

## Salacious and Sinful Simians in The Macclesfield Psalter: An Iconographic Study

Kelly Midgley  
University of Western Australia

*The ubiquity of apes in the margins of Gothic devotional prayer books, often doing deeds that would seem blasphemous to our modern sensibilities, has long caused confusion amongst scholars. Such images may be seen in The Macclesfield Psalter, a lavishly illuminated fourteenth-century manuscript, which was brought by the Fitzwilliam Museum in 2004. Apes appear throughout the manuscript several times, carrying out actions that are typically 'human', albeit in a humorous, often profane way. In this article I suggest that the recurrent apes in The Macclesfield Psalter may represent the vices inherent in post-Edenic mankind. First, I will discuss ape-lore more broadly, focusing on the recognised similarities between apes and men. Secondly, I will undertake a close analysis of a selection of images from The Macclesfield Psalter, where apes are portraying vices such as greed and lust: characteristics associated directly with the Original Sin. I argue that while the ape is indeed a polyvalent figure, its most popularly regarded attribute was its capacity for impersonation (or 'aping'), manifested in its close physical resemblance to Fallen man.<sup>1</sup>*

### I. Introduction

Monkeys and apes are figures of no small iconographic significance; throughout history they have been depicted frequently in art and literature, sometimes where they seem, at least to our modern sensibilities, out of place. To date, only a few detailed iconographic studies have been carried out. In the 1930s, William C. McDermott wrote *The Ape in Antiquity*, which deals primarily with the ways in which people interacted with monkeys and apes during the epoch of the Roman Empire.<sup>2</sup> Inspired by McDermott's work, H. W. Janson wrote, twenty years later, *Apes and Ape Lore in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* for the Warburg Institute, a monograph that remains the main authority on ape lore, even more than half a century after its original publication.<sup>3</sup> Recent studies have been on a smaller scale: Ptolemy Tompkins presented a short but informative book about the recurrence of

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper is an early version of a chapter in my Master of Medieval and Early Modern Studies dissertation. There are several individuals to whom I am most grateful for their advice, support, and friendship. I thank the editors, Deborah Seiler and Patricia Alessi, for their generosity in guiding me through my very first publication; the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments; my supervisor, Andrew Lynch for his feedback and encouragement; and especially my friends, Tahnee Barnett, Rebecca Norman, Chris Lenney, Elii Durham, Kellie Weston, and numerous others, for their unwavering kindness, understanding, and patience with my various crises of confidence. Without these people, and others whom, for the sake of brevity, must remain unnamed, I would not have been able to complete this paper. Any errors or omissions are entirely my own.

<sup>2</sup> William C. McDermott, *The Ape in Antiquity*, Baltimore, The John Hopkins Press, 1938.

<sup>3</sup> H. W. Janson, *Apes and Ape Lore in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, London, Warburg Institute, 1952.

monkeys in art in the early 1990s; Solly Zuckerman's *The Ape in Myth and Art*, published posthumously in 1998, evaluated the varying conceptualisations of apes as seen in art and mythology from antiquity to the early modern period; and throughout the past decade, numerous short articles by burgeoning scholars have been appearing on the academic blog *The Medieval Animal Data-Network*. Most of these later scholars rely heavily on the seminal research already carried out by McDermott and Janson.<sup>4</sup> In light of new source material that has been uncovered in recent decades, a detailed reconsideration of the portrayal of simians in art and literature would be beneficial.

The aim of this article is to analyse closely the way in which the ape is portrayed throughout the margins of *The Macclesfield Psalter*, a lavish small devotional book dating from the mid-fourteenth century that was rediscovered and acquired by the Fitzwilliam Museum in June 2004.<sup>5</sup> I will begin by looking at the rich and varied iconographic tradition surrounding the ape, considering etymological, literary, scientific, philosophical, and artistic source material. After this, I will provide a methodological overview of how marginal imagery has previously been studied, and contend that these images may have a multiplicity of meanings depending on the context of both the images and the reader or viewer. This discussion will contextualise my analysis of a selection of images in *The Macclesfield Psalter*. I focus particularly on paradigms in which apes represent the vices that characterise post-Edenic mankind: greed and lust. Throughout the article, I will argue that although the ape was a polyvalent figure, the physical similarities between apes and men were evident and had a significant impact on its portrayal and interpretation, particularly in the marginal art of Gothic devotional codices.

## II. Salacious Simians: An Iconographic Overview

In classical Latin, the word *simia* was used predominantly in the feminine, and only rarely in the masculine where it was normally replaced with *simius*. It was used often as a term of abuse, even in Cicero's letters, denoting trickery and, as an extension, dishonesty.<sup>6</sup> According to Lewis and Short's authoritative Latin dictionary, the exact origins of the word are dubious, but it could possibly have the same root as the word *similis*, a word used to denote likeness or resemblance.<sup>7</sup> This would be a strong indication of an etymological basis for the idea that apes are often linked with impersonation and their physical likeness to men. Isidore of Seville highlights this parallel, but then summarily dismisses it: 'Other people think that

---

<sup>4</sup> Ptolemy Tompkins, *The Monkey in Art*, New York, Antique Collector's Club, 1994; Solly Zuckerman, *The Ape in Myth and Art*, Great Britain, Verdigris Press, 1998; Thierry Buquet, 'Preventing "Monkey Business": Fettered Apes in the Middle Ages', *Medieval Animal Data-Network*, 2013, <http://mad.hypotheses.org/37>, (Accessed 30 March 2014); Mónica Ann Walker Vadillo, 'Apes in Medieval Art', *Medieval Animal Data-Network*, 2013, <http://mad.hypotheses.org/172>, (Accessed 30 March 2014).

