

Medieval uroscopy and its representation on misericords – Part 2: misericords

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ABSTRACT – By the fifteenth century the practice of uroscopy was falling into disrepute and the uroscopy flask (matula) became a symbol of ridicule. On the carved misericords in choir stalls, the physician holding the matula was commonly represented as an ape, with the allegorical implications of foolishness, vanity and even lechery. The ape uroscopist was frequently shown with his friend the fox, an animal that was often used to satirise the less-than-perfect cleric, and this association may reflect the close ties between the medical and clerical professions in the medieval period.

KEY WORDS: uroscopy, matula, misericords

By the fifteenth century the art of uroscopy, which involved the visual inspection of urine in a specially shaped flask, called a matula or jordan, was falling into disrepute, partly because of its misuse by orthodox physicians and partly because it was used increasingly by unqualified practitioners and imposters¹. The matula became a symbol of ridicule and was used as such on the carved misericords in choir stalls.

Misericords

Misericords are wooden projections on the undersides of the hinged seats found in the choir stalls of monastic and collegiate churches and cathedrals^{2,3}. When the seat is in the upright position the flat upper surface of the misericord forms a narrow bench on which the occupant can rest some of his weight, while still appearing to stand. They were introduced in the twelfth century as a concession to elderly monks who were required to say the Divine Offices up to eight times throughout the 24 hours, mostly while standing. Before the Reformation misericords were found throughout Western Europe, with the exception of Italy. The English design, which had been established by the thirteenth century, consisted of a principal central carving with additional carvings on the lateral supporters. The subject matter was sometimes religious but more

commonly secular, at least until 1563 when the Council of Trent forbade the use of temporal subjects in churches⁴. Prior to 1563, the illustrations were often non-religious and sometimes actually irreligious or frankly obscene; however, even then, they frequently bore some moral message, often couched in satirical humour⁵. For example, in Bristol Cathedral, a woman is shown in the act of fellatio, an illustration of a wanton woman's power to command and destroy the man's virility⁶, and perhaps a sly reminder to the monks, from the lay carver, of their vows of celibacy. Pictures of animals, both natural and mythical, were often used because of their allegorical associations, which would be known to and understood by a largely illiterate population. In this respect, the ape is of particular relevance in engravings with a medical theme. The ape was known for its uncontrolled sexual passions (in Great Malvern Priory an ape is shown having its arse – the seat of carnal passion – fanned with a bellows) and also for its foolishness⁵. As such, it was often used to satirise the errant clergy⁷ but, above all, it came to represent 'that huge humbug'³, the medieval doctor, who was so foolish as to think that he could diagnose illness by examining a flask of the patient's urine^{8,9}. Perhaps apes were also used to represent the medical profession because they were prone to self-adoration and grooming⁸ (the Sin of Vanity); one hopes that it was not because medieval physicians were also particularly given to the Sin of Lechery! Janson suggests that, in Gothic marginal art, the use of the ape to satirise the physician began in the mid-fourteenth century⁹, though a monkey and a charlatan are shown together on a stone carving in Bayeux Cathedral dated between 1142 and 1163. The ape is sometimes shown in association with his friend the fox, who is cunning (like the Devil)¹⁰ and who is also used to satirise the less-than-perfect cleric⁷. The use of the ape to represent both physicians and clerics, and the association between ape physicians and foxes in medieval marginal art, perhaps represent the close ties between the two professions at this time, when the medical practitioner was often also a priest with a responsibility for the spiritual as well as the earthly health of his patients¹¹.

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Fig 1. Misericord in Great Malvern Priory. Reproduced with permission from C Grössinger, *The world upside-down: English misericords*. London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 1997.

Misericords that depict uroscopy

As described below, Remnant¹² and Grössinger (*op cit*) both describe eight churches and one cathedral in which there are a total of ten misericords and one choir-stall end that depict uroscopy; on two misericords the uroscopist is a man but on the other eight he is shown as an ape, and on four of these is associated with a fox. Remnant also gives four other possible examples of ape or monkey uroscopists: in Bristol Cathedral; St George's Chapel, Windsor; St Mary of Charity, Faversham; and St Stephen, Sneinton.

