Synagogue has collapsed with its great foolish effort."[31] Set against this prominent inscription, the cross's couplet on laughter is paired with delusion, disbelief, and social antagonism. Symbolic of the supposed stupidity of denying Christ's life and Resurrection, while also evoking the abject social status of the Jews, it effectively showed laughter as belonging on the wrong side of salvation history. Expressed on a cross, an object that brought the viewer to contemplate the Passion of Christ, the message was even more stark.

As a prominent work of semi-public art, the Cloisters Cross embodied some of the dominant ways of thinking about Christian laughter in the mid-twelfth century. In a period in which a majority of theologians, monks, historians, and poets felt that laughter did not belong in the faith, the cross fittingly showed laughter as occupying a physical place at the outside of the Christian experience. Yet notably, the cross extended this philosophy through its unique visual language. By contrasting the mockery of the Jews with the suffering of Christ, the majuscule rhyming couplet mapped the Christian prohibition of laughter onto the social exclusion of the Jewish community. Just as Jews were thought to have killed Christ, so (the viewer might imagine) acts of laughter might conspire to "kill" his memory and his meaning. Similar to the gargoyles on the outside of gothic cathedrals or the ludicrous images framing sacred texts, the cross essentially showed laughter as an ugly force, something oppositional that could frame the solemnity of Christian devotion.

II. Canterbury Water Ampulla (ca. 1170–1200)

Ideas of Christian laughter were changing by the later 1100s. An object that can illuminate the flux is this small ampulla (fig. 2), one of many manufactured in Canterbury in the decades after 1170. This particular item was used to carry the blood relics of Saint

[27]William of Malmesbury, *Gesta pontificum Anglorum: The History of the English Bishops*, ed. and trans. Michael Winterbottom and Rodney M. Thomson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 2:116–119 (chap. 48). See also Charles Warren Hollister, "The Strange Death of William Rufus," *Speculum* 48, no. 4 (October 1973): 637–653.

[28]William of Malmesbury, *Gesta pontificum*, 333, 572–575.

[29]Thomas Hoving, "Super Art Gems of New York City: The Grand and Glorious 'Hot Pot'—Will Italy Snag It?," *Artnet* (website), June 29, 2001, http://www.artnet.com/Magazine/FEATURES/hoving/hoving6-29-01.asp; and cited in Parker, "Editing the 'Cloisters Cross,'" 150.

[30]On similar stereotypes in medieval artworks, see Sara Lipton, *Dark Mirror: The Medieval Origins of Anti-Jewish Iconography* (New York: Henry Holt, 2014), esp. 28–39 on pointed hats and beards.

[31]Parker and Little, *The Cloisters Cross*, 241: "Terra tremit mors victa gemit surgente sepulto / Vita cluit synagoga ruit molimine stult[o]."

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Fig. 2. *Ampulla of Thomas Becket (obverse)*, ca. 1170–1200. Tin, 10 × 8.7 × 2.8 cm. Collection of the British Museum, 1921,0216.62.

Thomas Becket (ca. 1115–1170). Becket was made archbishop of Canterbury by Henry II (r. 1154–1189) in 1162, but he soon fell out with the king and was forced into exile. Shortly after returning to England in 1170, Thomas was attacked by four knights and murdered in his own cathedral. Thomas was celebrated as a saint and martyr, and his cult quickly spread across the continent. Capitalizing on the emerging market of pilgrimage, the monks at Canterbury collected single droplets of his blood in tiny pyxes, or ampullae, just like this one. Similar to the wine in the Eucharist, the saint's blood was mixed with water and handled by a priest.[32] Although we do not know precisely how the Canterbury water was sold, we have a few clues. Benedict of Peterborough describes the blood relics as being "most elegantly collected in a most elegant vessel" (*vas mundissimum mundissime collecta*).[33]

Looking at this ampulla today, we can see that there is nothing intrinsically humorous about it. It depicts the saint, flanked by two of his murderers, in a solemn pose. On

[32]Rachel Koopmans, "'Water Mixed with the Blood of Thomas': Contact Relic Manufacture Pictured in Canterbury Cathedral's Stained Glass," *Journal of Medieval History* 42, no. 5 (2016): 535–558, 539–542.

[33]Benedict of Peterborough, *Passio S. Thomae Cantuariensis*, in *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury*, ed. and trans. James Craigie Robertson and J. B. Sheppard, vol. 2 (London: Rolls Series, 1876), 16.

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the reverse of the badge is an inscription: "Thomas is the best doctor for the worthy sick" (*Optim egror medic fit Toma bonor*).[34] But at some point in the 1170s, one of these vessels came to be the vehicle for a miraculous type of medieval joke. According to a miracle collection compiled in the 1180s by the Canterbury monk Benedict of Peterborough, a small blood reliquary like this was hung up in a church near Canterbury and celebrated "as a joke, and in laughter, to the glory of the martyr" (*in jocum et risum et martyris gloriam*).[35] This was because, as Benedict says, Saint Thomas had played a miraculous prank from beyond the grave.[36] A young man who had been defrauding his father's accounts had come to Canterbury to collect a sample of Saint Thomas's holy water. Yet when he arrived home, he found the vessel had been emptied, apparently by the saint's doing. People apparently laughed at this sudden overturning, seeing it as a play on how the young man had been emptying his father's purse. Enjoying the joke, the father hung up the ampulla in the church as a reminder of the saint's revelatory humor.

