Le Singe as le Signe
Serious Monkey Business in Robert of Sicily

Joan Baker

A Synopsis of the Middle English romance of Robert of Sicily

King Robert, the young “flower of Sicily,” peerless in every respect, attends vespers on St. John’s Eve. After hearing the Magnificat, he demands that a clerk translate the deposuit potentae. The clerk’s gloss — that God’s might is such that he may make the high low and the low high in the twinkling of an eye — elicits a defiant response from the arrogant king who is immediately transformed into an unsightly, ill-clothed churl while an angel in his former likeness has assumed his throne. Despite repeated assertions of his identity, he suffers the rebuke of his porter and the indignity of being knocked about and thrown in a puddle. Eventually Robert is received at court by the Angel-king who appoints him court fool and orders that he be shorn like a friar and companioned to an ape who is dressed like himself. Reduced to eating and sleeping with the hounds, he resorts to wandering about eating roots and grass, his suffering a sharp contrast to the peace and harmony of the Angel’s reign. The Angel’s impending reunion in Rome with Robert’s brothers, the Pope and the Emperor of Aleman, represents Robert’s last hope, but he and his ape are clad in fox tails for the occasion. He plunges into despair when his own splendidly arrayed brothers fail to recognize him. At this point, Robert recalls how closely his plight resembles that of Nebuchadnezzar. Remembering also the divine mercy of the ancient tyrant’s redemption, Robert acknowledges in prayers to the Blessed Virgin that he too has been


The Profane Arts / les arts profanes

guilty of pride. To the angel’s repeated, taunting question “What art thou?” Robert now responds that he is, indeed, but a fool. In the privacy of the royal chamber, the Angel reveals that he has been sent to punish Robert’s pride. A reformed Robert is restored to his throne as a God-fearing and just king. Before his death, he records his story in Rome as an exemplum both of pride and of God’s might and mercy.

Prologue

In a recent article, Martin Walsh aptly observes that in this Middle English romance on the theme of the Proud Prince Humiliated, the protagonist King Robert of Sicily becomes his own fool, but only, I would add, due to the divine and not-so-divine intervention of some very significant “others.” Professor Walsh finds the theatricality of the work remarkable (the narrative is structured as a sequence of dramatic vignettes) and has gone so far as to confirm his assumption by directing performances by the University of Michigan Harlotry Players during 1995 at the University of Michigan and at a medieval conference at Ohio State and Kalamazoo.

As a means of opening our discussion, I would like to speculate (hypothetically, in this case) about the staging of Robert of Sicily. One of the actors would undoubtedly be assigned to play Robert’s ape counselor and, like Robert, be costumed as the court fool, the position to which the former king has been relegated by the Angel who has usurped his throne. The actor playing the ape-counselor would, I imagine, be directed to follow the fallen Robert, silently imitating or mocking his every move and gesture, thereby heightening his humiliation. It is equally probable that our ape would be instructed to model for Robert the artificial, exhibitionist behavior now expected of him no less than the Angel-king must model the ideal, God fearing monarch.

Casting the parts would be no small problem, for the Angel must be Robert’s look-alike in order to be a convincing substitute while our


3 Ibid. pp. 46n 15.
ape, on the other hand, must struggle unsuccessfully to imitate his human alter-ego.

I emphasize the ape's performative nature in order to animate his role for the purpose of demonstrating how essential the ape is to the poem's meaning — as much, if not more, in earnest than in jest. The ape's composite, hybrid nature, its human similitude, provides the basis for the paradoxical "otherness" for which it is reviled. Taken together, the "high" similitude and "low" alterity function symbolically to effect both the prince's fall and his redemption.

The Ape as a singe

Michael Camille, who perhaps more than anyone else appreciates "babuni" on the edge, puts my argument in simian terms: the "ape is always a signe, a sign, dissimulating something else", and therefore has the unique capacity in "its distortion of the human" to point out our protagonist's "all too human sin". But it is by the same singe, he reminds us, that the very models that have been opposed or inverted are reinstated. Not only are these models or institutions that have been reinstated, which I take to mean in the sense of "affirmed," they are, I would argue with respect to the romance at hand, corrected and reformed, if not in actual, then in imagined social existence.