<sup>5</sup> This manuscript has been accessed in a facsimile edition that contains a detailed introduction, and a high-quality reproduction of the psalter in its original size. See: Stella Panayotova, *The Macclesfield Psalter*, United Kingdom, Thames and Hudson, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> For example: Cicero, *Ad Familiares*, VIII. 12.

<sup>7</sup> 'Simia, -ae', in Charlton T. Lewis; Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary; Founded on Andrews' edition of Freund's Latin dictionary*, Oxford Trustees of Tufts University, 1879.

apes are named from a Latin word, because they are felt to have a great similarity (*similitudo*) to human behaviour, but this etymology is false'.<sup>8</sup> He suggests instead that the word *simia* was originally a Greek word meaning 'with flattened nostrils', a more literal physical description of the animal.<sup>9</sup> Regardless of whether or not the linguistic connection between *simian* and *similitudo* actually existed, it remains significant that it was noticeable enough for thinkers like Isidore to criticise. It implies that there was an awareness that apes resembled men, at least among those who were able to read and understand Latin.

This physical resemblance has been noted in several sources. Aristotle's *Historia Animalium* contains a physiological comparison between apes and men.<sup>10</sup> He does not comment on the intellectual abilities or offer any behavioural analysis, but merely identifies physical properties, emphasising in particular that both humans and simians share similar facial features but noting all the while that apes were less refined, and more animalistic:

Its face resembles that of man in many respects; in other words, it has similar nostrils and ears, and teeth like those of man, both front teeth and molars. Further, whereas quadrupeds in general are not furnished with lashes on one of the two eyelids, this creature has them on both, only very thinly set, especially the under ones; in fact they are very insignificant indeed. And we must bear in mind that all other quadrupeds have no under eyelash at all.<sup>11</sup>

During the seventh and sixth centuries BC, the early Greek fabulist, Aesop, composed several fabulae highlighting the human attributes of simians. One parable, *The Dancing Monkeys* tells the story of how a prince chose to train a group of monkeys, who were initially successful at mimicking the movements of their human counterparts, until they were distracted by their natural inclination to nuts. The moral of this story: 'They who assume a character will betray themselves by their actions'.<sup>12</sup> In other words, the monkeys who were so adept at impersonating human dancers are still inferior, subject to their animal instincts. Similarly, *The Monkey and the Dolphin* is an invective against dishonesty, where the eponymous monkey was mistaken for a stranded man by a dolphin, after the ship he was on was wrecked. The deceit of the former was quickly revealed, when:

The Dolphin then inquired if he knew the Piræus (the famous harbor of Athens). The Monkey, supposing that a man was meant, and being obliged to support his previous lie, answered that he knew him very well, and that he was an intimate friend, who would, no doubt, be

---

<sup>8</sup> Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, XII.ii.30. Translation in: *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, ed. Stephen A. Barney; J. A. Beach; Oliver Berghof; W. J. Lewis, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 253.

<sup>9</sup> Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, XII.ii.30, p. 253.

<sup>10</sup> Translation accessed from: Aristotle, *The Works of Aristotle, volume IV, Historia Animalium*, ed. D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson, Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1910.

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle, *Historia Animalium*, II.8.

<sup>12</sup> Aesop, *Aesop's Fables*, ed. R. Worthington, Auckland, Floating Press, 2009, p. 207.

very glad to see him. The Dolphin, indignant at these falsehoods, dipped the Monkey under the water, and drowned him.<sup>13</sup>

Apes are depicted throughout these fabulae as having only physical similarities to their human counterparts; they were masters of mimicry but ultimately proved to be second-rate copies. The inferiority of simians to men may have had humorous connotations; the story of a group of monkeys dancing in a poor imitation of professional dancers could well have elicited laughter, especially when read out loud in a performative setting. However, during the medieval period, particularly in early Christian discourse, apes were portrayed in a more sinister light.

According to the *Middle English Dictionary*, apes are synonymous with trickery, deception, and even occasionally drunkenness.<sup>14</sup> Chaucer habitually equated apes with folly throughout his *Canterbury Tales*. One example may be seen in the General Prologue, where Chaucer first introduced the Pardoner and his fake relics:

He hadde a croys of latoun ful of stones,  
 And in a glas he hadde pigges bones.  
 But with thise relikes, whan that he fond  
 A povre person dwellynge upon lond,  
 Upon a day he gat hym moore moneye  
 Than that the person gat in monthes tweye;  
 And thus, with feyned flaterye and japes,  
 He made the person and the peple his apes.<sup>15</sup>

In this case, those who believed in the Pardoner's scam and parted with their money as a result were considered as akin to apes, foolish and easily outwitted. The ape, therefore, represents not only the deceiver, but also the deceived. The idea of the ape representing inebriation is portrayed by Chaucer in *The Manciple's Tale*, where it is said of the Cook: 'I trowe that ye dronken han wyn ape / And that is whan men pleyen with a straw'.<sup>16</sup> While apes themselves do not necessarily imbibe an excess of alcohol, it is implied here that the behaviour of drunk men is akin to that of an ape: dull and sluggish. The allusion to playing with a straw is described by Janson as an incredibly inane form of amusement, suitable only for infants and, as an extension, apes.<sup>17</sup> While the inferiority of the ape is shown in more or less a harmless light here, blatantly negative implications are denoted in *The Parson's Tale*, where the ape is

<sup>13</sup> Aesop, *Aesop's Fables*, pp. 43-44.

<sup>14</sup> 'Ape', *Middle English Dictionary*, 2001, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED1808&egs=all&egdisplay=open>, (Accessed 30 March 2014).

<sup>15</sup> 'General Prologue', 699-706, in Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, Third Edition, ed. Larry D. Benson, F. N. Robinson, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 34.

<sup>16</sup> 'The Manciple's Prologue', 444-45, in Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 282.