Why exactly did people laugh at this little episode? It is always difficult to be sure about the mechanics of medieval humor, but this moment certainly meets the criteria of three of the major modern theories of laughter. Like many of the "relief" jokes identified by Freud, the bubbling of the ampulla revealed a shameful secret, an act of fraud that had otherwise been repressed.[37] Like the "superiority" laughter associated with Thomas Hobbes and many others, hanging up the little water vessel was a way of getting people to "laugh down" at a fraudulent man.[38] And like the "incongruity" humor discussed by Henri Bergson, the joke of the hanging ampulla played on finding something small in a place reserved for something grand.[39] But these modern theories do not quite exhaust the joke. Evidence appears in the text of another kind of laughter, one that responded directly to the act of divine intervention.[40] As Benedict explained, these "amusing miracles" (*jocunda miraculorum*) were taken as "equally laughable and amusing as [they were] marvelous" (*tam joco et risui . . . quam admirationi*).[41]

From the mid-1100s, around about the same time that this relic was being transformed into a medium of divine humor, Christian writers of all kinds were beginning to describe humor as a vehicle for spiritual grace.[42] It is at this point that we begin to

[34]On the item, see Jennifer M. Lee, "Searching for Signs: Pilgrims Identity and Experience Made Visible in the *Miracula Sancti Thomae Cantuariensis*," in *Art and Architecture of Late Medieval Pilgrimage in Northern Europe and the British Isles*, ed. Sarah Blick and Rita Tekippe, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 473–491. See also Amy Jeffs, "One Object: Pilgrim Souvenir, Ampulla of Thomas Becket," *British Art Studies* 6 (2017) (online journal), accessed July 2019, http://britishartstudies.ac.uk/issues/issue-index/issue-6/ampulla-souvenir.

[35]Benedict of Peterborough, *Miracula*, in *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury*, ed. and trans. James Craigie Robertson and J. B. Sheppard, vol. 2 (London: Rolls Series, 1876), 96 (2.50).

[36]Benedict of Peterborough, *Miracula*, 73 (2.22).

[37]Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. Joyce Crick (New York: Penguin, 2002).

[38]Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: Penguin), 1.6.

[39]Henri Bergson, *Le Rire: Essai sur la signification du comique* (Paris: Éditions Alcan, 1924).

[40]For similar miracles in the late twelfth-century works of Gerald of Wales, see *Giraldus Cambrensis, Opera*, ed. J. S. Brewer, J. F. Dimock, and G. F. Warner, vol. 5, *Topographia Hibernica* (London: Rolls Series, 1867), 128–129 (2:44); and *Giraldus Cambrensis, Opera*, ed. J. S. Brewer, J. F. Dimock, and G. F. Warner, vol. 6, *Iterarium Kambriae* (London: Rolls Series, 1868), 17–18 (1.1).

[41]Benedict of Peterborough, *Miracula*, 133–134 (3.21).

[42]On this issue, see Jones, *Laughter and Power in the Twelfth Century*, chap. 1–2.

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find a number of tales of laughing saints. A vita of Saint Edward the Confessor (d. 1066), written by the Cistercian monk Aelred of Rievaulx in the 1170s, included a series of episodes in which the saint laughed while receiving visions. One tale in particular showed King Edward laughing at a kind of cosmic joke. Just as the Danish king Svein was preparing to launch a military offensive against England, he slipped and drowned in the sea. Seeing this vision, Saint Edward laughed with a kind of prophetic *schadenfreude*. According to Aelred, Edward quoted Sarah (Genesis 21:6), explaining that "God has made me laugh, and all who witness it will laugh with me."[43] At the same time, centuries-old martyred saints, such as Saint Lawrence, came to be celebrated again for their transcendent humor. In the telling of Nigel Wireker (d. ca. 1200), Lawrence was shown laughing while he was being tortured and persecuted by the Roman emperor Decius.[44] Now a fashionable topic for commentary, the saint's laughter also found strong support in the work of theologians. As the Cistercian prior John of Ford (d. 1214) commented in a sermon dedicated to Saint Lawrence, his laughter represented an "everlasting fire" of contemplation that "never slacks, even for a moment."[45]

Just like the laughing Saint Edward, it is significant that the humor provoked by the miraculous ampulla was essentially revelatory. On the one hand, in the second half of the 1100s, a range of Christian writers were beginning to argue that laughter also had the power to reveal important matters. Explaining the utility of humor to King Henry II, the prior of Grandmont, William de Trahinac (d. ca. 1180), wrote that "beneath a joke lies the truth" (*sub joco lateat veritas*).[46] There was more of a hint here of the classical satirist Horace and his principle, which was growing popular in the same period, of "telling the truth through laughing" (*per ridentem dicere verum*).[47] Yet this mechanism of laughing revelation also picked up on deeper currents in twelfth-century monastic theology. From the mid-1100s onward, monks were beginning to articulate the idea that laughter, and by extension humor, could reveal the truth of a person's inner luminescence. Although he was elsewhere dismissive of laughter, the powerful Cistercian abbot Bernard of Clairvaux reluctantly admitted that some people were sufficiently holy that even their laughter could radiate piety.[48] Bernard's Cistercian successors took this idea much further. By the time Becket's miracles were being recorded in the 1170s, the white monk Geoffrey of Auxerre (ca. 1180) was describing a kind of monastic laughter that could express the total joy of being in the presence of God.

[43]Aelred of Rievaulx, *Vita S. Edwardii Regis et Confessoris*, in PL 195:748C–749D: "Haec sunt quae Christo revelante cognovi, et vidi et risi et gavisus sum. Risum enim mihi fecit Dominus, et quicunque audierit corridebit mihi." On Sarah's laughter, see Catherine Conybeare, *The Laughter of Sarah: Biblical Exegesis, Feminist Theory, and the Concept of Delight* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

[44]Nigel Wireker, *The Passion of Saint Lawrence: Epigrams and Marginal Poems*, ed. and trans. Jan M. Ziolkowski (Leiden: Brill, 1994). An example of this laughter appears on 104–105.