As both mimic and model, the ape represents a grotesque caricature of the proud prince as the fool who has "said in his heart: There is no God". The fact that Robert's transgression and humiliation are precipitated by and patterned on the depositi potentates of the Magnificat "He hath put down the mighty from their seat and exalted the humble", appears consistent with early notions of the grotesque as "the defining negative of the transcendentally

---


5 Psalm 52.


7 Biblical quotations are from the Douay-Rheims translation of the Vulgate (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1914).

exalted". In the popular winter festival of the Feast of Fools, this verse was a favorite among the lower clergy who were limited in repeating it, a fact that perhaps accounts for the relish with which the clerk glosses the text for King Robert in the poem.

We notice, however, that Robert's denial of this gloss and his subsequent transformation occur during the midsummer festival of St. John the Baptist, not the Christmas Feast of Fools. Sandra Billington explains that the "lowest in society were celebrated at the lowest seasonal point, in contrast with the emphasis on proud kings at midsummer," Robert of Sicily conflates the two, playing out in the low season the depositi potentates he has defied in the high. What we must keep in mind is that in the carnivalesque, any reversal is temporary: the mock king is back in his usual business when the party is over. In Robert of Sicily, it is the legitimate ruler, a king renowned for courage, honor, and military conquests, who is forced off the throne by an angel usurper. Robert's humiliation cuts far deeper than the subversive parody of the court fool not the least because his suffering, repentance, and ultimate restoration to the throne are invested with political as well as spiritual significance.

Students of medieval popular literature are indebted to Michael Camille for making a discussion of marginal critics relevant to the text occupying center page and equally so to Aron Gurevich for placing socially marginalized vernacular literature in a dialectical relationship with "official" ecclesiastical culture. Gurevich adapts and refines the Bakhtinian notion of dialogism in which disparate elements are not merely juxtaposed in various contexts, but interact with or interanimate one another; he also applies Bakhtin's theory

---


of Carnival/Lent to medieval culture and texts.\(^{11}\) For example, Gurevich, whose “conception of medieval popular culture is significantly less oppositional than Bakhtin’s”\(^{12}\) describes the daily spiritual life of the people as a syncretism in which the formal religion of the learned churchmen that was “assimilated superficially and mainly from the external ritualistic side, coexisted ... with pre-Christian folklore...” He reminds us, however, not to approach this dual consciousness as two isolated cultures but to treat them in whatever form as they interact, whether in dialogue or opposition, to mutually influence one another. With respect to the highs and lows of medieval grotesque from the “drunken whore playing the role of the Virgin, the fool in place of the bishop, [or] the criminal on the throne...” Gurevich argues that such inversions “by no means ignored or denied the dominant religious culture; they rather proceeded from it and ultimately affirmed it. This “lowering” assumes ...a temporary overcoming of it through an inclusive inversion”. Indeed, it was through the notion of maximum lowering that “the concept of the Incarnation united the divine and human in their extreme manifestation”, Christ’s humble birth and humiliating Passion, “these elements of ennobling ‘disparagement,’” affirm the “spiritual power in physical powerlessness.”

Gurevich’s argument is sustained in the visual arts by Michael Camille who, as mentioned above, also cautions that we “have to face up to carnival’s complicity with the official order, played out in the supposed subversion of it”. Nor should we view medieval culture “in terms of binary oppositions” such as the sacred and profane, for medieval people could tolerate more ambiguity than we have given them credit for. Indeed, he argues, [T]ravesty, profanation and sacrilege are essential to the continuity of the sacred in society”. In her study of parody, Margaret Rose notes that “when medieval parodists did mock something it was generally not the holy text but some misuser of it”;\(^{13}\) on this count King Robert is guilty as charged.