<sup>17</sup> Janson, *Apes and Ape Lore*, p. 246; Beryl Rowland, 'Chaucer's She-Ape ("The Parson's Tale", p. 424)', *Chaucer Review: A Journal of Medieval Studies and Literary Criticism*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 1968, pp. 159-165; Beryl Rowland, "'Owles and Apes" in Chaucer's Nun's Priest's Tale, 3092', *Mediaeval Studies*, Vol. 27, 1965, pp. 322-325.

portrayed as a deceiver, its foolishness belying far more sinister motives that are linked explicitly to those of the Devil:

After this comth the synne of japeres,  
That been the develes apes; for they maken  
Folk to laughe at hire japerie as folk doon at  
The gawdes of an ape.<sup>18</sup>

*The Parson's Tale* is a stark reminder that the ape is an inherently base, profane creature, using folly and seeming stupidity to obscure its evil, licentious nature. In particular, the ape here is linked explicitly to the Devil, the very epitome of malevolence. Chaucer's writings are a late manifestation of this idea; apes were most often considered to be representative of the Devil in earlier discourses, composed prior to the twelfth century.

The *Physiologus*, an immensely popular collection of moralised stories about various animals, expounds upon the evil nature of simians. The exact origins of the text are hard to determine; it is known that it was composed initially in Greek, between the second and fourth centuries AD, but unfortunately the original version no longer survives.<sup>19</sup> There are myriad versions that have been translated, adapted and supplemented over the course of several centuries, eventually having a significant influence on the later Bestiary tradition. In *Versio Y* of the Latin *Physiologus*, regarded by Janson as relatively faithful to the lost original, the ape is linked explicitly to the *diabuli personam*, or the persona of the Devil.<sup>20</sup>

*Et simius, hoc ipsam diabuli personam accepit: habuit autem initium, finem autem non habet (hoc est caudam); in principio autem fuit ex archangelis, finis autem eius nec inuenitur. Beneque simius, non habens caudam, sine specie enim est; et turpe infimio, non habentem caudam; sicut et diabolus, non habet finum bonum.*

[And the ape, which accepted the persona of the Devil itself, had a beginning but does not have an end (that is, no tail). In the beginning he was of the archangels, but his end is not to be found. And indeed the ape, not having a tail, is therefore without species; and its rear is made vile without a tail; like the Devil, it does not have a good end.]<sup>21</sup>

Twelfth-century Latin Bestiaries use this conceptualisation of the ape almost exactly as it was written in the *Physiologus*. Concepts such as the ape's lack of a tail and its similarities to the Devil are emphasised nearly verbatim, although rather than

<sup>18</sup> 'The Parson's Tale', 651, in Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 309.

<sup>19</sup> The most popular theory is that the *Physiologus* dates to around the second century AD, but it has been suggested by Alan Scott that it may have been compiled later, around the third or fourth centuries. For a detailed explanation, see: Alan Scott, 'The Date of the *Physiologus*', *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 52, No. 4, 1998, pp. 430-441.

<sup>20</sup> Janson, *Apes and Ape Lore*, p. 24, n. 23.

<sup>21</sup> Francis J. Carmody, 'Physiologus Latinus Verso Y', *University of California Publications in Classical Philology*, Vol. 12, No. 7, 1941, p. 121. My translation.

referring to the *diaboli personam*, the phrase *figuram diabolus*, or the figure of the Devil, is used instead. This can be seen in the Aberdeen Bestiary, which states:

*Symia caudam non habet. Cuius figuram diabolus habet, qui capud habet, caudam vero non habet. Et licet symia tota turpis sit, posteriora tamen eius satis turpia et horribilia sunt. Diabolus initium habuit cum esset in celis angelus. Sed ypochrita et dolosus fuit intrinsecus, et perdidit caudam, quia totus in fine peribit, sicut ait apostolus: Quem dominus Iesus interficiet spiritu oris sui.*

[The ape does not have a tail. It has the figure of the Devil, which has a head, but it does not have a tail. And though all of the ape is foul, yet its rear parts are foul and horrible enough. The Devil had begun as an angel in heaven. But he was a hypocrite and deceitful on the inside, and he lost his tail because he will perish totally in the end, just as the apostle says: Lord Jesus shall kill him with the spirit of his mouth.]<sup>22</sup>

The ape-devil topos was prominent in early Christian discourse. Janson argues that it was a result of many shared attributes between the two figures; he believes that the ape was considered to have been the ultimate impersonator. The saying 'X simia Y' ('X is the ape of Y') was used often in various discourses.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, the Devil was regarded as the 'unworthy imitator *par excellence*,' referred to as *simia Dei*, or the ape of God.<sup>24</sup> Both the *Physiologus* and the Bestiary tradition also expound on the ape's lack of a tail, linking it to metaphysical ideas of fate and freedom of choice.<sup>25</sup> The ape, in its attempts to emulate its human counterpart, trying to exist above its station, paralleled the Devil who wanted to act like God and was ultimately evicted from Heaven as a result.

Mónica Ann Walker Vadillo suggests that the connection between apes and the Devil began to be questioned due to their increased physical presence in Europe beginning in the twelfth century, and that this made way for the dominant interpretation of the ape as the embodiment of the sinner.<sup>26</sup> This is somewhat of an oversimplification. There is certainly evidence that monkeys and apes were widely available as pets from around the twelfth century onwards, and were a relatively popular status symbol.<sup>27</sup> In his archaeological study of medieval Southampton, Colin Platt describes evidence that a man known as Richard of Southwick, who died around 1290 and was probably a moderately wealthy merchant of wine, wool, and victuals, kept a 'diminutive African monkey' as a pet, which he probably bought off a sailor, and which may have accompanied him into town when he was running

<sup>22</sup> The University of Aberdeen, 'The Aberdeen Bestiary, fol. 12v', <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/translat/12v.hti>, (Accessed 20 August 2014). My translation.