[45]John of Ford, *Super extremum partem Cantici Canticorum sermones CXX*, ed. Edmond Mikkers and Hilary Costello, vol. 2 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1970), 720: "Quid enim aemulatione illa durius aut vehementius excogitari potuit, quae suos ausa est ridere carnifices, longaque examination excocta ad solidum iam ignes non timuit, quoniam ut testa exaruit?" This translation is from John of Ford, *Sermons on the Final Verses of the Song of Songs*, trans. Wendy Mary Beckett, vol. 7 (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1984), 72–73.

[46]William of Trahinac, *Tractatus quales sunt*, in PL 207:1044A–1045A.

[47]Horace, *Satires*, ed. and trans. François Villeneuve (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2011), 1.1.24: "quamquam ridentem dicere verum quid vetat? Ut pueris olim dant crustula blandi doctores, elementa velint ut discere prima."

[48]Bernard of Clairvaux, *Super Cantica Canticorum*, Sermo 85, in *Bernhard von Clairvaux: Sämtliche Werke*, ed. G. Winkler, vol. 6 (Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 1994), 642 (85.11).

> What, indeed, could be more proper than that laughter which is said to come from a contemplation that moves us beyond [*contemplationis excessus*]? With this, the mind is seized by an abundance of joy, through which, instead of being loosened into foolishness, it becomes spiritually liquefied [*spiritaliter liquefacit*]. Moreover, this kind of laughter is not made by human industry, but rather by a divine visitation. It is not learned by instruction, but is given by anointment.[49]

If we accept that the ampulla of vanishing water performed a similar kind of jocular truth-telling, we must, however, concede a difference in tone and scope. This was not a grand statement of laughter's potential for manifesting a high contemplation of God but rather an intimate performance of laughter's miraculous potential within a secular parish community. When the vessel was hung up "as a joke, and in laughter, to the glory of the martyr," it communicated the comic power of the saint through a form of gentle humor. Ordinarily, this ampulla was meant to be hung around the neck of an individual pilgrim. Hanging from the roof of the church instead, its startling new use was understandably comical. But in the process of this little joke, the ampulla did articulate something of these sophisticated new monastic and theological views. Symbolically, it embodied the idea of laughter as something that could arise through devotion. It showed how a miraculous object could accommodate the jocular while also demonstrating how it might be acceptable in certain contexts to laugh with—or more accurately, *through*—a sacred thing, such as a pilgrim's reliquary or the blood of a saint.

Modifying and repackaging elite monastic discourses about laughter as a "joyful visitation," the ampulla, therefore, pointed to a more direct connection between humor and the life of ordinary Christians. In this regard, the laughter produced by the object echoed contemporary popular hagiographies, such as the *Life of Saint Catherine* (ca. 1160s), which showed, in a vernacular that ordinary people could appreciate, a saint laughing and joking triumphantly in rhetorical battles with pagans.[50] Saint Thomas's miraculous object contributed to the popularization of precisely this kind of saintly laughter among the laity. From the later 1100s onward, through moments of miraculous humor like this, it was increasingly possible for people to laugh along with saints and to accept that humor could be a constituent part of the spiritual armory.

III. Codex of Jacques de Vitry's *Sermones Vulgares* (ca. 1250–1300)

Although the next object I will look at is a book (fig. 3), its importance goes beyond the matter of its text alone. Stored in the British Library under BL Harley MS 463, this manuscript contains excerpts from a preaching text written in the 1220s by the bishop of Acre, Jacques de Vitry (d. 1240). This particular copy was made several decades after its original writing, reflecting the popularity of preaching by the middle of the century. In the years after the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, ecclesiastical authorities

[49]Geoffrey of Clairvaux, *Expositio in Cantica Canticorum*, ed. Ferruccio Gastadelli, vol. 1 (Rome: Edizioni de Storia e Letteratura, 1974), cxxxvii: "Quid enim rectius quam risus dicitur contemplationis excessus, cum interim gaudii plenitudo animam raptam supra se non dissolvit inaniter, sed spiritaliter liquefacit? Ceterum huiusmodi risus sicut humana non efficitur industria sed visitatione divina, sic non discitur eruditione sed unctione magistra."

[50]Clemence of Barking, *The Life of St. Catherine*, ed. William MacBain (Oxford: Blackwell, 1964). For Catherine's laughter, see pp. 20–21, lines 633–638: "Mult sunt de grant desmesurance / E de orgoilluse cuintenance. / Entr'els ert grant la risee / E la pulcele unt mult gabee. / Mult se curuce li tyrant / Que li estrif demure tant."