Monkey Business
It is now time to get down to monkey business as it were and take a closer look at the ape who is, of course, a familiar figure in the margins of manuscripts, in border decorations, swinging from the tendrils of marginal foliage or cavorting about the edges mocking or mincing the text. Architecturally, apes leer at human congregants from their perches atop capitals or gape at the clergy from below as depicted upon misericords. The impression overall is one of parodic

\(^{11}\) For a concise summary of Bakhtinian theory see Thomas J. Farrell, “Introduction: Bakhtin, Liminality, and Medieval Literature,” Bakhtin and Medieval Voices, ed. Thomas J. Farrell (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1995) 1-14. See also in the same volume Nancy Bradbury “Popular-Festive Forms and Beliefs in Robert Mannyng’s Handlyng Synne. Her analysis and application of Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque and Gurevich’s modification to a clerical text is relevant to Robert of Sicily in that the romance claims monastic provenance for several of its ten extant versions.

\(^{12}\) Ganim, op. cit. p. 39.

playfulness, as if to keep the ecclesiastical enterprise from taking itself too seriously. In the romance itself, Robert’s ape-companion has similarly been regarded as a comic sidekick whose costume and demeanor function dramatically to assure that Robert, too, will neither be recognized nor taken seriously. But even the adumbration of a long established tradition of ape lore taken up below suggests that the monkey business we may take in jest would likely have been taken in earnest by a medieval audience for whom the image evoked multivalent associations. Robert of Sicily exploits the hybridic and mimetic nature of the simian image to manifest symbolically the nature of both the sinner (the prince) and the sin (superbia), illuminating in the process the way in which the punishment fits the crime. As readers, then, we are encouraged to take more seriously a marginal figure who on vellum has been limited to a kind of textual voyeurism and who, in our romance, has heretofore been regarded as little more than an actor in a dumb show.

Etymology
This hybridic and mimetic nature can be accounted for to a great degree by the prevailing etymology of the form simia as derivative of similis, similitude with its reference to comparison, resemblance, and imitation as opposed to Isadore’s unconvincing argument for simis meaning flat or snub nosed. According to Curtius, the use of the ape as metaphor, as the simia, is introduced in the thirteenth century by Alain de Lille and comes to be applied “not only to persons but also to abstractions and artifacts which assume the appearance of being something they are not.” The negative valence of this notion of imitation is reflected in the following example Curtius cites from the Romance of the Rose.


16 Lines 16029 ff.

Si garde comment Nature euvre,
Car mout voudrait faire autel eivre
E la contrefait come singes.

Camille notes that le singe came to be an anagram for le signe — the sign — and by association came “to signify the dubious status of representation itself” — by drawing attention to the danger of mimesis — in God’s created scheme of things.”

It is no mere coincidence, then, that the source of our word baboon, babuini, or “monkey business” and in Chaucer’s Middle English babewyn18 corresponds linguistically to the term “bauble,” or the fool-headed staff cum mock scepter. The medieval encyclopedia Bartholomeus Anglicus weighs in noting that we “clepen hem simias and giuen hem that name for the likenes of resoun, for in many thynges he counterfetieth the deeds of men”. Interestingly, Bartholomeus distinguishes those human like behaviors as “louen wel here whelpes” and their instinctive knowledge of the fondness of the young for being “ystorked and knoweth hem that conforteth and pleseth hem and maken hem good cheere’” from those such as “to lepe and playe” that must be “ylerned and taught”.

The Monkey’s Tail
The early philosophers and Jewish and Christian commentators were preoccupied not with the ape’s snub nose but (here the reference is to the Barbery ape) the ape’s lack of a tail, a trait perceived as a sign of debasement. Leviticus 22-23 declares the tail to be a necessary part of every animal — those lacking it are unfit for sacrifice. In Talmudic tradition, Adam had a tail which God removed either for his dignity,20 or as viewed in the Physiologus as proof of Divine disfavor,” distinctive sign, not unlike that of Cain, that warns against the hybris of striving above one’s preordained

17 Curtius, op. cit. p. 13
18 Camille, op. cit. p. 12.
19 Robert of Sicily I 1246 -47
20 Janson, op. cit. p. 135, 144n 92.
station.21 Precisely because the ape was *quam similis nobis*, the common classical assumption viewed the ape as both “morally vile” and “aesthetically hideous” — an unworthy pretender to human status.22 The Heraclitian statement that “the most beautiful of apes is ugly compared to man and that the wisest of men is an ape beside God” was translated to early Christian thought through Plato and Plotinus to be transmuted eventually into the Christian epithet of Christ’s enemies as “man-imitating apes”.23

The *Physiologus* contributed to the long tradition in which the ape represents the devil, for by the Middle Ages pseudo Hugh of St. Victor notes that “The devil had his beginning among the angels in heaven, but being full of hypocrisy and guile, he lost his tail, as he will perish completely in the end”.24 Read allegorically then, the lack of tail was equated with having a beginning but no end — a state received as un-Christian as it is unnatural and hence diabolical.

