SCENES IN AN IVORY GARDEN

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The scenes on a small ivory pedestal of the early sixteenth century, in the exhibition of recent accessions at The Cloisters, present a fascinating problem. The characters involved are a lady, a gentleman, and a fool. The action takes place in a garden surrounded by a wattle fence with a gate. Garden scenes in which a lady and gentleman chat or enjoy the pastimes of medieval life often decorate objects made for secular use and appear in manuscripts, prints, and drawings, but the drama inherent in the scenes carved on the sides of the pedestal makes it tempting to give a more specific interpretation.

On one side the gentleman holds a ring, and the lady a pomegranate; between them is a fountain, behind which a fool is standing. Behind the lady is an ape with collar and chain, eating a pomegranate from a basket in front of him, and behind the gentleman is a hound, also with collar and chain. On the other side of the pedestal the man brandishes his sword as the lady turns away, holding her hand to her head. The fool stands between them. With the lady is now a lap dog, and behind the man a ferocious unchained animal.

Gone is the traditional courtly elegance that characterized much of the ivory carving of the earlier Middle Ages; the interest is no longer in simple narration but in human drama. The figures, in such high relief that they are almost free-standing, are carved with a great deal of action and realism. The faces express convincing individuality and varying emotions, and the details of the costumes are done with care. The lady and gentleman wear the style of dress fashionable in the beginning of the sixteenth century, while the fool wears the traditional medieval jester’s habit, his hood adorned with ass’s ears and coxcomb, and in his hand the “marotte,” or “bauble,” a staff with a replica of the jester’s own hooded head on the top.

The lady and the fool are obviously the same people in the two scenes, but some doubt arises whether the man is the same. The costumes are not identical, and the faces are of no help as the head of the man with the ring is not the original but was taken from another medieval ivory at some later date. If there are two men the first thought that comes to mind is a literal interpretation: the jester discovers the unfaithful wife with her lover and then mimics his master, the betrayed and wrathful husband, by brandishing his jester’s staff. The vicissitudes of marriage have always had popular appeal, and the people of the Middle Ages were just as much interested in the subject as people of today. The unfaithful wife appears in many medieval tales: sometimes she is caught and “repudiated with every loss of honor,” and sometimes she is even punished by laws demanding imprisonment or death. In other cases she is forgiven. On occasion she is too clever for her husband, and by one ruse or another the lover who may be concealed under the bed or in the hall manages to escape unseen.

The same sort of plot figures in the comic dramas of the period. One such play is described...
as “a new farce, very gay and full of good humor for four characters”—the husband, the wife, the lover, and the “badin,” a sort of good-natured joker or jester. The husband desires a servant, and the “badin” who happens to be passing by is hired for six francs a year. The lover arrives while the husband is away and tries to get rid of the “badin” by sending him on an errand, but the rogue pretends to misunderstand and keeps coming back for further explanation. Finally the husband returns and discovers what is going on; the lover is forced to flee, and blows rain on the wife.

The unfaithful wife is also discussed in one of the most popular books of the Gothic period, the Roman de la Rose, a long allegorical poem written in the thirteenth century but still popular enough at the end of the Middle Ages to have twenty-one editions between 1480 and 1538. Not only does the unfaithful wife appear but also the theme of courtship versus marriage, the problems created by an extravagant wife or a mother-in-law, and the foolishness of the jealous husband. Since the man on one side of the Cloisters pedestal holds a ring it is more likely that he is the suitor rather than the lover and that only one man is involved in the two scenes. In this case the scenes could illustrate the contrast between courtship and marriage and the words of the Roman de la Rose on the subject would apply. The suitor “would a-vow him for the lady’s bounden servitor but after marriage doth declare his lordship.... His only thought was to obey her every wish in every way, but when they’re once by wedlock tied this courtesy is cast aside.” According to the faithful friend who is counseling the lover a man is foolish to marry a woman who is jealous is just as foolish.

The lover is advised that the wife who is beaten will not be more dutiful but instead will certainly wish her spouse “in far Roumania or at
The possibility of symbolism in the scenes must be seriously considered. The popularity of the Roman de la Rose is an indication of the growing interest at the end of the Middle Ages in secular allegories. Episodes of everyday life in many tales and fables had moral interpretations, and there were allegorical characters in many of the comic dramas. The prominent part played by the fool in both scenes on the pedestal is particularly interesting, for at just about the time the pedestal was carved the fool was at the height of his popularity as a symbol of folly.

"Infinite is the number of fools" was the motto of the Infanterie Dijonnaise, a company that banded together to give farces called "sotties" in which all the world obeyed the laws of folly, and Dijon was only one of the many towns in France where such "joyous societies" thrived. All the characters, king and pope, bishop and lawyer, lord and lady, appeared as fools wearing the jester's habit and were presided over by a lady jester, Mère Folle. More serious works had titles like The Order of Fools, The Ship of Fools, and The Praise of Folly. The best known of the three today is undoubtedly Erasmus's Praise of Folly. Erasmus presents Folly as a lady, a character not unlike Mère Folle, who delivers an eulogy on herself as ruling a world where everyone obeys her laws. In the same strain a fifteenth-century print shows a lady mounted on an ass with a cuckoo on her wrist; in front of her is a group of fools and behind her a band of apes. The words on the scroll say that with her hunting bird she catches both apes and fools.