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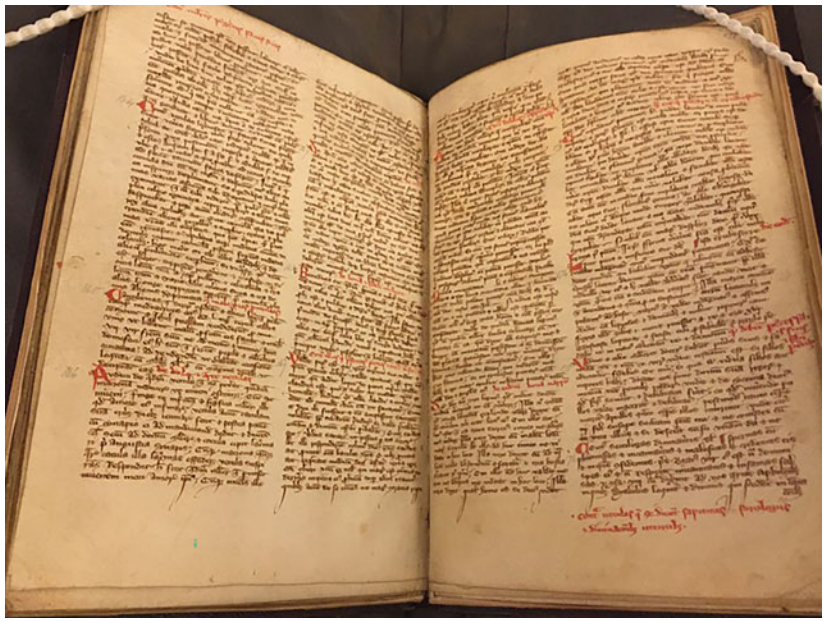

Fig. 3. London, British Library Harley MS 463. Photograph by author.

promoted preaching as a way of keeping an increasingly engaged laity on the track of Christian orthodoxy. According to one decree of the council, bishops should appoint preachers to teach "by word and example" (*instruendo eos verbo pariter et exemplo*).[51] As a consequence, preaching texts like this one began to spread right across Europe.[52] Their survival attests to their popularity. By the mid-1200s, hundreds of these collections were in circulation, with this reissue of Jacques de Vitry's *Sermones Vulgares* epitomizing a sustained preaching boom.

Like many of these *exempla* texts, some of the tales in Jacques's collection were meant to be outright comic. One of the briefest tells the story of a priest "who had a horrible voice like an ass, although he thought he could sing well" (*quodam sacerdote qui vocem asinarum et horribilem habebat et tamen se bene cantare putabat*).[53] On hearing him singing, a lady apparently began to cry. At first, the priest thought that she had been touched by his talent. But Jacques then reveals that, on the contrary, the lady was crying because his voice reminded her of "a donkey being ripped apart by wolves." Other stories in the collection appear as little more than misogynistic jokes dressed up as moral tales. Typically, we hear of a man who took revenge on

[51]See Concilium Lateranense IV: Canon 9, in *Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Generalium Decreta: Editio Critica*, 2:1: *The General Councils of Latin Christendom: From Constaninople IV to Pavia-Siena (869–1424)*, ed. A. García y García et al. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 172.

[52]For more on this, see Peter J. A. Jones, "Humour at the Fourth Lateran Council," in *Literary Echoes of the Fourth Lateran Council*, ed. Maureen Boulton (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies Press, 2019), 133–155.

[53]Jacques de Vitry, *Sermones Vulgares*, in *The Exempla or Illustrative Stories from the Sermones Vulgares of Jacques de Vitry,* ed. T. F. Crane (Publications of the Folk-lore Society 26, 1890), 22 (sermon 56).

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his wife after she continued to contradict whatever he said. When he asked her to move her chair closer to him while they were both seated at dinner outside, she pushed herself so far back from the table that she fell in a stream and began to drown. Feigning grief, the man began trying to save her from the water with a long pole. But he rowed upstream to look for her, instead of downstream, and she died in the water. When his friends asked him why he had gone the wrong way, he said "Well, she would do the opposite of what I wanted, wouldn't she?"[54]

It might be instructive to think about precisely what the humor in this *exempla* collection was *not* doing. This is because it was making a significant adjustment to familiar comic material. Jokes like this one about the drowned wife would have been known to many contemporary urban audiences. From the early 1200s, the market squares of France and Italy saw an explosion of comic *fabliaux* tales, bringing anecdotes of lusty priests and jealous wives into colorful vernacular rhyme.[55] For the most part, these stories gently mocked the very institution of the church that preachers such as Jacques de Vitry sought to defend. Tales such as "The Soul Who Argued His Way into Heaven" took an irreverent approach to salvation. Showing a peasant using logic and wit to save his soul while accusing Saint Peter of pride and class prejudice, that story took a borderline unorthodox approach to the relative social challenges of overcoming sin.[56] A story like "Saint Martin's Four Wishes" satirized the cult of saints, with the figure of Saint Martin granting two squabbling peasants the ability to transform each other's genitalia.[57] Yet, for all their grotesque subject matter, many of these *fabliaux* tales advocated a set of moral principles of their own. At the resolution of "Saint Martin's Four Wishes," the listener learns a lesson about moderation. After the peasant's wife has given up on her first two wishes, for her husband to have dozens of penises and then to have no penis at all, she eventually uses her third wish to return him to the status quo. Her husband gets his original genitalia back, and she resolves to settle for monogamy over either the lusty indulgence or the total abstinence that the saint had initially allowed her to explore.

Another form of radical religious comedy was also taking European cities by storm in the early 1200s. At the same time that the *fabliaux* were becoming popular in France and Italy, the Franciscan movement was beginning to practice its own unique kind of comic evangelism. While Francis of Assisi is supposed to have referred to himself as the "jongleur of God," his actual use of humor was much less conventional than many later hagiographers and scholars have made it appear. Above all, he worked to ridicule himself and his fellow friars as a way of exemplifying a total humility before God. Francis forced avaricious brothers to undergo humiliating spectacles, such as spitting coins onto piles of manure, telling them that they should be "glad and happy" to be mocked in this way as it would profit their souls.[58] Eyewitness accounts suggest that the early followers of Francis pursued this logic in their evangelical strategies, making themselves

[54]Jacques de Vitry, *Sermones*, 94 (sermon 227).