**Pet Apes and Sermons**

Nor were medieval preachers amused by the wandering minstrels who kept trained apes to amuse their audiences with human and animal antics.25 Indeed the domestic or pet ape furnished a popular staple of sermon satire, decried by preachers, particularly the prolific sermonizer John Bromyard, as an extravagance, a vanity of the rich, and a symbol of decadence and depravity.26 Bromyard’s contempt was reserved not for the owners alone, but was directed toward the ape’s peculiar capacity to imitate, “to copy little tricks and habits of their owners, struggling ostentatiously to put on their

spur and gloves… imitating their walk and manner” in the manner of the fops.27 While classical literature had depicted such antics as those of a “spurious pretender,” medieval preachers drew from patristic literature that equates the simian imposter’s hubris to Lucifer’s *imitation Dei*.28

In what has been described as a “devolutionary” relationship of angel-man-ape29, the ape assumes a hybridic quality, a quasi-human status that like the semi-divine status of man appears to predispose both human and simian to aspire to such vices as pride, folly, vanity, and hypocrisy. In a homily on the sin of pride in his *Summa Predicandi*, Bromyard extends his simian simile to the *superbia* of rulers: As the ape, which is afraid when it occupies a low position but when on high grins upon all around and mocks them, so are many when placed in positions of power.30 The tyrant is like an ape in that the latter has a human face “sed in fine in defectu cause sum turpitudinem ostendit.” So the tyrant too, says Giovanni da Coppo, “starts out by pretending to be a just ruler but comes to no good end”.31 By presuming his omnipotence in defiance of the *depositus potentes*, King Robert is indeed guilty of *imitatio dei*, a hubris comparable to that of the pet ape who aspires to his master’s position, for he is as pale a figure in comparison to the divinity of the Angel-King as his ape-companion is a grotesque caricature of his own humanity. In his moment of recognition, however, Robert appears to acknowledge the parallel between his fall and his devolutionary triad of angel-man-ape:

*For that name I hedde pride
As angels that gone form ioye glyde
And in twyklyng of an eige*

---


God binom heore maystrie
So hath he myn, for my gult\textsuperscript{32}

As a visual metaphor of the nature of the sinner and the sin, the ape is one aspect of a parodic trinity.

Ecclesiastics fared no better in escaping the sting of reformers’ wrath: friars and wayward priests clad in “the garments of Religion” but for whom “the habyte maketh nogth the relygious”\textsuperscript{33} are compared to climbing monkeys who display their turpitudinem posteriorum... to the derision of men.” This perhaps explains the inspiration for and nature of Robert’s mock tonsure:

\begin{quote}
He heet a barbur him before,
That as a fool he schulde be schore
Al around, lich a fre,
An honde-brede boe either ere,
And on his croune make a crois.\textsuperscript{34}
\end{quote}

Nor can the church and the congregation itself escape being implicated in simian exempla. Bromyard points to the grotesque form of the ape-gargoyles grimacing over his parishioners’ heads as manifestations of a kind of architectural hypocrisy: the weight is borne not by those outwardly expressive stones but by those hidden from view. The gargoyles provide exempla, he moralizes, of those who profess great compassion but offer little in the way of help to the supplication of others or offer satirical portraits of those slothful clergy who “complain of the least task.”\textsuperscript{35}