The Ship of Fools was the most popular work on fools in the late Middle Ages. It was written by a German lawyer, Sebastian Brant, and was first published in 1494. The 112 fools who sail on Brant's imaginary boat are shown in the illustrations dressed as usual in the jester's habit as they carry out their various follies. Numerous editions were published in Germany, with a few additions made to the original. Another author wrote an imitation with six more boats for female fools. By the early sixteenth century Brant's book had been translated into every language familiar in Western Europe. It first appeared in England in 1509 as "The Shyp of folys of the worlde . . . translated . . . out of Laten, Frenche and Doche into Englyssse tonge" by Alexander Barclay, who adapted and expanded the original, adding special English fools who are not included in any continental category. Brant and Barclay both list fools who are also sinners, such as the slothful, avaricious, or proud, as well as the lesser and more familiar fools: "the old folys . . . the longer they lyve the more ar gyven to foly, the folys who do to moche spekynge or bablynge, the folys whom Venus caught hath in hyr net a snare, the card players and dysers, and hym that is Jelous over his wyfe." The jealous husband does not beat his wife as in the Roman de la Rose but "watcheth hir wayes without cause." Brant and Barclay agree that one boat would not be large...
enough to carry all the fools of their acquaintance, for as Barclay puts it in his prologue: “if all these Foles were brought into one Barge the bote shulde synke so sore shulde be the charge.”

A statuette with a base very much like the one at The Cloisters, formerly in the Figdor collection in Vienna, has been catalogued, with ours, in Les Ivoires gothiques français by Raymond Koechlin. This base has the same fence and similar animals; on one side a man draws his sword, on the other a fool looks up to the statuette, a nude woman, with an elaborate headdress and veil and a flower, standing back to back with a skeleton. Camille Enlart (Société des Antiquaires de France, Mémoires, series 7, vol. 7) relates this piece to a woodcut of Hercules’s dream in The Ship of Fools. This print of Hercules’s choice between two women representing two ways of life does not appear in Brant’s first edition but does figure in the later European versions. In Barclay’s book the woodcut illustrates the “Concertacion or stryngynge between Vertue and Voluptuosyte. . . . Whyle Hercules lay slepynge (as I rede) two wayes he sawe full of diffyculte, the one of pleasour . . . the other of vertue.” The nude young lady holding a veil and flower, with a skeleton behind her, is obviously “Voluptuosyte,” while “Vertue” is the fully clothed, stern, elderly woman with a distaff, who stands at the top of a stony path.

The theme of Hercules’s choice between the hard way and the easy way appeared first in Xenophon in the fourth century B.C. Hercules in his youth, before he set out on his labors, met two women, one offering him the difficult way of virtue, the other the pleasant path of dalliance. Hercules decided on the way of virtue. This allegory appealed to later writers in both the classical and the Christian periods. Brant used it, along with other biblical and classical prototypes, to strengthen his descriptions of various fools. In keeping with the moralistic tendencies of his period he also pointed out that the easy way was the way of death.

Skeletons may seem startling today, but they were the familiar images of death in the late Middle Ages. To give more force to the moral lessons set forth in fables and allegories, skeletons were used as constant reminders that death was inevitable. They appear ominously in scenes of lovers or suddenly confront elegantly dressed young knights or ladies. A skeleton associated with a nude young woman is one of the most usual illustrations of the fact that death is the end of human beauty and worldly pleasures. Death was also the universal ruler whom no one could escape, and in many versions of the “danse macabre” the same people who obeyed the laws of Folly, whether king, queen, bishop, or abbess, are led by a skeleton in the dance of death. An example of this taste for the macabre is found in a group of rosary beads with skulls or the upper parts of skeletons carved back to back with busts of young men, women, or married couples.

The figures on some of these rosary beads are related in style to those on the pedestals and the statuette and like them were carved in Flanders or northern France at the beginning of the sixteenth century, when the demand of earlier centuries for ivories made for personal religious or secular use had largely disappeared. The number of ivories carved then was small compared to that of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Among those in existence today from this
late period the two pedestals seem to be unique.

It is probable that the Cloisters pedestal once held a statuette related in subject to that of the scenes on it. The intensity of the facial expressions of the figures and their dramatic gestures and attitudes give the impression that they are characters playing their parts on the medieval stage, and the scenes they are performing surely have a symbolic meaning. If the fool is present as the symbol of human folly, the animals may also stand for human qualities. The dog usually expressed fidelity, and the ape represented man’s lower nature, but both had various other meanings. Their symbolism seems to apply to the figures beside which they are shown. At any rate, the scenes were intended to illustrate a moral lesson, a lesson somehow concerned with worldly love and marriage.

*Engraving of a lady going hunting on an ass with a cuckoo on her wrist, apes on a leash, and a group of fools. The scroll says that she catches both apes and fools. German, XV century*