[55]On the popularity and spread of the *fabliaux*, see Per Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1973), 20–51. For another view, see R. Howard Bloch, *The Scandal of the Fabliaux* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 1–21.

[56]Dubin, *The Fabliaux*, 466–477.

[57]Dubin, *The Fabliaux*, 885–894.

[58]*Scripta Leonis, Rufini et Angeli, Sociorum S. Francisci: The writings of Leo, Rufino and Angelo, companions of St. Francis*, ed. and trans. Rosalind B. Brooke (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), chap. 83, p. 234–235. The manure episode can be found in *The Assisi Compilation*: *'Compilatio Assisiensis' dagli Scritti di fr. Leone e Compagni su S. Francesco d'Assisi. Dal M. 1046 di Perugia. Il edizione integrale revduta e correta*

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ridiculous as a way of winning converts and supporters. As the chronicler Jordan of Giano (d. 1260) explained, the first Franciscan missionaries used jokes to win followers in Germany and Hungary and aimed to make people laugh while begging for alms.[59] While humor was evidently a way of life for these early Franciscans, their mockery explicitly targeted established Christian forms and customs. Serious preaching, dignified ecclesiastical processions, and the privileged study of texts all came under regular comic fire from the early friars. Some, such as Brother Giles of Assisi (d. 1262) or Brother Juniper (d. 1258), performed parodies of clerical sermons in city squares, stripping themselves naked and clowning in the streets to disrupt gatherings of bishops and other prelates.[60]

Harnessing the popular comic appeal of both the *fabliaux* and the friars, Jacques de Vitry's text attempted to turn it toward the more traditional craft of preaching.[61] Several stories in Jacques's collection directly appropriated and modified *fabliaux* humor, although he often stripped the source material of its more salacious moments.[62] This was specifically because Jacques wanted his preaching humor to serve a strict function. As he explained in his prologue, the preacher needed to choose the timing and tone of his comic stories very carefully.

> So that they should not be upset by excessive grief, nor begin to be struck by excessive fatigue, sometimes [an audience] may be relieved by a number of delightful *exempla*. It is profitable to tell them fables, after which they should be awake to listen to serious and useful words. . . . But buffoonery, obscene words, and ugly speech should never come from the mouth of a preacher.[63]

Rather than treating laughter as any kind of manifestation of inner sanctity, as the "amusing miracles" of Thomas Becket had done, or as a way of opening up new questions about Christian belief, as the *fabliaux* arguably did, Jacques treated humor as a means to an end. And insofar as his humor was evangelical, this was not because it developed a sense of humility in the way early Franciscan humor had done. Instead, Jacques's religious humor was meant to be an evangelical tool, something adapted to "refresh" listeners for a more "serious" Christian message.

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con versione taliana a fronte e variazioni, ed. Marino Bigaroni (Assisi: Pubblicazioni della Biblioteca Franciscana Chiesa Nuova, 1992), chap. 27, p. 66–68.

[59]Jordan of Giano, *Chronica*, in Johannes Schlageter, "Die *Chronica* des Bruders Jordan von Giano: Einführung und Kritische Edition nach den Bisher Bekannten Handschriften," *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum*, 104 (2011): 33–63, at 33–35, 46, 57–58.

[60]For episodes like this involving Brother Juniper, see *Chronica XXIV generalium Ordinis minorum, Analecta Franciscana ad Historiam Fratrum Minorum Spectantia*, ed. Collegium S. Bonaventurae, vol. 3 (Florence: Quaracchi, 1897), 61. I have discussed this aspect of Franciscan humor further in Peter J. A. Jones, "Humility and Humiliation: The Transformation of Franciscan Humour, c. 1210–1310," *Cultural and Social History*, 15:2 (April 2018): 155–175.

[61]For a discussion of how thirteenth-century preachers adapted *fabliaux* tales, see Jeannine Horowitz and Sophia Menache, *L'Humour en chaire: Le Rire dans l'Eglise médiévale* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1994), esp. 185.

[62]For example, Jacques de Vitry, *Sermones*, 99 (sermon 237).

[63]Jacques de Vitry, *Sermones*, xlii–xliii: "Qui tamen ne nimio merore confundantur, vel nimia fatigatione torpere incipient, aliquando sunt quibusdam jocundis exemplis recreandi et expedit quod eis proponatur fabulosa, ut postmodum evigilent ad audiendum seria et utilia verba. . . . Scurrilia tamen aut obscena verba vel turpis sermo ex ore predicatoris non procedant."

This attitude became prevalent among the most popular Christian preachers. A typical example is the work of Thomas of Cantimpré (d. 1272), the Dominican preacher from Leuven. Thomas's exempla collection, the *Bonum universale de apibus* (ca. 1260s), makes a decisive case for using humor in sermons. In fact, the text is full of comic stories and shows priests and monks laughing at many points in positive ways.[64] Yet Thomas's preaching humor was ultimately guarded and functional. Quoting Seneca, he observed that laughter should be closely controlled. "Laughter is reprehensible if it is immoderate, childish, womanly, if it is broken out uselessly, or if it is provoked by other people's misfortunes. Your witticisms should be toothless, your jokes without frivolity, your laughter without cackling, your voice without shouting, and its progress without commotion."[65]

Texts like Thomas's can give us a sense of the change in attitudes to Christian laughter taking place in the 1200s. Yet the physical object of Jacques de Vitry's *Sermones Vulgares* itself, BL Harley MS 463, reveals a unique dimension of this shift that might otherwise be missed. As the latest generation of codicologists have shown us, individual manuscripts deserve to be considered as objects with their own agency.[66] Aside from articulating a level of learning and finance way out of the reach for the majority of the population, the handbook imposed a powerful visual order onto the comic ideas it communicated. Any spontaneity or anarchic comic potential were *de facto* absent from a carefully written book of comic stories such as this one. In its tiny Latin words, the "looser" laughter of comic miracles or vernacular public entertainments was visibly translated and regulated for serious didactic use.[67] Drawing from the titillating moralizing humor of the *fabliaux* and forestalling the disturbing self-mockery of the early Franciscans, Jacques's preaching text essentially formalized and codified evangelical playfulness. In its series of rigid columns of impenetrable words, laughing with sacred things was all the more tightly managed and regulated by clerical authority.