As for the congregation, the Bishop of Repingden derides those who attend church to be seen, and who listen and respond with more delight than the occasion warrants as “apes of the clergy”.\textsuperscript{36} When such excess is translated materially as luxuria, the ape becomes one in a litany of social offenses jeopardizing the salvation of the rich, those “robbers” who on Judgment Day will have to answer for having allowed the poor to suffer while “their hounds and horses and apes, the rich, the powerful, the abounding, the gluttons, the drunkards and their prostitutes, they fed and clothed...”\textsuperscript{37} Even the Pope is subjected to anti-simian counsel. In his treatise De consideratione addressed to Pope Eugene III, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux warns the Prince of the church not to be like the “ape on the roof, the king of fools enthroned priding himself on his exalted station rather than on his virtues”.\textsuperscript{38} Interestingly, Bernard employs this analogy in a chapter titled “What art thou?” the very question the Angel-king puts to the humiliated King Robert. The chapter is particularly insightful because it is concerned not so much with the vice of pride itself as with the Pope’s vulnerability, his predisposition to sin, his capacity for foolishness orinsipiens, because of his complacent state of mind.\textsuperscript{39}

We have seen from this spectus of ape symbolism the parodic potential inherent in the ape’s anthropomorphic nature whether manifest as a symbol of sin, be it pride, folly, or vanity; of man’s fallen nature, either as sinner or repentant; or of the demonic, whether hypocrite, imposter or the figura diaboli itself. I wish now to demonstrate how these same characteristics that prove so fertile a source of parody thematize the penitential and political elements that Robert of Sicily clearly intends to be taken in earnest.

\textsuperscript{32} Robert of Sicily II. 341-45.


\textsuperscript{34} Robert of Sicily II. 169-73.

\textsuperscript{35} Owst, op. cit. p. 238.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid. p. 394.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid. p. 301.

\textsuperscript{38} Janson, op. cit. Pp 200-1.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid. pp. 200-1.
King Solomon
We first turn to the figure of King Solomon, an example familiar to the medieval audience for whom he is as much an example of latent foolish pride as he is a symbol of unsurpassable wisdom. Solomon not only violates the commandments that forbid accumulating excessive treasure and wives, but by disobeying the Lord’s specific injunction against idolatry brings the golden era of his forty-year reign to an end with the loss of ten tribes of Israel and the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem.\(^{40}\) Robert of Sicily is a literary descendent of the tales of the Proud Prince Humiliated that were drawn from the legends surrounding Solomon’s fall. An apocryphal treatise, The Testament of Solomon, warns the monarch against the dangers of overreaching pride and all the sins it begets.\(^{41}\) What Solomon fails to remember is that his wisdom has been a gift divinely given in recognition of his humble response to the Lord’s request that he name what he most desires.

These pre-Christian literary representations embody man’s fallen state so that, not unexpectedly, the apple-eating ape is ubiquitous in Christian art depicting the fall of both angels and man. Less expected, perhaps, are the epiphany pageants of the fourteenth century that go beyond the tradition of placing the ape amongst the splendid entourage of the Queen of Sheba’s visit to Solomon to a question to which he replies that he is but a little child: “I know not how to go out or come in.”\(^{42}\) His request for an understanding heart “to judge thy people” pleased the Lord who granted his request assuring that none before or after him should be as wise.\(^{43}\) Solomon’s innate humility corresponds inversely to Robert’s recognition, achieved only after his involuntary humiliation, that he is, indeed, but a fool. Wisdom, the antithesis of pride, is most often associated with humility.\(^{44}\)

The early Hebrew legends generate some fifty offspring, pre and post-medieval analogues that appealed to the popular imagination as an entertaining mirror for centuries of princes. But what does the ape have to do with Solomon? In Jewish legend, the image of the ape figures in those stories that depict the consequences of pride:

In one account we are told of Solomon’s meeting (in a land of darkness, presumably the Egyptian desert) ape-men garbed and behaving as humans. They tell Solomon that they were formerly men and have been punished in this manner for not having observed the Torah.\(^{45}\) A similar punishment for pride is associated with legends surrounding the fall of the Tower of Babel in which people thrown into water, forest, and desert were transformed into sprites, apes, and demons respectively.\(^{46}\)

---

\(^{39}\) 3 Kings 3, 7.

\(^{40}\) 3 Kings 11.


