FROG IN THE MIDDLE

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One of the most fascinating features of the Hours of Jeanne d’Évreux by the illuminator Jean Pucelle is the myriad of marginal figures that decorate the pages. Strewn about the borders of each folio are lively minuscule figures disporting themselves in every way imaginable. They serve as line endings, decorate the initials, fill the lower margins of the pages on all but ten of the 209 folios. Some play games, some tilt, a woman tries to spin while a cat below plays with her spindle, a girl washes her hair, and throughout the entire manuscript a dog and a rabbit play continual games, chasing and teasing one another. The majority of the figures are monstrous and dissolve into dragons, half-chickens, or footless beings. Some are parodies, such as the “valiant” soldier who stalks a rabbit with his sword and shield, and others gibe at doctors, priests, hunters, and musicians.

The interpretation of these frivolous drolleries has often been a matter of conjecture. It is possible to recognize meaningful scenes here and there in the margins, which can sometimes be related to the context and sometimes not. Léopold Delisle, who first published the manuscript, felt that the marginalia were merely to divert and amuse the reader at prayers, but other scholars have sought a meaning for each of the subjects and a program of some iconographic sort for the entire series. This seems a strange turn of mind for those versed in the medieval field, for there is hardly a Gothic building where the gargoyles or corbels can be said to form a coherent program or a set of choir stalls where the misericords fall into iconographic order. There was a widely understood repertoire of comic and monstrous elements on which an artist of the period could draw, and he varied and reinterpreted them endlessly, contrasting them frequently with the serious programs of miniature cycles or stained-glass windows.

The examination of the context of a single marginal subject in the Hours of Jeanne d’Évreux and in several contemporary manuscripts may serve to show whether there was any necessary relationship between marginalia and the serious program of miniatures and text. For example, there appears on the famous Annunciation folio of the Hours of Jeanne d’Évreux (p. 271), in the area below the text, the bas de page, a scene showing a young man seated on a cushion, around whom dance two young women and a second youth. The figures fill nearly the entire width of the tiny page, though there is room for

Detail of a silver and enamel burette, or altar cruets, in Copenhagen, with a scene representing the game of frog in the middle. French (Paris), made in 1333

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a miniature oak on the right and a pillar of leaves on each side as a frame. In the leaves on the right one may discern a monkey and a squirrel, and the head of a rabbit pokes out of its burrow below the foot of the left-hand girl. The scene has been variously interpreted, most recently as an allegory of sloth, because the youth is seated on a cushion.2

There is no apparent relation between this marginal scene and the other elements on the page. The page begins the Hours of the Virgin with the text “Domine labia mea aperies,” and its chief decoration consists of the famous miniature of the Annunciation. From the miniature have overflowed into the margins a number of musical angels, and below in the initial D is a kneeling royal figure, whose identity has been contested but who is probably the queen, Jeanne d’Évreux herself, with her lap dog at her feet and her major domo behind her. In the bow of the initial is a bearded monster.

There is a second manuscript in which a very similar scene appears in the lower margin of the Annunciation page. This is the Book of Hours of Joan II of Navarre, which was produced in the atelier of Jean Pucelle and can be dated from the arms of its owner between the years 1328 and 1343. Although the whereabouts of the manuscript is now unknown, one can see from a partial reproduction3 that it not only follows the program of the Hours of Jeanne d’Évreux but also even re-uses many of the cartoons. The Navarre manuscript is of considerably lesser quality than the Hours of Jeanne d’Évreux, with many features that show it to be a workshop production—for instance, the rectangularly framed pages with their schematized bird-and-leaf decoration, so typical of Paris at the period. The use of the same bas de page with the Annunciation miniature does, however, make it worth while to consider the interrelationship between the two scenes.

The miniature of the Annunciation in the Navarre Hours is clearly based on that in the Évreux manuscript and, though the charming border angels have been omitted, the initial similarly shows a young queen in prayer, though it has been embellished by the addition of a statue of the Virgin and Child on an altar. In the bas de page is a seated youth, his legs crossed tailor fashion, who forms the pivot of a group of four boys and girls who posture and dance about him. Although the attitudes of the youths are different and the seated figure sits on the ground rather than on a cushion, the point of departure for this element, no less than for those already noted, must have been the Annunciation page of the Hours of Jeanne d’Évreux.