IV. Bruges Pilgrimage Badge, ca. 1350–1400

With the final object, we arrive at a point of sexualized religious parody. This pilgrimage badge (fig. 4) survives from Bruges and was circulated at some point in the second half of the fourteenth century. It is made of pewter, fits in the palm of the hand, and was discovered by chance in a riverbed.[68] The scene it depicts is of three humanoid penises carrying a crowned vulva on a bier. As anyone who handled this in the 1300s would

[64]On Thomas's more positive approach to laughter, see Jones, "Preaching Laughter in the Thirteenth Century," 180–181.

[65]Thomæ Cantipratani, *Bonum universale de apibus*, ed. George Colvener (Duaci: Ex typographia B. Belleri, 1627), 201 (2.13.5): "Reprehensibilis risus est, si immoderatus, si pueriliter effuses, si muliebriter, inutiliterque effractus, si alienis malis evocatus. Sales tui sine dente sint, ioci sine levitate, risus sine cachinno, vox sine clamore, incessus sine tumultu." Thomas draws from Seneca's *De quatuor virtutibus*.

[66]See, for example, the comments in Elena Pierazzo and Peter A. Stokes, "Putting the Text Back into Context: A Codicological Approach to Manuscript Transcription," in *Kodikologie und Paläographie im digitalen Zeitalter* 2 / *Codicology and Paleography in the Digital Age* 2, ed. Franz Fischer, Christiane Fritze, and Georg Vogeler, in collaboration with Bernhard Assmann, Malte Rehbein, and Patrick Sahle (Norderstedt: Books on Demand GmbH, 2010), 397–430, at 398.

[67]These arguments extend the views of Horowitz and Menache, *L'humour en chaire*.

[68]Jos Koldeweij, "'Shameless and Naked Images': Obscene Badges as Parodies of Popular Devotion," in *Art and Architecture of Late Medieval Pilgrimage in Northern Europe and the British Isles*, ed. Sarah Blick and Rita Tekippe (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 493–510.

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Fig. 4. Pilgrimage Badge. Van Beuningen Family Collection, Inventory Number 652.

have immediately recognized, this was meant to be an imitation of the procession of the Host at Easter. Mass-produced objects like this were being made all over Europe by the mid-thirteenth century, and they drew a skeptical response from some observers. Jean Gerson (d. 1429), a theologian who showed great concern for pastoral care, condemned them unequivocally, suggesting that the "shameless and naked images displayed for sale in churches and during church festivals" could expose young people to evil.[69] Modern cataloguers have shown a similar disdain, and, as the introduction to Nicola MacDonald's recent book has pointed out, badges of this kind have continuously been dismissed and marginalized as a "pornographic" embarrassment by modern historians.[70]

What exactly was this badge, with its anthropomorphic genitalia, trying to show or do? Historians and archaeologists have put forward conflicting views about the function of badges like this. Traditionally, scholars have seen pilgrimage souvenirs as serving a straightforward spiritual function. Megan Foster-Campbell, looking especially at images of items preserved in manuscripts, has argued that badges worked to preserve an

[69]Jean Gerson, *Opera Omnia*, vol. 3, *Exposulatio ad potestates publicas adversus corruptionem juventutis per lascivas imagines* (Antwerp: 1706), col. 291–292.

[70]Nicola MacDonaldson, "Introduction," in *Medieval Obscenities*, ed. Nicola MacDonald (York: University of York Press, 2014), 1–17, at 6–9.

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important "devotional memory" for the pilgrim.[71] Yet sexualized souvenirs have often been seen as having the apotropaic power of warding off evil spirits or bringing the wearer good luck.[72] The Bruges badge, as a sexualized representation of a solemn Christian theme, evidently falls between the two camps. Yet at the simple structural level of "inversion," it is impossible to escape the fact that the object intended to produce laughter. Taking the supposedly serious devotion of the Host procession, the badge "inverted" it. By transforming the ecclesiastical participants into genitalia, it effectively turned the "high" into the "low."[73]

But if this badge was meant to bring laughter, it is not clear who the target was intended to be. Again, no easy answer can be found in existing scholarship.[74] A simple explanation would be that the badge was meant to poke fun at a solemn Christian ritual. Along these lines, the scholar Malcolm Jones has suggested that the Bruges badge was an irreverent commentary on the Virgin.[75] At the other end of the spectrum, the literature professor Johan Winkelman has seen the same object as a moralizing piece of mockery, one intended to ridicule Venus and consequently the sin of lust.[76] Yet the badge might also have been targeted at particular individual sinners. A convincing theory has been offered by Sebastiaan Ostkamp, who has suggested that badges like this one could have been pinned to known adulterers as a way of publicly shaming them for their misdeeds.[77]