\(^{42}\) See Proverbs 11.12; 15.33; 16.19; and 29.23.


forge an analogy of Sheba's legendary journey with the sacred pilgrimage of the Magi.\textsuperscript{47} She is depicted in a thirteen-century work, "Goldene Pföte" at Freiberg, crushing the ape underfoot, a gesture suggesting perhaps that she has overcome the vice of luxuria or has crushed the "ape of worldliness".\textsuperscript{48}


\textbf{Nebuchadnezzar}

The Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar, reputed to be the son of Solomon and Sheba,\textsuperscript{49} is also depicted with the ape in a number of contexts but for related but different reasons. The king's reputation in both the literary and visual arts undergoes multiple transformations so that his image evokes a range of responses from that of an insufferable godless tyrant to a suffering, messianic figure. By the time the Middle English Robert of Sicily is composed in the mid-fourteenth century, Nebuchadnezzar is regarded spiritually as an exemplum of the repentant sinner,\textsuperscript{50} and politically as a model "of what kings, when corrected, may become".\textsuperscript{51} It is worth noting here that the Middle English versions are the only texts to interpolate the Nebuchadnezzar episode. It is Nebuchadnezzar's lieutenant Holofernes who has boasted, "And who is God save Nebuchadnezzar? He will send forth his might and utterly destroy them (the people of Israel) from the face of the earth and their God will not protect them."\textsuperscript{52}

\textsuperscript{47} Janson, \textit{op. cit.} pp 51-2; 67-9n; 104-5.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid. pp. 51-2; plate VIIIc.

\textsuperscript{49} Ginzberg, \textit{op. cit.} p. 4.300.

\textsuperscript{50} Penelope Doob, \textit{Nebuchadnezzar's Children: Conventions of Madness in Middle English Literature}. New Haven: Yale UP, 1953.


Cast from his throne and compelled to wander in exile for seven (in some accounts fifteen) years, he is reduced to the status of the prototypical wild or timid man, a condition interpreted variously as a state of holiness or unholiness, "the working out of salvation, voluntarily or involuntarily, in the place of exile".\textsuperscript{53} The distinguishing feature of Nebuchadnezzar's penitential exile is the bestial existence induced by his loss of speech and reason, a reversal rendered all the more poignant because his legendary omnipotence had been such that "not a bird opened its beak without the permission of Nebuchadnezzar"\textsuperscript{54} whereas now his hairs grew like the feathers of eagles and his nails like birds' claws".\textsuperscript{55} In Jewish legend he is not only reduced to eating the diet of the ox, herbs, roots, and grasses, but is transformed into an ox above the waist; a lion below.\textsuperscript{56}

Whereas Nebuchadnezzar undergoes his penance in the solitary isolation of the desert wilderness, our King Robert is eventually forced to scavenge for food, but the emphasis is on his anonymity on the periphery of the court he once ruled. He is clothed like his ape companion in fox tails--not merely the garb of the court fool, but symbolic of two equally reviled creatures human and beast: deceitful tricksters and parasitic vermin. Each of the kings has, of course, been deprived of the very faculty which distinguishes him from the beasts and without which he appears the madman or fool. We recognize the extent of this loss and the relationship between reason and identity in their recognition scenes.

I, Nebuchadnezzar lifted up mine eyes to heaven and my sense was restored to me. And I blessed the most High and I praised and glorified him that liveth forever\textsuperscript{77} ... At the same time my sense returned to me: I came to the honor and glory of my


\textsuperscript{55} Daniel 4.30.

\textsuperscript{56} Ginzberg \textit{op. cit.} 4:333-34.

\textsuperscript{57} Daniel 4.31.
Guthlac Roll, a series of designs for stained glass windows by a twelfth-century artist, depict the simian-shaped demons surrounding the saint’s desert hermitage, waging an ongoing psychomachic battle to corrupt his soul during his life and struggling to seize his soul at death in a different but related fashion. The Nebuchadnezzar episode in Robert of Sicily dramatizes the reflective, psychological process that is prerequisite for contrition and repentance.