The diversion which arouses the young company in these scenes can readily be identified as the game of frog in the middle (la grenouille). This was a typical medieval game in which punching, slapping, and pulling hair were considered sport. The person who was “it,” the frog, sat on the ground with his legs crossed or sat on a base. The other players gamboled about him, buffeting him or pulling his hair, and in order to escape from his predicament, he had to catch one of them without uncrossing his legs or getting up. Because the frog could not move from his base, the others had ample opportunity to dance about and gesture towards him, trying to pretend that they were about to deliver blows or come within range of being caught. The game somewhat resembles two others in the placement of the figures and is at times hard to distinguish from them. Both are called hot cockles in English, though they are differentiated in French. One, la main chaude, is represented frequently on ivories and in manuscript marginalia. The central player in this game sits or kneels, hiding his head in another’s lap and placing one hand behind his back. The hand is struck by one of the party, and the victim must identify his assailant. In the other game of hot cockles, hautes coquilles in French, the head of a player is again hidden in a lap and a buffet is given by one of the group, who must be identified or the process is repeated. In representations of all three games the players dance and prance about the central figure, executing various capers and at times appearing like a corps de ballet.

Frog in the middle seems to have been most popular, or at least most frequently represented,

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Annunciation pages from the Hours of Jeanne d'Évreux and Joan II of Navarre (workshop of Pucelle). In each the game of frog in the middle is the "bas de page."
from the end of the thirteenth century to the middle of the fourteenth. The date of the Hours of Jeanne d’Évreux, 1325-1328, falls in the middle of this period. Because of the antics of the players the game gave the illuminator ample opportunity for variety, and we see in the numerous representations of it in manuscripts that different moments have been picked. In the Chansonner de Paris, a musical manuscript of the late thirteenth century (Montpellier, Ms. 196, fol. 88), the seated figure is apparently counting with his eyes closed at the beginning of the game. In the Navarre Hours a girl is pulling the hair of the seated figure, and in the Hours of Jeanne d’Évreux the frog seems dejected, perhaps from the number of buffets he has received.

An elaborate representation of the game appears in a Psalter and Hours in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris (Latin 14284, fol. 63). Here the central figure of interest for the artist seems to have been the player in a student’s cap who stands on one foot and bends over in apparent unconcern to touch the frog’s shoulders. The richly illustrated Romance of Alexander in the Bodleian Library, Oxford (M. 264), finished in Bruges in 1338, has no less than four representations among its many games. Once it is played by girls (fol. 97v) and three times by varying numbers of boys (fol. 65, 130v, and 168). It occurs twice in a Book of Hours in Trinity College, Cambridge (Ms. B 11.22, fol. 24 and 144), and intermixed with religious and grotesque marginal subjects in four other Hours—in the British Museum (Stowe 17, fol. 142v), Nancy (Ms. 249, fol. 105), Princeton University (Ms. 4418, fol. 181), and Walters Art Gallery (Ms. 109, fol. 53). In two other types of books frog in the middle also appears in the margins; one is the Metz Pontifical in the Fitzwilliam Museum (Ms. 298, fol. 98) and the other the Breviary of Marguerite de Bar in the British Museum (Yates Thompson 8, fol. 222v). These manuscripts vary considerably in origin and style, three being Parisian and the rest from different areas of North France and Flanders. In every one the game of frog in the middle appears with a different text and bears no relation to an Annunciation scene.4

Ivory diptych with youths playing hot cockles, left, and frog in the middle. French (Paris), late xiv century

In other media too the game appears a number of times. There are four ivories depicting the subject, one dated by Koechlin5 in the early fourteenth century and the remaining three in the latter half. In three cases, the scene decorates half of a writing tablet, the other valve of which depicts the game of hautes coquilles (Koechlin nos. 1171, 1173, 1176). In the fourth case it has been combined with a scene of the castle of love (Koechlin no. 1177). In the illustrated Louvre example the seated player turns toward the young lady at his right as if to seize her. A more modest representation is seen on an exquisite enameled burette or altar cruet in Copenhagen (p. 269).6 This bears the Paris mark and dates from the year 1333. Above an arcade with scenes from the story of the Prodigal Son are smaller compartments containing games, and on the lid, foot, and handle are typical “marginal” monsters. The games represented are kickfoot, hockey, blind man’s buff, whipping a top, stilts, and frog in the middle. The latter is played by three youths, and fills the compartment above the feast of the fatted calf.

In all of the representations mentioned, and there are probably many more to be discovered, it seems apparent that the game had no part in a specific program, and that it was used variously, as choice or chance dictated, in a songbook below twenty-two motets, in a romance, or a Book of Hours. It appears among other games, as in the Romance of Alexander and on the burette, or as an isolated marginal subject inserted among religious subjects (Princeton Hours), or among drolleries (British Museum, Stowe 17). Its position, therefore, as the bas de page beneath the Annunciations in the Hours of Jeanne d’Évreux and Joan of Navarre depends on the particular interrelation of the two manuscripts rather than on a significant meaning of the game itself or a relation to the other elements with which it appears.

