
Physical and Social Inversions in the Topsy-Turvy World

Elaine C. Block

He ys lovyd that wele can lye;
 And thevys tru men honge;
To God I rede that we cry,
 That this lyfe last not longe.
This world is turnyd up-so-doune among;
 For frerys ar confessourys, ageyn a kynde,
To the chefe ladyes of this londe;
 Therefor the bysom ledys the blynde.

In this poem, “On the Corruption of the Times”¹ dated August 24, 1456, wisdom and truth are depicted as absent from the state. The blind are leading the blind; the world is upside down. Complaints against the fifteenth century social system cited in the many stanzas of this poem include:

- poor men raised to be the peers of the land,
- men ignorant of the laws dispensing justice,
- robbers and men who yearned only for private gain established as righteous men,
- court officials selling judgments for money,
- friars appointed confessors to the chief ladies of the land,
- prelates selling pardons and absolutions.

The prevailing sanctity was rooted in “hell”, and sin reigned supreme. This crumbling condition of the world, far from the

¹ British Library, ms Harley 5396 f. 295r, dated August 24, 1456. Quoted in Thomas Wright, A Collection of Political Songs and Poems, pp 235. London: 1896.

Creator's design, is "the world turnyd up-so-doune". The social criticism expressed in literature and art were entertaining to the reader and viewer, but they were more than amusing cartoons.²

Sixteenth Century Broadsides

The humorous aspects of this topsy-turvy world were underscored, especially in sixteenth century broadsides depicting the sky below and the earth above,³ or hunters netting fowl from the sea while fish nested in the trees. These are the "impossibilia" which we generally associate with the world upside down, the topsy-turvy world. They are inversions of natural elements, impossible in the real world, except perhaps to the astronauts today who may actually see the earth above and the sky below.

Another category of "impossibilia" is described in the poem on "complaints": disturbances and inversions of the divine hierarchy created carefully by the Supreme Being so that each angel, person, animal, and even stone had its ideal and immutable niche and function in the world.

The broadsides show the inversion of male and female roles — the wife goes off to war while the husband sits home and spins. And the wife thrashes her husband instead of the acceptable and necessary "correction" of the wife by the husband.

There is inversion of servant and master — the master polishes the servant's shoes or walks while the servant rides.

There is inversion of age — the child rocks the parent to sleep or whips the teacher for laziness and poor grades.

² For an analysis of the "world-upside down" in Shakespeare's plays see Jean Klene, "The Fool, Folly and the World Upside Down in 'Measure for Measure'" in *The Upstart Crow*, Vol III (1980), 1-10.

³ For reproductions of sixteenth century broadsides see Frederick Tristram, *Le Monde a l'envers*. Paris: Hachette, 1980.

There is inversion of weak and strong, usually depicted by reversing roles of men and animals. The horse shoes the man or more dramatically, the pig slays the butcher.

The world upside down can actually represent several worlds if we understand the reversals as the crumbling of the social order. The world of Satan was a reversal of the world of God. Here the witch's Sabbat replaced the Eucharist. The world of the reformers was a reversal of the Catholic world. The world of the fool was a reversal of the realm of the king. The world of plenty, as in the Land of Cocaigne, was based on standard reversals but stressed reversal of the world of scarcity and want to create a world of plenty.

...there where the lions were black and the chickens covered with wool, there where certain trees only bloomed at night while, by day, the leaves were formed; there where certain fish bore feathers like birds, and certain birds bore shells like fish, there where one found stones which floated on water, and wood which sank like stones; there where certain worms were resplendent as torches and where certain waters inebriated like wine; there where the women thought it reprehensible to be honest and where men felt bestiality was noble; there where birth was clothed in mourning and at death one rejoiced in the midst of dances and banquets; there where iron was worth more than gold, glass and crystal preferred to jewels and diamonds.⁴

Added to this glorious world was a fountain of youth, fruit that fell into one's waiting mouth, and animals that begged to be killed and eaten. Laziness was glorified and workers were jailed. Licentiousness reigned supreme.

⁴ "The Land of Cocaigne and Utopia" from thirteenth century fabliau. Luca Assarino in *I Givochi di Fortuna*. Venice, 1669 unpublished. Quoted in F. Tristram, *Le Monde a l'envers*. p 39. Translation by the writer.