The majority of these carvings were executed between the early fourteenth and mid-fifteenth centuries, with just two examples, in Manchester Cathedral and Beverley Minster, in the early years of the sixteenth century. It is, therefore, evident that uroscopy had been the subject of satire in this marginal art for at least 150 years before it was ridiculed by Elizabethan dramatists and prohibited by the College of Physicians¹.



Fig 2. Misericord in Holy Trinity, Stratford-upon-Avon. Reproduced with permission from C Grössinger, *The world upside-down: English misericords*. London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 1997.

In Great Malvern Priory (Fig 1) the doctor examines a flask of the patient's urine while a woman supports the patient, who is offering a bag of money to the doctor. The same scene is also found in nearby Tewkesbury Abbey. These are the only English examples in which the doctor is represented as a man rather than an ape. In St Mary's, Beverley, the ape physician examines the urine flask while the patient holds what may be either a coin or a host (it is marked with a cross). Grössinger suggests that if it is a coin then it is in payment for the promised cure, and if it is a host then it may represent salvation through Christ in a world of quackery⁸. On a misericord in Holy Trinity, Stratford-upon-Avon (where Shakespeare is buried), the central composition shows two bears with a ragged staff (a variation on the badge of the Earls of Warwick) while the lateral supporters show two chained apes, one of whom is providing a urine sample and the other examining it (Fig 2).

Other examples of apes practising uroscopy are to be found in Manchester Cathedral, Cartmel Priory and Beverley Minster.

The ape physician is shown with his friend the fox in a number of compositions. In the church of St John the Baptist, St Lawrence and St Anne, Knowle, the ape, who wears a monk's hood, lectures to two foxes while pointing at the flask in his hand. In St Mary's, Beverley, a fox that has been wounded by an arrow offers a purse to the ape uroscopist. In St Botolph's, Boston, a fox brings a bucket of his droppings to the consultation with the ape uroscopist, and in the same church a fox and an ape physician are shown on the elbow of a choir stall¹³.

Examples of uroscopy are also found on misericords and choir-stall ends in mainland Europe. In Spain, uroscopy is shown on misericords in Seville and León, where the physicians are shown as men rather than apes¹⁴. On a choir stall in Cologne Cathedral an ape physician is anointing an owl⁹ – a creature of the night and, therefore, associated with the forces of darkness.

(The association of an ape, without a matula, and an owl also occurs in Winchester Cathedral¹².) On a late fifteenth century misericord at Villiers sur Loir in France two apes are using a pestle and mortar, which suggests that they may be apothecaries.

Physicians may take some comfort in knowing that they were not the only healthcare professionals to be ridiculed on misericords. In St George's Chapel, Windsor, a barber (a trade allied to surgery) is shown as an ape⁸, and in Ely Cathedral a dentist is depicted as the Devil³!

Acknowledgement

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References and notes

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- 3 Bond F. *Wood carvings in English churches. 1. Misericords*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1910.
- 4 Grössinger C. *The world upside-down: English misericords*. London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 1997:121.
- 5 Grössinger. *op cit* 13–19.
- 6 Grössinger. *op cit* 73, explains that even subjects as obscene as this were permissible in the most sacred part of the church, close to the altar and Sacrament, because they were ‘below the bottom line’ where real bottoms, which were associated with the vilest of passions, were, quite literally, in contact with them.
- 7 Grössinger. *op cit* 77.
- 8 Grössinger. *op cit* 99–101.
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- 11 Rawcliffe C. God, mammon and the physician: medicine in England before the College. *J R Coll Physicians Lond* 2000;34:266–72.
- 12 Remnant GL. *A catalogue of misericords in Great Britain*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969.
- 13 In three of the churches where ape uroscopists are depicted (Beverley Minster, St Mary’s, Beverley, and Cartmel Priory) there are also carvings in which an ape or monkey without a matula is shown with a fox, and the same association occurs in St George’s Chapel, Windsor.
- 14 Fernández FL-R. *Arte y medicina en las mesericordias de los coros españoles*. León: Junta de Castilla y León, 1991:40–5.

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