Nebuchadnezzar, we recall, was a model of what kings when corrected may become. What is problematic is that we tend to impute outside or external agency to the term “corrected.” For both Robert and his Old Testament counterpart, such correction requires nothing short of divine intervention: each needs to lose his place and trade places — as if dramatically enacting the social reversal prophesied in the Magnificat — before he can recognize his true place in the divine scheme. Each must comprehend the divine justice reflected in his personal reversal of fortune; for Robert, this means the recognition that he, like the proud and mighty of the Magnificat whom God will scatter in the imagination of their hearts, is being punished for the blasphemous error in his. But it is our proud prince’s remembrance of God’s grace — as it is manifest spiritually in Nebuchadnezzar’s redemption and pragmatically in the recovery his kingdom — that is the catalyst for Robert’s contrition, penance, and reform.

Miraculous events are stock features of medieval romance, but the divine substitution and reversal we witness in Robert of Sicily illustrates St. Bernard’s definition of the miracle as the means to bring men to God.

The Nebuchadnezzar episode externalizes or projects the interior anguish and remorse that leads to compunction and in so doing achieves a subjectivity that is remarkable in contrast to the work’s numerous continental analogues, none of which contain this episode. The figure of the ape, likewise a distinguishing feature of the Middle English version, facilitates Robert’s discovery that he

---

58 Ibid 4.33.

59 Robert of Sicily II 233-34 and 2246-48.

60 British Library Harley MS 31 containing Gower’s Confessio Amantis; Bibliotek der Universitat Basel MS A II, containing Nicholas de Lyra’s Postillato Daniel; Stifsbibliotek Lillienfeld MS Imfol 40r Ulrich von Lillienfeld, Concordantiacaritatis “Nebuchadnezzar’s cure”.

61 BL Harley Roll Y6.

shares more with his grotesque companion than with his angelic counterpart: the Angel-king reflects clearly what he is not; his ape-companion, what he is. Its parodic-redemptive function fulfilled, the ape drops out of the narrative. The focus becomes more corrective than critical: Robert's repentance and reform conform to orthodox penitential doctrine and reflect a shift from a parodic to paradigmatic mode.

Contrition of King Robert
The portrayal of Robert's contrition, for example, represents an interiority consonant with the increasing theological preoccupation, stimulated by Peter Abelard in the twelfth century, with the penitent's state of mind, the intentionality of sin, and individuality of confession and penance. Robert's confession conforms to the privacy and confidentiality enjoined by the doctrine: he is taken into a private chamber where, alone with his Angel-Confessor, he fulfills the major qualities of confession outlined by Aquinas.


64 Ibid. p. 34.


67 Psalms 73:22-23.
himself that he is a sinner bowed down, and not worthy to lift his eyes to heaven.  

Robert's penance is significantly compounded by a very public humiliation, a humiliation that appears patterned after ancient and early Celtic forms of perpetual exile that likened the penitent to the fugitive Cain or a later form of "solemn" Lenten penance in which the penitents were cast out of church in ashes and sackcloth. Taking this double humiliation into account, it seems most likely that Robert of Sicily enacts the penitential doctrine of Hugh of St. Victor: external (public) physical suffering remits the deed whereas the internal (private) mental anguish of contrition remits intention. Robert explicitly acknowledges his intentions:

I hedde an error in myn herte  
And that error doth me smerte

Unlike the common sinner, however, Robert's transgression profoundly impacts the body politic; therefore, it stands to reason that any satisfactory repentance and reform must be undertaken to whatever extent possible amidst the public so implicated. Inasmuch as the Angel-king administers Robert's penance, serves as his confessor, and absolves his sin, the romance affirms a conventional sacramental role in achieving spiritual and political redemption. The agency to which "correcting" the king is assigned appears to be threefold, distributed, albeit unevenly, among the prince himself, his public both courtly and common, and the Angel-king cum priest.

The interiority and individualization of contrition and confession exemplified in Robert of Sicily could also be perceived as a corrective to the abuse of indulgences and commutations arising from the notion of vicarious penance. In the context of this discussion, I would argue that the notion of vicarious be deployed not to exempt one sinner on the merit of another's penance or good works, but so as to exhort one sinner to learn from another's example. And what better model for the body politic to emulate than the figure of the reformed prince, be he drawn from life or fiction. Like Robert, the proud who have puffed up and exalted themselves in the "imagination of their hearts" require correction. To be realized, any transformation, whether in the personal or political must first be imagined, perhaps no differently than visualizing exercises routinely conducted in any motivational seminar.