<sup>23</sup> Janson, *Apes and Ape Lore*, pp. 25-26, n. 39.

<sup>24</sup> Janson, *Apes and Ape Lore*, p. 19; Anthony Ossa-Richardson, *The Devil's Tabernacle: The Pagan Oracles in Early Modern Thought*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2013, pp. 66-67.

<sup>25</sup> See: Janson, *Apes and Ape Lore*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>26</sup> Vadillo, 'Apes in Medieval Art'.

<sup>27</sup> Kathleen Walker-Meikle, *Medieval Pets*, Woodbridge, Boydell & Brewer, 2014, p. 13.

errands.<sup>28</sup> Some clerics even kept monkeys and apes as pets, and were chastised by Hugh of Saint-Victor because he considered the ape to be 'a most vile, filthy, and detestable animal'.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, the ape-devil topos did persist in popular texts: as previously discussed, Chaucer, who wrote in the second half of the fourteenth century, actively used the trope throughout his *Canterbury Tales*. It should also be noted that the notion of the ape as the embodiment of human vice was not new in the twelfth century, and it certainly was not limited to Christian discourse: Tompkins discusses an African myth that treats chimpanzees as the descendants of an especially unmotivated tribe of humans, who abandoned village life for the relative comfort of the jungle, where all responsibilities could be abandoned.<sup>30</sup>

With that said, the motif of the ape as a base version of man did certainly become more popular in religious discourses from around the twelfth century.<sup>31</sup> During this time, Bernardus Silvestris wrote a treatise about the creation of the universe, entitled *De Mundi Universitate* or *Cosmographica*, where he expresses the idea of the ape existing as an inferior, deformed version of man. His account of the Creation of the Animals concludes by stating: '*Prodit et in risus hominum deformis ymago / Simia, naturae degenerantis homo*' ['The ape comes forth to receive men's laughter, a deformed image, a man of degenerate nature'].<sup>32</sup> Bernardus depicts the ape as the last creature God created prior to man, as a warning example of what may happen if mankind repudiates spirituality in favour of the profane pleasures of the flesh, the very thing that distinguishes men from beasts. In one leaf of the Northumberland Bestiary, an English manuscript from the middle of the thirteenth century, the ape is associated further with Original Sin.<sup>33</sup> Adam is depicted in a partitioned section at the top of the leaf, flanked by two angels, gazing directly out at the reader. Surrounding him, separated by the green border, is the rest of the animal kingdom. The only other figure on the leaf looking out at the reader is the ape, crouching near the bottom right hand corner, smiling malevolently and holding a round object. While it is not clearly distinguishable, this object seems to be an apple, probably foreshadowing the Fall of Adam and Eve.

### III. Apes and the Study of Liminal Japery

H. W. Janson notes that apes 'played a more conspicuous part in marginal grotesques than any other animal,' but also states, rather pessimistically, that: 'To search for hidden meanings, symbolic, didactic, or satirical, in this fairy realm, would obviously be futile'.<sup>34</sup> Janson's research was primarily iconographic; while he

<sup>28</sup> Colin Platt, *Medieval Southampton: The Port and Trading Community, A.D. 1000-1600*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973, pp. 103-104.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Walker-Meikle, *Medieval Pets*, p. 13.

<sup>30</sup> Tompkins, *The Monkey in Art*, p. 8.

<sup>31</sup> Janson, *Apes and Ape Lore*, p. 30.

<sup>32</sup> *Cosmographia*, III.227-28 in Bernardus Silvestris, *Cosmographia*, ed. Peter Dronke, Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1978. Prose translation in: *The Cosmographia of Bernardus Silvestris*, trans. and ed. Winthrop Wetherbee, New York and London, Columbia University Press, 1973, p. 80.

<sup>33</sup> See: Fol. 5v: 'Adam naming the animals'. The Northumberland Bestiary has been digitised and is available freely for viewing online. See: J. Paul Getty Museum, 'Northumberland Bestiary', <http://www.getty.edu/art/gettyguide/artObjectDetails?artobj=304109>, (Accessed 1 March 2014).

<sup>34</sup> Janson, *Apes and Ape Lore*, p. 164.

provided some valuable insights into what the ape may have symbolised in general, his focus on the images alone and not their codicological context is of limited use in discussing marginal imagery. Contemporaneous to Janson, Lilian Randall, one of the first scholars to focus explicitly on the margins of Gothic manuscripts, provides a more optimistic outlook, stating that:

...some of the marginalia which today fall into the category of pure *drôlerie* or *grotesquerie* in all likelihood conveyed a specific meaning, possibly illustrative of the accompanying text, to the original owner or the illuminator of the manuscript.<sup>35</sup>

In order to understand this specific meaning, it is imperative to consider the marginalia in their full context, taking into account not only the central text and other imagery, but also the complex relationships between the patron, bookseller, scribes, and illuminators, and the different reading and praying practices which may have informed how the marginal imagery was actually viewed on the page. Michael Camille, whose authoritative monograph, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art*, provided an exciting new approach to the study of liminal imagery, argued most aptly that marginal images '... add an extra dimension, a supplement, that is able to gloss, parody, modernize and problematize the text's authority while never totally undermining it'.<sup>36</sup> He suggested that marginalia provided a direct or indirect commentary on the text at the centre, which was, more often than not, polysemous depending on the context.<sup>37</sup>