While these answers are compelling, they each depend in their own way on the premise that the badge was intended to be obscene. But this is perhaps to see the object too much through modern eyes. Given the power assigned to humor in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and taking seriously Martha Bayless's suggestion that comic works had the potential to open up new ways of seeing the faith, it might be more productive to think of the badge as an attempt to use humor as a unique approach to serious belief in itself.[78] That is, the badge may have been intended to articulate a devotional message precisely *through* the laughter it provoked. By seeing the genital parody of the Holy Blood procession in a laughable way, pilgrims were invited to glimpse an uncanny connection between the Christian pursuit of salvation and the lover's pursuit of sexual

[71]Megan H. Foster-Campbell, "Pilgrimage Through the Pages: Pilgrims' Badges in Late Devotional Manuscripts," in *Push Me, Pull You*, ed. Sarah Blick and Laura D. Gelfand, vol. 1, *Imaginative, Emotional, Physical, and Spatial Interaction in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 227–274.

[72]Malcolm Jones, "The Sexual and Secular Badges," in *Heilig en profaan*, ed. H. J. E. van Beuningen, A. M. Koldeweij, and D. Kicken, vol. 2, *1200 laatmiddeleeuwse insignes uit openbare en particuliere collecties*, (Cothen: Stichting Middeleeuwse Religieuze en Profane Insignes, 2001), 196–206.

[73]The obvious theoretical reference point for this type of comic incongruity is Bergson, *Le Rire*. For a more sophisticated perspective, drawing on Hegelian psychoanalysis, see Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2007), 23–40.

[74]A brief survey appears in Sherry C. M. Lindquist, "Introduction," in *The Meaning of Nudity in Medieval Art*, ed. Sherry C. M. Lindquist (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 1–46, at 20–22.

[75]Malcolm Jones, "The Late-Medieval Dutch Pilgrim Badges," in *Carnivalesque*, ed. Timothy Hyman and Roger Malbert (London: Hayward Gallery, 2000), 98–101. This is cited in Sebastiaan Ostkamp, "The World Upside Down. Secular Badges and the Iconography of the Late Medieval Period: Ordinary Pins with Multiple Meanings," *Journal of Archaeology in the Low Countries* 1, no. 2 (November 2009): 107–125, 118.

[76]Ostkamp, "The World Upside Down," 118.

[77]Ostkamp, "The World Upside Down," 123.

[78]Bayless, *Parody in the Middle Ages*, esp. 208–210.

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consummation.[79] This was not an unprecedented connection. Within the celebrated love allegory *Roman de la Rose* (completed ca. 1275), women's genitalia symbolized precisely this kind of unobtainable object of divine love.[80] And in Sheela na gigs, the carved images of women exposing exaggerated genitalia that appeared on rural church walls in northwestern Europe from the 1100s onward, we can observe a similarly grotesque comic articulation of something more profound. Although scholarly controversy remains about the meaning of these carvings, their ecclesiastical placement suggests a comparable connection between exaggerated sexuality and religious fulfilment.[81] Seen through this lens, the laughter evoked by the Bruges badge does not really appear as that of targeted mockery at all. Rather than being in opposition to the sacred, it seems to have been meant as a type of sacred thing in itself. Laughing at the badge potentially worked as an opening, leading those who enjoyed it to recognize something profound—the absurdity of lust or the sexualized drive of devotion—in the course of their own moral journey.

Importantly, this kind of laughter with sacred things gradually came to be more fully integrated into church buildings and endorsed by official ecclesiastical structures. In the early 1300s, we have the first comic scenes depicted in English stained glass windows, with an example at York Minster showing monkeys in a parody of a funeral procession.[82] It was also during this period that the first lewd misericords appeared in English churches. The earliest misericords that we know of, such as those produced at Exeter Cathedral (ca. 1220–1260), had been not at all comic in form. While they had featured an array of weird and wonderful creatures, including one or two laughing grotesques, their scenes contained no elements of farce or satire. But all this was changing by the middle decades of the 1300s. The misericords produced at Tewkesbury Abbey (ca. 1330–1340), Ely Cathedral (ca. 1340), and Hereford Cathedral (ca. 1340–1355) all showed farcical scenes that could have come directly from the *fabliaux*.[83] Other misericords, such as those at Saint Botolph's Church in Boston, Lincolnshire (ca. 1350–1400), showed absurd parodies of ecclesiastical life, with an ox preaching a sermon to a group of hens (SB05), a clerical master beating his students with a birch (NB02), and a bear playing a church organ (NH02).[84] In these scenes, the comic logic of provocative folk tales was finding its way right into the heart of the Christian devotional space.

Naturally, it is possible to see the Bruges badge, in the light of these misericords, as operating a similar appropriation of *fabliaux* humor. Like the preaching handbooks of

[79]For a discussion of humor as a way of creating productive philosophical connections between disparate subjects, see Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, esp. 111–126.

[80]Gary Waller, *The Virgin Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern English Literature and Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 35–37.

[81]Barbara Freitag, *Sheela-na-gigs: Unravelling an Enigma* (London: Routledge, 2004), 23–46. See also Eamonn Kelly, "Irish Sheela-na-gigs and Related Figures," in *Medieval Obscenities*, ed. by Nicola MacDonald (York: University of York Press, 2014), 124–137.

[82]Paul Hardwick, "The Monkeys' Funeral in the Pilgrimage Window, York Minster," *Art History* 23, no. 2 (June 2000): 290–299.

[83]Betsy Chunko-Dominguez, *English Gothic Misericord Carvings: History from the Bottom Up* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 35–37.