One's personal and political identity must be reconceived in different terms or reinvoked with different values, each of which engages the penitent in conjuring up a fiction equal to his initial blasphemous fantasies. In Robert of Sicily the Nebuchadnezzar episode serves that end. Structurally the episode is embedded in the narrative as an exemplum within an exemplum. Robert grasps at the second chance offered in this exemplum internal to the poem, much as the audience is expected to grasp the exemplum covered by the poem as a whole. As the distressed king has remembered and been inspired by Nebuchadnezzar, so the auditor or reader is to remember Robert's fall and redemption. This is to say that Robert's response to his recollection of the Old Testament king rhetorically models the desired response to his own story. The same meta-textual consciousness motivates King Robert to assure that his story will be recorded in memory at Rome, for thus, he claims, will God's might (not his, we notice) be sown. Our fictional King Robert would no doubt take satisfaction in the fact that his name is invoked by the fifteenth-century poet and ecclesiastical critic John Audelay in his verse Magnificat venerating the Virgin Mary:

Thenke on Kyng Robert Sesel  
He went ne lord had he bot he  
Yet sodenic downe he felle  
And was put into a folis dege


69 McNeill, op. cit. p. 34.

70 Hopkins, op. cit. p. 59.

71 Robert of Sicily II 349-50.
Robert and Public Political Rituals

Although a political valence permeates the romance, our focus has tended to the religious, as opposed to the political, not the least because the two are mutually inclusive. I would like to consider briefly the ways in which the motifs in Robert of Sicily are played out in the popular political culture of this period, which might help to explain the nature of topical illustrations on misericords. Recent studies of public processions, spectacles, and celebrations contribute to our understanding of the political forces “at play” in these events.

Sheila Lindenbaum’s recent study of the London Midsummer Watch refutes nostalgic theories that community solidarity motivated the pageants, bonfires, and neighborhood feasting; rather, she argues, ... “[t]he ceremony reproduces power relations” of an urban oligarchy in such a way that “rulers and rules alike became implicated in a web of habitual social practice through which the oligarchy’s power was exercised and simultaneously disguised”.

Contrary assumptions about the spontaneity of the carnivalesque audience control was a major concern: a tub of water was placed outside each house in the city to guard against fires. Could this have been inspiration for the puddle into which Robert was cast? The point here is that Lindenbaum offers illustrative confirmation of which Gurevich and Camille have argued earlier.

Continuing this same line, I wish to consider a similar study with more direct bearing on Robert of Sicily. Brown and Regaldo’s study of a Pentacost celebration by Philip the Fair touches our romance in three instances.


taunted at his trial. "Begone Renart! Your scheming and trickery have killed us. You've stolen the kingdom's wealth". To the medieval audience steeped in Renart tradition, Robert and his simian counselor may well have warned of the dangers of false or foolish counsel and the self-serving maneuvers of the court sycophant.

It should not pass unnoticed that the repentant Robert prays for mercy to the Virgin Mary, turning for comfort and reaffirming the very source of his denial. Our mute, illiterate ape has helped a king read and comprehend the sacred text, and has facilitated his becoming the Pauline fool for Christ.

Epilogue
I would like to close this discussion by returning to the topic with which I opened it: the theatricality of Robert of Sicily. And again I would like to draw a comparison with the Parisian celebration of 1313, specifically the description of the tableaux vivants. The presentation of the tableaux juxtaposed biblical scenes with episodes of bean kings and wild men or with those from popular tales in which Jesus laughs with his mother and eats an apple," and these in turn were followed by a complete cycle of the life of Renart. All this theatrical crossing and mixing describes the spirit of a "discourse of festive counsel" that I believe extends also to a popular literary work such as Robert of Sicily, a work that embraces the polarities of high and low, affirms the sacred institutions it parodies, and glorifies the monarch it admonishes.

Serious monkey business indeed.

77 Brown, op. cit. pp 70, 83n89.

78 Ibid. p. 67.