Camille's theory may be applied to Fol. 123v of Bodleian MS Douce 6, a Flemish psalter dating to the early fourteenth century that frequently portrays apes carrying out seemingly blasphemous actions in the margins. On the left-hand side of the leaf, linked to the foliate margin, is an ape seemingly in the guise of either a monk or a priest, holding a staff decorated with an animal skull, perhaps indicative of a generic pagan ritual. This ape-cleric is depicted blessing another two apes, who are copulating. This single image may have several layers of meaning which are worth unpacking. While the ape-priest seems to be making a mockery of the Church, through its amalgamation of Christian and generic pagan iconography, the copulating pair of apes may reflect a preoccupation with sexual gratification over spiritual purification. It should be noted too that this image does not just depict a generic sexual act, but sodomy, an act so maligned in canon law as *contra natura humanis*, or against human nature, that it became illegal from the late thirteenth century onwards.<sup>38</sup> The image may have also had a more practical function. At the centre of the leaf, the main text contains the first two verses of Psalm 128: '*Saepe expugnauerunt me ab adulescentia mea dicat nunc Israhel; saepe expugnauerunt me ab adulescentia mea sed non potuerunt mihi*' ['Often have they fought against me from my

<sup>35</sup> Lilian M. C. Randall, 'Exempla as a Source of Gothic Marginal Imagination', *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 39, No. 2, 1957, p. 102.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art*, London, Reakiton Books, 1992, p. 10.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Camille's discussion of the knight and snail motif in: Camille, *Image on the Edge*, p. 31-36.

<sup>38</sup> Vern L. Bullough; James Brundage, *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, Hoboken, Taylor and Francis, 2013, pp. 174-175.

youth, let Israel now say. Often have they fought against me from my youth: but they could not prevail over me’]. At a literal level, there does not seem to be any discernible relationship between the text on this leaf and the marginalia, but it is possible that this image was punning on the next verse, which appears on the following leaf: ‘*Super cervicem meam arabant arantes prolongaverunt sulcum suum*’ [‘The wicked have ploughed upon my back: they have lengthened their iniquity’]. The imagery, I suggest, may have acted as visual catch-word for the reader. While catch-words tend to occur only between quires as opposed to individual leaves, the imagery may have served to prefigure the main text on the next leaf for the reader, much like a visual mnemonic, however crude and sacrilegious it may seem to the modern viewer.

While it is not in the scope of this article to conduct a full study of the marginalia in their full codicological context in The Macclesfield Psalter, it must still be qualified that an understanding of the ways in which marginal illuminations were viewed or ‘read’ in relation to the central text may enhance our own interpretations of these often ambiguous images. By considering an example from the near-contemporary Bodleian MS Douce 6, we can see that these images may not have a single definitive meaning, but several different potential interpretations, depending on the methodological approach and personal context of the reader or viewer.

#### IV. Monkeys in the Margins of The Macclesfield Psalter

The Macclesfield Psalter, a tiny devotional manuscript that was made in East Anglia during the second quarter of the fourteenth century, has been lauded by scholars such as Christopher de Hamel as ‘the most important discovery of any English illuminated manuscript in living memory,’ and Lucy Freeman Sandler as ‘a window into the world of Medieval England’.<sup>39</sup> The manuscript was purchased by the J. Paul Getty Museum at an auction in Sotheby’s in 2004, and is currently residing in the Fitzwilliam Museum.<sup>40</sup> During its time at the Fitzwilliam Museum, the manuscript required extensive conservation as a result of several factors such as age, careless handling, and rebinding by various owners over the course of more than six hundred years.<sup>41</sup> Unfortunately, some of the marginal imagery had been damaged irrevocably, particularly due to the practice of trimming manuscripts to fit in new binding or on small shelves; in fact, one owner had actually cut out one of the illuminated initials in the middle of the manuscript.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, the urgent need for rebinding and restoring did have some positive aspects: it meant that it was possible for over sixty leaves to be displayed in the Cambridge Illuminations

<sup>39</sup> Both statements were made prior to - the auction of the Psalter in 2004, and are cited in: Panayotova, *The Macclesfield Psalter*, p. 11.

<sup>40</sup> Lynda Dennison gives a brief overview of the events that led to the Fitzwilliam Museum acquiring the manuscript, but it should be noted that the 2005 date for the Sotheby sale is a misprint. See: Lynda Dennison, ‘The Technical Mastery of the Macclesfield Psalter: A Preliminary Stylistic Appraisal of the Illuminations and their Suggested Origin’, *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 2006, p. 253. See also: Panayotova, *The Macclesfield Psalter*, p. 11.

<sup>41</sup> See: Robert Proctor, ‘The Conservation of the Macclesfield Psalter’ in Panayotova, *The Macclesfield Psalter*, pp. 344-45.

<sup>42</sup> See details in Panayotova, *The Macclesfield Psalter*, p. 345, and fol. 246.

exhibition during the latter half of 2005, and, even more significantly, it also allowed for the manuscript to be fully digitised and made widely available online and in facsimile form.<sup>43</sup>

Extensive work has been conducted to establish how the marginal illuminations of The Macclesfield Psalter fit into the broader context of the 'East Anglian tradition', which includes the Gorleston Psalter and the severely damaged Douai Psalter.<sup>44</sup> According to Nigel Morgan and Paul Binski: 'The Macclesfield Marginalia are unique in their density and profusion, compelling the reader to re-examine text and images page after page'.<sup>45</sup> In her seminal study of the Macclesfield Psalter, Stella Panayotova identifies several purposes that the marginal grotesques may have had. They may have served as visual mnemonic devices either by punning on individual words or syllables, or even by resembling particular letters.<sup>46</sup> The images may have also had a synaesthetic dimension to them, particularly in relation to sight and sound.<sup>47</sup> Sandler posits that while some of the grotesque images were overtly moralistic, many of them were probably placed in the manuscript to elicit laughter from the viewer: 'Laughter was not forbidden in the Middle Ages. It was part of everyday life, even at the heart of religious experience, as the exempla, misericords, and plays reveal'.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, much of the marginal imagery in The Macclesfield Psalter seems topical in nature, revealing how the patron, and probably the illuminator, perceived the world in which they lived.<sup>49</sup> Panayotova suggests that in the marginalia surrounding Psalms 30 and 31, there may have been some subtle commentary about the 'sodomitic' relationship between Edward II and Piers Gaveston, which remained a controversial matter long after the king's death in 1327.<sup>50</sup> The marginal grotesques reference a vast urban context, highlighting issues such as the divergent attitudes towards beggars, while portraying images of workers, performers, the peasantry and the nobility, and, of course, love, lust, and death.<sup>51</sup>

The richness of these images is reminiscent of those in the contemporaneous Luttrell Psalter. In the 1930s, E. G. Millar commented that 'the mind of a man who could deliberately set himself to ornament a book with such subjects... can hardly have been normal'.<sup>52</sup> In a more recent study, Michelle Brown responds to Millar's

<sup>43</sup> Panayotova, *The Macclesfield Psalter*, p. 344.