[84]These are the identifying codes given at "The Misericords and history of the Boston Stump, St Botolph's," *Misericords* (website), accessed July 2019, http://www.misericords.co.uk/boston_stump.html. For details of the Saint Botolph's misericords, see Christa Grössinger, *The World Upside-Down: English Misericords* (London: Harvey Miller, 1997), 102.

the second half of the thirteenth century, the badge directed the anarchic moralization of popular comic tales toward a more solemn form. But it is important to recognize how the specific practical uses of this object took its humor to another register. More than any preaching text or misericord, the badge encouraged people to participate individually in religious humor. By owning this object and wearing it publicly, the pilgrims effectively became the individual agents of Christian laughter themselves. Unlike the passive observers of misericords, stained glass windows, or sermons, they were empowered to personally provoke laughter and to be on the inside of the joke as they spread these "charismatic objects" back throughout the pilgrimage network.[85]

The price for this further investment, however, was that laughing with Christian topics was coming to be regulated in new ways. Witnessing the manufacturing and mass production of ecclesiastical humor, the clerics who permitted (or even sold) these badges were essentially managing and directing their own critique. The penises on this badge may be ridiculous, like the dozens of penises given to the husband in "Saint Martin's Four Wishes." But in that particular *fabliau* tale the phalluses were essentially a comic excess or an eruption of the obscene.[86] In this badge, by contrast, the penises carried a tight symbolic meaning. Behind the smokescreen of laughter, the logic of the parody seemed to substitute sexual desire with Christian desire, pointing those who laughed with the object to consider the connections between lust and love of God. Whether we see the badge as evoking fecundity and productivity, as communicating ideals of divine love, or as representing some kind of spiritual fulfillment, the effect was therefore the same: it suggested that something more serious should lie behind the surface pleasure of the badge's humor. The pilgrim could laugh and share the joke, but in doing so they were locking themselves into the sense that there was a practical significance when they laughed with sacred things.

V. Conclusion

By discussing the different modes of comic play at work in these four objects, I hope to have expanded our sense of how laughter could work against, at, with, and through sacred things in medieval Europe. While it may be that no straightforward historical narrative presents itself, two conflicting trends in Christian laughter do emerge. On the one hand, I have outlined a contrast between the explicit prohibition and the open encouragement of laughter. Whereas laughing with Christian themes and objects was something explicitly condemned in the Cloisters Cross, in the other objects we find laughter being accepted, encouraged, and even sold as a part of the Christian experience. At the heart of this tension, I have argued, was another trend: a clerical impulse to harness the revelatory and pedagogical potential of humor to the service of maintaining orthodoxy. While laughter may have moved between the sidelines and the center stage of mainstream Christian experience, appearing as a core capacity in the lives of saints, a useful tool in the work of preachers, and a way of leading pilgrims on a deeper moral journey, it arguably became tamed and regulated in the process.

[85]Margrete Figenschou Simonsen, "Medieval Pilgrim Badges: Souvenirs or Valuable Charismatic Objects?," in *Charismatic Objects: From Roman Times to the Middle Ages*, ed. Marianne Vedeler, Ingunn Marit Røstad, Siv Kristoffersen, and Ann Zanette Tsigaridas Glørstad (Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk, 2018), 169–196.

[86]This view is explored in Thomas D. Cooke, "Pornography, the Comic Spirit, and the Fabliaux," in *The Humor of the Fabliaux: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Thomas Darlington Cooke and Benjamin L. Honeycutt (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1974), 137–162.

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Central to this brief history have been the objects themselves. Building on the important theoretical positions of Kellie Robertson, Caroline Walker Bynum, Ittai Weinryb, Elina Gertsman, and others, I have considered how these materials shaped the emotional and devotional experiences of ordinary Christians, creating unique frames for understanding the permissibility of Christian laughter. With the cross, as I have suggested, laughter was rendered as abject by the visual and symbolic order of the artwork. With the ampulla, the object embodied emerging views of the revelatory nature of saintly laughter. Through its comic repositioning, it demonstrated how laughter could reveal a hidden potential in sacred objects while nevertheless preserving their integrity and solemnity. With the preaching handbook, it became apparent that religious laughter was coming to be owned and managed by members of a clerical elite, one capable of handling a codex and transmitting its Latin text into the vernacular. And finally, the pilgrimage badge made clear how ordinary people, by wearing something like this, were becoming individual agents of Christian laughter. By sharing this artefact publicly, these pilgrims effectively demonstrated an emerging inseparability between laughter with and devotion toward Christian objects.

Clearly, the comic performance of these four artefacts alone cannot speak for all of the Christian humor of the High Middle Ages. At the fringes of my analysis have been forms of laughter with sacred things—notably, the disturbing humor of early Franciscan preachers or the moralizing comedy of the *fabliaux*—that more properly challenged, provoked, and unsettled onlookers. Importantly, these less regulated forms had their own distinct comic effects. When medieval audiences laughed at *fabliaux* or Franciscan clowning, they were encouraged to engage in independent reflections on the ethics of the faith. While listening to preaching about humility could be instructive, laughing at friars rolling naked in the mud arguably opened a far more dramatic path into the issue that individuals needed to interpret for themselves. My argument, however, is that these more radical comic forms were liable to be subjected to regulation and reduction, too. In the examples that I have shown, forms of potentially anarchic laughter with sacred things were often codified into the frame of miracle collections, squeezed to fit the rhythms and lexicon of preaching, or else commodified as souvenirs for pilgrims. Rather than any sweeping account of how religious laughter changed, I have perhaps instead described components of the particular medieval clerical engine that turned potentially anarchic laughter into more functional forms of Christian humor.

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