Origins of the Topsy-Turvy World

Topsy-turvy worlds were portrayed in the sixteenth century on popular woodblocks designed for the non-reading public. However, this type of motif had appeared in art and literature from ancient times. An example of an animal-human inversion, a lion and an antelope playing the game of senet, is one of many scenes where animals "ape" human activities in a satirical Egyptian papyrus.⁵ Pagan celebrations, especially the Saturnalia, reversed servant-master roles as well as good and evil. During the medieval feast of fools, the fool reigned supreme. There were inversions in the recital of the mass as donkeys brayed behind the altar. On Holy Innocents' day a child replaced the bishop and conducted the sacred rituals.

The World Upside Down on Misericords

Many of the topsy-turvy motifs appeared on medieval choir stalls and the wood carvers used these inversions to portray the crumbling of the ideal world.⁶

Choir stall carving was big business in the Middle Ages, with its zenith in the fifteenth century. Misericords were in a topsy-turvy place to begin with, for they were invisible when the hinged seats were down, and hidden by the praying monks and canons when they were raised. Misericords, therefore, were the perfect medium for topsy-turvy themes. Carvers used several types of inversions.

⁵ Satirical papyrus from the Ramesside Period, now at the British Museum in London.

⁶ Several hundred misericords in European churches, cathedrals and abbeys show "world-upside-down motifs. Some of these have been identified in Christa Grossinger, "Humour and Folly in English Misericords of the First Quarter of the Sixteenth Century," *Early Tudor England*, 1988.

1. Natural elements, such as parts of the body, are reversed or displaced.
2. Animals exhibit physical and psychological traits of humans; and humans, conversely, display animal qualities.
3. Animals do the work of humans and, less often, men do the work of animals.
4. Animals are in positions of power over men.
5. Weaker animals exchange roles with the stronger.
6. Sex roles are reversed.
7. The visible becomes invisible.

Animals played an important part in most inversions. In the oral tradition, animals were used to represent human physical and psychological traits, and this technique made substitutions effective. A pig, taking a human role, would be associated with gluttony and drunkenness; a fox with the qualities of deception and guile. Rabbits were cowardly. Donkeys were lazy. These qualities could be easily conveyed by depicting the animal, rather than a human, in a social situation.

Natural Elements Are Reversed

While we do not see any inversions of sky and earth on misericords, we do see some inversions or displacements of natural elements. Sometimes people and animals stand on their heads (Fig. 1). At Beverley Minster a woman may be milking a bull for there is no sign of an udder (Fig.2). If milk is actually obtained from the bull it is indeed an example of the topsy-turvy world. However, if milk

cannot be obtained in this manner, it is a foolhardy act and probably illustrates a proverb "To milk the bull".⁷

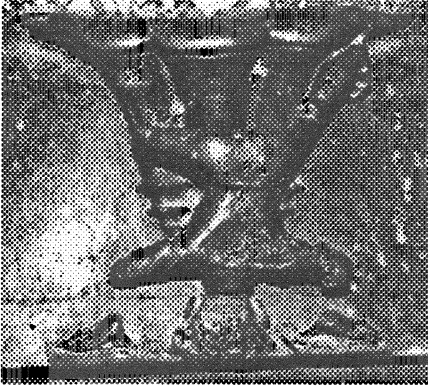


Fig. 1: Stand on One's Head
Toledo, Spain



Fig. 2: To Milk the Bull
Beverly Minster

⁷ Malcolm Jones. "The Depiction of Proverbs in Late Medieval Art", *Collection Recherches Germanique* No. 2. Strasbourg, 1989. p. 211.

Another example of a reversal of natural functions is the ducat man on an Amsterdam choir stall (Fig. 3). The “waste” that he defecates has turned into the most valuable wealth.



Fig. 3: Man defecates Gold Coins

Amsterdam

Animals Exhibit Physical and Psychological Traits of Humans

On misericords and other choir stall carvings, we see monkeys and donkeys, foxes, pigs and a variety of other animals acting like humans.