<sup>44</sup> See, for example: Christopher de Hamel, 'The Macclesfield Psalter' in Sotheby's, *The library of the Earls of Macclesfield removed from Shirburn Castle*, Part 3: Western Manuscripts, London, 22 June 2004, pp. 43, 47; Dennison, 'The Technical Mastery of the Macclesfield Psalter', pp. 253-288; *The Cambridge Illuminations*, exhibition catalogue, eds. Paul Binski; Stella Panayotova, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, 2005, pp. 187-188.

<sup>45</sup> *The Cambridge Illuminations*, p. 187.

<sup>46</sup> Panayotova, *The Macclesfield Psalter*, p. 63.

<sup>47</sup> Panayotova, *The Macclesfield Psalter*, p. 63. Camille also discusses the relationship between image and sound in marginal imagery, considering it in relation to the inherent musicality of prayer. See: Camille, *Image on the Edge*, p. 12.

<sup>48</sup> Lucy Freeman Sandler, 'In and around the text: the question of marginality in *The Macclesfield Psalter*', in *The Cambridge Illuminations: The Conference Papers*, ed. Stella Panayotova, London, Harvey Miller, 2007, p. 107.

<sup>49</sup> Panayotova, *The Macclesfield Psalter*, p. 63; Sandler, 'The question of marginality in *The Macclesfield Psalter*', p. 107.

<sup>50</sup> Panayotova, *The Macclesfield Psalter*, p. 63.

<sup>51</sup> Panayotova, *The Macclesfield Psalter*, pp. 64-65.

<sup>52</sup> E. G. Millar, *The Luttrell Psalter*, London, British Museum, 1932, p. 16.

criticism, which had been informed by his own aesthetic tastes, stating that the grotesques in the Luttrell Psalter were 'perhaps the only sane response to the traumas and absurdities of the age'.<sup>53</sup> The fourteenth century was a tumultuous period marked by war, plague, and political corruption, and Brown argues that these may be seen clearly in the recurrent marginal grotesques.<sup>54</sup> Not only does the Luttrell Psalter serve as what Brown aptly terms 'an unparalleled mirror of its age', but it also seeks to shape the future by 'placing the needs and preoccupations of the present within an eternal continuum and exploring the relationship between creature and creator'.<sup>55</sup> The animals and grotesques within the Luttrell Psalter are infused with symbolism, invoking the trope of *inversus mundi* to portray an anarchic world characterised by plague, war, and sin, which can only be held at bay through prayer and adherence to both the laws of God and of his earthly vice-regents.<sup>56</sup> Likewise, by viewing images in The Macclesfield Psalter, we may gain an insight into political, social, and ideological issues that may have been directly relevant to the owner. Throughout the manuscript, apes are depicted in several different contexts, seemingly with parodic undertones. I propose that they are representative of the various sins and vices inherent post-Edenic mankind, and possibly even a reflection of how the patron or illuminator perceived the world around them.

Fol. 22r contains an ape-physician treating a sickly bear.<sup>57</sup> The bear is lying down, wrapped in a blanket, seemingly unable to move, while the ape is standing nearby, looking as if it is speaking to the bear whilst holding aloft what looks like a flask, possibly containing some sort of cure, or the patient's urine, a motif normally used to identify a particular figure as a physician.<sup>58</sup> Throughout his analysis of parodic animal-physicians in art, David A. Sprunger argues that society as a whole was suspicious of those in the medical profession during the medieval period.<sup>59</sup> The most common belief, at least as expressed in art and literature, was that physicians benefitted from the illness and misfortune of other people, and as a result they came under attack constantly for inefficiency and dangerous malpractice.<sup>60</sup> In the General Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer described the Physician as somebody who lusted after gold:

In sangwyn and in pers he clad was al,  
Lyned with taffata and with sendal;  
And yet he was but esy of dispence;  
He kepte that he wan in pestilence.

---

<sup>53</sup> Michelle Brown, *The World of the Luttrell Psalter*, London, British Library, 2006, p. 85.

<sup>54</sup> Brown, *The World of the Luttrell Psalter*, p. 85; Michelle Brown, *The Luttrell Psalter: A Facsimile*, London, British Library, 2006, p. 19.

<sup>55</sup> Brown, *The Luttrell Psalter*, p. 1.

<sup>56</sup> Brown, *The Luttrell Psalter*, p. 19.

<sup>57</sup> See: Panayotova, *The Macclesfield Psalter*, fol. 22r.

<sup>58</sup> David A. Sprunger, 'Parodic Animal Physicians in the Margins of Medieval Manuscripts', in *Animals in the Middle Ages*, ed. Nona C. Flores, New York, Routledge, 2000, pp. 70-71.

<sup>59</sup> Sprunger, 'Parodic Animal Physicians', p. 67.

<sup>60</sup> Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1973, pp. 91-92, p. 250, n. 24.

