
A Note on
Another Fight to Wear the Pants in the Family

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Varied iconography describes and comments on the relationship between husband and wife, or at least man and woman, on medieval misericords.

On English, Spanish and Belgian misericords, for example, the woman is always the dominant member of the family; she figuratively wears the trousers. This relationship is shown not by a woman in pants--she still wears a long dress-- but a woman who raises a domestic implement such as a washing paddle, (Fig. 1) a distaff (Fig 2) or even a chair, and aims it at the man in her life. Sometimes she grabs the man by his hair or beard (Fig. 3) and drags him along the floor. At Whalley, the man is shown praying, obviously begging his wife to spare his life. (Fig 4)

Man and wife on Spanish misericords, while not as frequent, show similar battles. The man on a Toledo misericord is on all fours, a fool's cap with ass ears covering his head, his bottom bared. The wife, elegantly attired is at his side, whip in hand.

One of the most murderous looking wives, sits atop her nude husband on a misericord at Aarschot, Belgium. (Fig 5)

A few misericords show man and woman in a more amiable relationship. He is kneeling before her and places one of his hands under her shoe.¹ (Fig. 6) This scene represents a proverb "To measure up" which refers to a man proposing to or propositioning a woman. The hand and shoe, symbols of the sexual organs, are a way of finding out if the couple will be sexually compatible. If the woman accepts the man's proposal, she raises a ladle from which they will share their wedding feast. (Fig. 7) If she refuses, as she does at Malvern Abbey, (Fig. 8)

¹ See the thesis by Elizabeth Moore, University of Missouri, Columbus, Missouri, on this motif in the Smithfield Decretals and English misericords.

she tosses her spindle at him, as she might do in the iconography depicting marital combat.



Figure 1 – Carlisle (Cumbria) – Marital Combat
Photo by Misericordia International



Figure 2 – Leon (Spain) – Harridan and distaff
Photo by Misericordia International



Figure 8 – Great Malvern Priory (Hereford and Worcester) –
‘Measuring up’

Photo by Misericordia International

The third convention which expresses marital relationships represents “who will wear the pants in the family.” This expression derives from a folk tale about Sire Hain and Dame Anieuse. In this story, the woman wants to be the dominant member of the partnership. The couple pull the waistband of a pair of pants as a way of deciding who will have the power in the family...and the husband wins! The wife accepts his dominant position; to the end of her days she is subservient to the man and serves him well and happily. The expression was popular with the public and appears over the centuries in illuminated manuscripts, on Epinal woodcuts and on misericords.

The misericord carvers placed a different ending on this tale. When the husband and wife pull on the waistband of the pants... we never see who wins or who loses. It is the struggle that is important. However, there is an iconographic variation where the wife already wears the pants and the husband already spins. We assume they have already fought for the pants and the wife has won.

Only a few misericords are based on this iconography and each has unique details. For example, at Rouen Cathedral husband and wife face each other, kneeling as they hold onto the waistband of a pair of pants. Neither appears to have an advantage, but it seems that the husband is holding a knife, (now broken) ready to cut up the pants rather than lose them. (Fig. 9)



Figure 9 – Rouen Cathedral (Seine-Maritime)
Fight for the pants

Photo by Misericordia International

At Hoogstraten in Belgium, the husband and wife stand and face each other. (Fig. 10) The pants they hold between them have long legs, each adorned with a different pattern. Perhaps this means that the marriage will be different according to the winner of the pants.

At Rodez Cathedral (Aveyron) an elderly couple face each other holding a pair of pants between them. The couple is seated, possibly because they no longer have the energy to stand. Their feet are placed against their partner's feet, as in the game of pannon. The game is a struggle for power, so the iconography here emphasizes the power struggle between husband and wife. The struggle is ridiculous since neither partner, winner or loser, will have any power.



Figure 13 – Saint-Cernin (Cantal) – Woman wears the pants
Photo by Misericordia International



Figure 14 – *Le Cocu* (The Hen-pecked Husband)
 Israhel van Meckenem

At this time we wish to propose another pair of misericords which undoubtedly represent the Fight to Wear the Pants in the Family. At the church of St. Cernin (Cantal) a seated woman dons a pair of pants. (Fig. 13) She looks remarkably like the woman at the Cathedral of Leon and also like the woman in an engraving by Israel van Mechenem titled *The Fight to Wear the Pants*.³ (Fig. 14) In this engraving the loser husband, carrying a distaff, sits by the wife. A misericord with the loser husband, the other half of this scene, is nowhere to be seen in the church of St. Cernin.

However, in the church at St. Illide, several miles down the road, a misericord presents a man holding a distaff. The carving is in poor shape with several details missing. However, it is quite obvious that this is a man with a distaff. Furthermore, its details are similar to Van Mechenem's engraving. The pair of misericords follow the iconography at the Cathedral of Leon rather than that in other churches in France or Belgium.

The pairing is even more obvious when one realizes that the choir stalls at St. Cernin and St. Illide were originally part of the choir stalls at the abbey, a few miles away at St. Chamant, which no longer exists. Therefore this pair of misericords, originally in the same set, were perhaps side by side, or facing each other. Their exact position will probably never be known. We therefore wish to add the two misericords at St. Cernin and St. Illide to the known group representing the Fight for the Pants in the Family. Perhaps this note will lead to the identification of other fights for the pants, where only one of the marital partners remains on a misericord in a set of choir stalls.

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³ I am indebted to Sylvie Bethemont for alerting me to this engraving. While there is another van Mechenem engraving on this subject, this particular one is strikingly similar to the misericord at St. Cernin.