- They stand on two feet.
- They wear human clothing.
- They read and write.
- They eat human food from household containers. (Fig. 4)

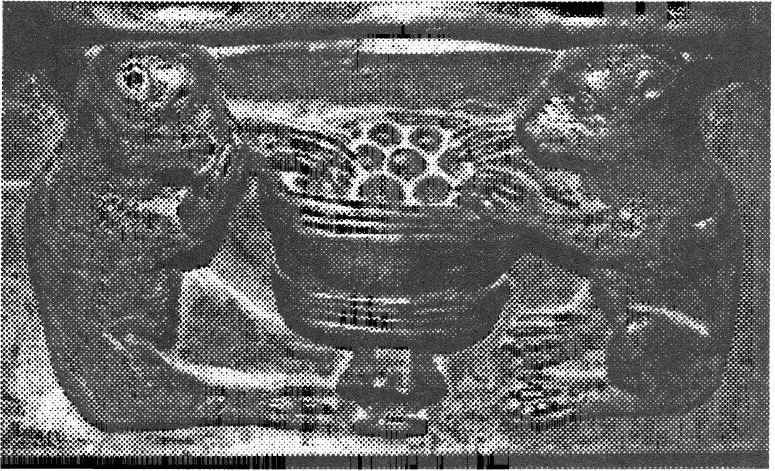


Fig. 4: Animals Eat from Bowl

Zamora, Spain

The nun-pig at Ciudad Rodrigo looks strangely like a creature in Bosch's "Garden of Delights".⁸ Both may be writing their testaments, forced to leave their worldly goods to the church.

Animals play games and provide entertainment such as the ape at Beverley minster who cruelly manipulates a dog as if it were a set of bagpipes. On a misericord at Norwich Cathedral a jester from the real world performs the same act.

We also see animals who:

- admire the rear parts of their anatomy in mirrors usually employed to view facial features.
- show affection by sitting on laps, by hugging and kissing, care for their children in human ways.
- ride in carts.
- participate in burial processions and church rites.
- say the rosary (Fig. 5).

⁸ Jerome Bosch: "Garden of Delights". Madrid: Del Prado Museum



Fig. 5: Donkey says Rosary

Kalkar, St Nicholas

Perhaps these carvings reinforce our superior self-image, for animals cannot really do these things even if they wish to do so. Both human and animal worlds obey an ordained plan in which only humans walk upright, wear clothing, and follow social customs and sacred rites. When animals behave this way, however, we realize at once how foolish humans can often be. Is clothing ostentatious? Is play merely sloth? Are we gluttons? Are we lustful? Are we reading forbidden books? Or not concentrating as we read, especially if we are scratching ourselves at the time? Are funeral processions based on hypocrisy, with mourners parading to be seen rather than to show grief? The slothful pigs, the sly foxes, the lusty apes mirror the basic instincts of man. In a humorous way these animals show us the crumbling of our own moral values.

Humans Exhibit Animal Qualities

Many of the choir stall carvings show humans with some modified anatomical details. The most common is a human head with ass's ears (Fig. 6). The head is always male, sometimes a monk. We have not yet encountered an ass-eared woman. With the world shifted a few degrees, we see the error of people who act like asses — slow, stubborn, eavesdropping, acting counter to the preordained hierarchy of the world.

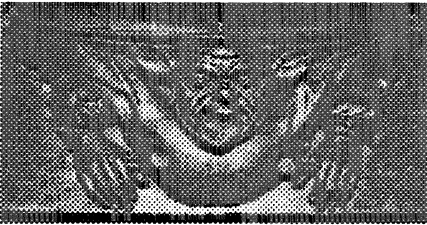


Fig. 6: Fool with Ass's Ears
Windsor, St George

The carvers turned the world still farther on its head to show man-monsters portraying the most evil of human instincts. Humans are given claws, serpent bodies, or heads where their entrails should be (Fig. 7). They fight and writhe in agony. They are the devil in myriad forms.



Fig. 7: Devil
Najera, Spain

Animals Do the Work of Men

The choir stall carvers turned the world of work upside down by assigning animals to do the work of man.

- Foxes teach.
- Apes peddle fruits and vegetables.
- Apes thieve.
- Pigs tend sheep or spin (Fig. 8).



Fig. 9: Pig Spins Amsterdam, Oude Kirk

How can we respect a learned physician after we have seen an ape or fox holding up a urinal to diagnose an ailment from the color of its contents⁹ (Fig. 9)? We also see apes treating patients with a clyster, a dreaded experience but a medical commonplace.¹⁰

⁹ There are many ape physicians such as those at Manchester Cathedral, Cartmel Priory, Beverley St. Mary, and Cologne Cathedral.