For gold in phisik is a cordial,  
Therefore he lovede gold in special.<sup>61</sup>

Chaucer's physician was, on the whole, a competent practitioner; nevertheless, the underlying idea that he profited from the sicknesses of other people is still evident in the richness of his garb and his love for money. Sebastian Brant's *Ship of Fools*, composed in 1498, is even less kind to physicians, focusing not on their material greed but on their innate stupidity:

A fool is he, of little skill,  
Who tests the urine of the ill  
And says: "Wait, sir, and be so kind,  
The answer in my books I'll find."  
And while he thumbs the folios  
The patient to the bone yard goes.<sup>62</sup>

Although Brant's lampooning of the medical profession was written far later than the period we are currently concerned with, I suggest that the ideas that he promulgates were still relevant. Sprunger argues that apes were used popularly as parodic physicians due to 'their physical resemblance to humans and their capacity to mimic and not understand human behaviour'.<sup>63</sup> This is an entirely feasible explanation; apes were, by the fourteenth century, relatively well-known due to their portrayal in popular Bestiaries and stories, not to mention their increasing physical presence on the European continent and even in England. Thus, the physical similitude between apes and humans would certainly not have gone unnoticed. The ape in The Macclesfield Psalter is perhaps unusual for its lack of expensive accoutrements, but the flask it holds, plus the fact that it is accompanied by a prone, unhappy looking bear, implies its status as a physician, a figure linked with greed and folly bordering on malevolence.

There are also examples of the simian representing profane lust throughout The Macclesfield Psalter. Fol. 155r depicts an ape, dressed in expensive robes, passionately kissing a goat, wearing similarly expensive garb.<sup>64</sup> According to Isidore of Seville, the goat:

... is a lascivious animal, butting and always eager to mate; his eyes look sideways on account of wantonness, whence he has taken his name, for according to Suetonius... *hirqui* are the corners of the eyes. His nature is so ardent that his blood by itself dissolves adamantine stone, which can be overpowered by neither fire nor iron.<sup>65</sup>

In this case, the goat is wearing what seems to be a woman's dress, while the ape wears a hooded robe with a sword sheathed on his belt. The manner in which the

<sup>61</sup> General Prologue, 439-444, in Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 30.

<sup>62</sup> Sebastian Brant, *The Ship of Fools*, trans. Edwyn Zeydel, New York, Dover Books, 1966, p. 188.

<sup>63</sup> Sprunger, 'Parodic Animal Physicians', p. 72.

<sup>64</sup> Panayotova, *The Macclesfield Psalter*, fol. 155r.

<sup>65</sup> Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, XII.i.14, trans. in *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, pp. 247-248.

sword protrudes behind him is indicative of a phallic symbol, denoting the ape's status as a male. While apes are not necessarily associated directly with lasciviousness, this example may nonetheless be seen to represent the weaknesses of men in the face of aggressive female sexuality. As Adam was believed to have been tempted by the guiles of Eve, the simian here, almost forcibly drawn into the kiss by the goat's front hooves holding his face, succumbs to his innate lust.

In another, arguably more confronting example, an ape, not wearing any clothes, attempts to rape a villager, whose gender is ambiguous.<sup>66</sup> The image accompanies the first verse of Psalm 32, which describes the blessed 'whose sins are covered,' and Panayotova posits that the image may have been based on the story of Marcolf, who managed to persuade Solomon to look into his anus.<sup>67</sup> While this is possibly one way that the image may have been understood, I wish to propose an alternate interpretation which may explain more specifically why an ape was used instead of a more explicit depiction of Solomon. Debra Hassig argues that the marginalia of medieval manuscripts drew on the same tradition as Bestiaries, 'which consistently view animal behavior in terms of human moral conduct, with a special emphasis on the dangers of female sexuality'.<sup>68</sup> I suggest that the image here reflects the existence, if not the predominance, of a negative conceptualisation of male sexuality. In this case, the villager grips onto the foliate margin, a look of distress on their face, as the gleeful looking simian sits behind them, holding their backside, leering lasciviously. While in the previous example, the ape seemed to be on the receiving end of the she-goat's amorous affections, here it is, unambiguously, the aggressor.

Perhaps the most overt example of the simian representing the inherent baseness of humanity occurs towards the end of the manuscript. An ape sits on its own, on a branch which reaches underneath the foliate margin, eating a red object, discernible as an apple.<sup>69</sup> While in other examples throughout the manuscript, apes were portrayed as larger than life, behaving in the same way as their human counterparts, in this leaf we see a more subdued creature: small, hunched, and animal-like. Alongside the serpent, the apple is often considered to be the definitive symbol of the Original Sin and subsequent Fall of Man. George Ferguson argues that this is due in part to the identical etymology for the words 'apple' and 'evil': the Latin word *malum*.<sup>70</sup> This is not quite true; the two words are similar, but the word for 'apple', *mālum* differs slightly due to a long 'ā' sound.<sup>71</sup> Nevertheless, in spite of etymological differences, there may have still been a connoted link between the words 'apple' and 'evil' simply because they sounded similar and were spelt the same. There is also a long-standing tradition of apes depicted with apples, prefiguring the Original Sin, such as in the Northumberland Bestiary that was

---

<sup>66</sup> Panayotova, *The Macclesfield Psalter*, fol. 45v. Panayotova argues that the villager is a young man, but I am more inclined to view the gender as ambiguous due to the colour and styling of the clothing the villager wears, and the length of their hair. See: Panayotova, *The Macclesfield Psalter*, p. 63.

<sup>67</sup> Panayotova, *The Macclesfield Psalter*, p. 63.

<sup>68</sup> Debra Hassig, 'Sex in the Bestiaries', in *The Mark of the Beast*, ed. Debra Hassig, New York, Routledge, 2000, p. 72.

<sup>69</sup> Panayotova, *The Macclesfield Psalter*, fol. 239r.

<sup>70</sup> George Ferguson, *Signs & Symbols in Christian Art*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1954, pp. 27-28.