The evidence afforded by the game of frog in the middle and the numerous fantastic figures,

5 Raymond Koechlin, Les Ivoires gothiques français, Paris (Picard), 1924.
M. Mackeprang, Vases sacrés émaillés d’origine française du 14e siècle, Copenhagen, 1921.
monsters, and drolleries of the Pucelle Hours show that the major controlling factor in their invention and placement was the fancy of the artist. The dictates of any imagination are subject to suggestive material, and thus one finds with Pucelle that, while there is no program of marginal decoration, there are noticeable relationships between marginalia and various elements within the Hours of Jeanne d’Evreux. The most obvious point of departure is the miniature cycle of the manuscript. Beneath the Adoration of the Magi, for instance (p. 285), one sees in the initial the groom of the three kings holding their horses and in the lower margin the Massacre of the Innocents, which was a contemporary event. The miniature of the Flight into Egypt is also related to its *bas de page*, which shows two events from the Apocryphal Gospels, the idols falling from their pillars and the miracle of the wheat field. Other miniatures have their subjects extended into the margins, such as the Annunciation to the Shepherds (p. 279), where the margin is filled with shepherds looking up at the angel and blowing joyfully on their pipes, or the Resurrection, where the soldiers at the tomb sleep in the border of the page (p. 289).

Another source for the artist was a drawing already completed on an earlier folio of the manuscript or the cartoon or sketchbook which recorded such a figure. The first soldier in the miracle of the wheat field, for example, (p. 290), who extends his finger to point to the wheat, is given a monster’s tail and is used as a line ending on folio 80. This figure was twice re-used in other manuscripts from the Pucelle atelier, once in the similar *bas de page* in the Hours of Joan of Navarre, and again, in reversed form, as the right-hand soldier in the betrayal scene from the Hours of Yolande de Flandre (British Museum, Yates Thompson 27, fol. 13v). There are numerous instances of this re-use of earlier drawings in the manuscript, where the facile pen of the artist has transformed a helmet into a bucket, a sword into a bone, or a buckler into a puppy dog.

The text, normally written before the illumination was completed, was also suggestive in

Marginal figures from the *Hours of Jeanne d’Évreux*: a monster with a sling, probably suggested by its position opposite a *psalm* of David, and a tailed soldier whose helmet is a bucket several instances. On folio 40v there appear at the top of the page in rubrics the words *Psalmus David* and on the opposite page in the upper margin Jean Pucelle has drawn the figure of a monster man with a sling, recalling the familiar slaying of Goliath. In another instance his own cartoons or the calendar of another manuscript, or perhaps even the weather, inspired a group of figures who perform the various calendar occupations of flailing, raking, and winnowing. The upper figure on folio 32 calmly flails the words of the text instead of the wheat of August. Scenes of daily life are numerous, and it seems unnecessary to seek their origin outside the life and observations of the illuminator.

A few of the marginal subjects are perennials from well-known literary or artistic sources. We have already noted the parody of valor with the soldier and the rabbit, a scene familiar from the sculpture of Notre Dame and Amiens. Any direct relation to the other illustrations on its page is again doubtful since it appears beneath the miniature of the Visitation and a drollery of the ape and the apple (or nut), which has many
meanings concerned with original sin. The bas de page shows a group of beggars dancing. This subject, incidentally, seems to have inspired a similar one in the Hours of Joan of Navarre, which is placed beneath the miniature of the Annunciation to the Shepherds, again reinforcing the lack of programmatic relationship of the marginalia. Other subjects drawn from literature are rare in the Hours of Jeanne d’Évreux. A fox stealing a chicken might refer to the Roman de Reynard, and there is a series of animals which may come from a bestiary, including a mermaid, a unicorn, a cat and mouse, and an elephant. The initial S on folio 27v is an elegant swan with wooden sides, a sail, and a rudder, and may be a reference to the Knight of the Swan Boat. In one margin is a woman running off with a man’s pants. This illustrates a proverb which was pop-


8 Waer de vrou d’overhand heeft en draecht de brouck, daer is dat Jan de man leeft; naer advys van den douck.

lar in many countries and is carved on corbels and misericords in England, France, and Flanders. The Flemish version of the proverb is preserved on a print of the subject by Pieter Brueghel, and can be freely translated: “Where the woman wears the pants and holds the upper hand, there John must always dance to the tune of her command.”

By far the majority of the figures in the manuscript are tiny biped monsters and men with tails who entertain themselves at the occupations and under the guises of the various classes. They twist and turn, fight and love in infinite variety, maintaining the highest artistic level throughout. They not only helped to subdivide and punctuate the text and to keep the reader’s eye roving over the pages, but they also made the Book of Hours an unusually rich work of art, fit for the queen of Charles le Bel. They are the wonderful products of a Gothic imagination and are indeed, in Delisle’s words, “les miniscules hors d’oeuvre.”