<sup>71</sup> Definitions of both terms accessed in Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*.

discussed earlier. A later example, Frans Francken and David Teniers' *The Interior of a Picture Gallery* (c. 1615-50), contains, in the foreground of an image, a fettered ape holding an apple, perhaps a symbol of man being chained to vice.<sup>72</sup> While the association of the apple with the Original Sin seems definitive, it is not the only possible meaning; apples, like apes, are polyvalent. Ferguson posits that the apple is also symbolic of Christ and thus salvation, basing his interpretation on a line from the Song of Solomon, 2.3:

*sicut malum inter ligna silvarum sic dilectus meus inter filios sub umbra illius quam desideraveram sedi et fructus eius dulcis gutturi meo.*

[As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons. I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste].<sup>73</sup>

The beloved in the Song of Solomon is generally believed to refer to Christ himself; thus, the apple is not only an allusion to Original Sin, but also to the promise of eventual salvation for humanity. When shown in conjunction with the ape, we are thus presented with two possible interpretations. It remains feasible to say that the ape here may be the very embodiment of sin, that it represents the fateful act that condemned humanity to its fallen state. Conversely, this final depiction of the ape may have more hopeful connotations, that mankind can be redeemed by Christ, as embodied by the apple.

## V. Conclusion

Bernard of Clairvaux, in his *Apologia ad Guillelmum Sancti Theoderici Abbatem*, famously condemned what he considered to be the frivolous use of animals in Clunaic art and architecture during the first half of the twelfth century.

*Caeterum in claustris coram legentibus fratribus quid facit illa ridicula monstrositas mira quaedam deformis formositas, ac formosa deformitas? Quid ibi immundae simiae? Quid feri leones? Quid monstruosi centauri? Quid semihomines? Quid maculosae tigrides? Quid milites pugnantes? Quid venatores tubicinantes? ...Proh Deo! Si non pudat ineptiarum, cur vel non piget expensarium?*

[But in cloisters, where the brothers are reading, what is the point of this ridiculous monstrosity, this shapely misshapeness, this misshapen shapeliness? What is the point of those unclean apes? What of the fierce lions? What of the monstrous centaurs? What of the half-men? What of the striped tigers? What of the fighting soldiers? What

<sup>72</sup> Image and discussion accessed at: Lucy Cutler, 'The Monkey in Art', *The Courtauld Institute of Art*, [http://www.artandarchitecture.org.uk/insight/cutler\\_monkey/cutler\\_monkey01.html](http://www.artandarchitecture.org.uk/insight/cutler_monkey/cutler_monkey01.html), (Accessed 1 September 2014).

<sup>73</sup> Ferguson, *Signs & Symbols*, p. 28.

of the trumpet-blowing hunters? ...Good Lord! If we are not embarrassed by the stupidity, why are we not disgusted by the expense?]<sup>74</sup>

Nevertheless, the use of humorous, often profane and seemingly blasphemous imagery continued to pervade art and architecture, even centuries after Bernard's death. Apes, well-known for their similarities to humans, were especially prominent, particularly in the margins of Gothic devotional and liturgical manuscripts. These images may have had several purposes, acting as mnemonic devices, commentaries on the central text or broader societal issues, or perhaps even all of the above. The depiction of animals in marginalia may also provide us with an insight into how individuals may have viewed themselves in relation to the broader cosmos. An initial iconographic analysis of the ways in which simians were portrayed in The Macclesfield Psalter has reinforced the notion that the relationship between men and apes remained prominent in late medieval religious world views. Greed and lust, the two vices that resulted in the Original Sin are depicted throughout the lavishly illustrated manuscript, with the simian representing the debased form of post-Edenic mankind. The very last portrayal of the ape may, depending on the personal outlook of the reader, be understood in two ways: a resounding condemnation of the frailties of mankind, or a promise of eventual salvation through the body of Christ.

---

<sup>74</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *Apologia ad Guillelmum Sancti Theoderici Abbatem*, accessed at Marco Binetti, 'Complete Works of St. Bernard of Clairvaux', <http://www.binetti.ru/bernardus/14.shtml>, (Accessed 28 March 2014). My translation.

### *Author Biography*

Kelly Midgley is a postgraduate at the University of Western Australia, currently in her second and final year of the Master of Medieval and Early Modern Studies program. She is in the process of writing her dissertation, tentatively entitled *Salacious Simians in the Margins of Gothic Devotional Books*, and has just embarked on a second, as yet untitled, research project on the influence of emotions in the manipulation of historical memory. Outside her studies, Kelly has worked as a tutor since early 2012, helping students from grades three to twelve, as well as those just beginning their tertiary studies, to develop their essay writing and research skills. She is also an avid reader, particularly of science-fiction and fantasy, and an occasional actor in workshops and amateur theatre productions, with particular love for the works of William Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

### *In Memoriam of Philippa Maddern*

Although I only had the pleasure of knowing Philippa for a relatively short period, as a supervisor for my Master of Medieval and Early Modern Studies dissertation, the influence she had on my work and outlook on life was immense. Her immediate excitement when, stuttering and with shaking hands, I first described my proposed project to her, was contagious, and every time I left her office after a meeting I felt energised and excited to continue researching and writing. Philippa had a wonderful way of instilling confidence in people, and as a young scholar who struggles often with confidence issues, I can say that this is one of the greatest gifts that a teacher can give to a student. I remember in one of our early meetings, Philippa said that for me to become a world expert in my chosen area of study is a very real possibility. I was initially taken aback, unable to believe that *I* could achieve such a thing, but on reflection I realise that these are words that perhaps every fledgling researcher needs to hear at some point, not as empty plactions, but as a way to inspire one to continue working hard, even during those times when everything seems impossible. Philippa had a special way of inspiring her students to persevere and do their best, and this, I feel, will form a large part of her immense legacy as a great teacher, mentor, scholar, and friend.