¹⁰ There are apes with clysters at the Collegiate church at Villefranche-de-Rouergue and at Malvern Priory.



Fig. 9: Ape Physician Cologne

And who were the ape-doctors' patients? Foxes, owls and monks! In a quatrefoil under a Cologne misericord we see a human doctor tending a woman, while an ape in the adjoining image treats an owl. This, we feel, is a strong anti-judaic statement for the owl symbolized the Jew who allegedly did not "see the light". This is another inverted world, with the blind owl and the sly fox as patient and physician (Fig. 10).



Fig. 10: Ape Treats Owl Toledo, Spain

Pigs and an occasional ape or squirrel perform the “woman’s work” of spinning, thus denigrating not only that task but the dignity of women as well. The sow may nurse her young as she works. Or the owl, who does not “see the light”, may be her companion. On one misericord an ape casually spins his excrement (Fig. 11).



Fig. 11: Ape Spins Excrement Kalkar, Germany

Friars suffered the most at the hands of the carvers.¹¹ A sly fox preaching to the geese, cocks, hens and ducks alludes to the holy men’s lack of sincere dedication to the church. Even worse, the fox-friar hides members of his congregation in his cowl until he has time to cook them for his dinner (Fig. 12). In addition to being shown as animals, the Spanish clergy are also shown clothed in

¹¹ For examples of fox preachers on English misericords see Kenneth Varty, Reynard the Fox: A Study of the Fox in English Medieval Art. Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1967.

pigskins instead of priestly vestments or monk's cowls¹² (Fig. 13). Pigskins, normally used to store wine, indicated that the priests had imbibed more than their share of intoxicating liquids. In Spain too, the friars are shown performing unsaintly activities some of which are described in the English poem; they seduce women (Fig. 14) and perform homosexual acts.

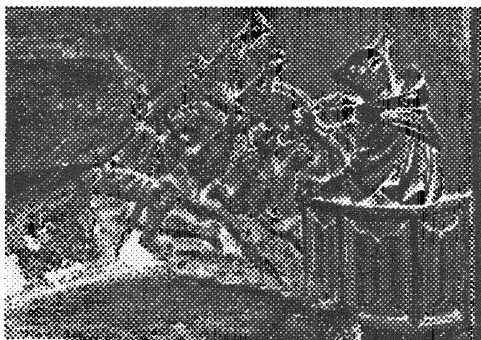


Fig. 12: Fox Preacher

Zamora, Spain



Fig. 13: Monks in Wineskins

Ciudad Rodrigo, Spain

¹² For an expanded discussion of clerical satires on Spanish misericords see Isabel Mateo Gomez, "La satira religiosa en las sillerias de coro gotica espanolas", in *Archivo Espanol Arte* 47:301-316. July, 1974.



Fig. 14: Monk Seduces Woman

Zamora, Spain

Animals Are in Positions of Power Over Men

The most striking reversal of man's power over animals is story of the rabbits who roast the hunter. Israel Van Mechenem etched this story.¹³ It was copied on one misericord at Manchester Cathedral, and simplified on the back of a choir stall in Evora, Portugal. The sculpture shows many details of this violent story. Two rabbits turn the spit to roast a hunter still clad in coat and soft high boots, with a scarf under his chin and a horn hanging from a strap over his shoulder. Rabbits lift the lids of pots to make sure that the hunting dogs are well boiled. A rabbit with a saltbox is ready to season the pot. Another rabbit has a dead dog slung over his shoulder. Thus the weak animals do the impossible, killing the human who ordinarily hunts them, and then dining on human food.

¹³ The Albertina Museum in Vienna and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York have examples of the Van Mechenem engraving *The Hares Roast the Hunter*.

Weak Animals Conquer the Strong

The weak impossibly gaining power over the strong is also shown by reversals of strong and weak animals: the mice hang the cat,¹⁴ the geese hang the fox,¹⁵ the cock eats the fox.¹⁶

Sex Roles Are Reversed

In the world right-side up, women were subservient to men. They stayed home and spun wool, took care of the children and obeyed the “better” sex. But the carvers delighted in showing the impossible reversal of women who beat their husbands unrestrainedly, fought to wear the pants in the family,¹⁷ killed lions,¹⁸ and ruled the roost making monkeys of their husbands.¹⁹

The story of Phyllis the courtesan, who seduced the great Aristotle, made him crawl on all fours while she mounted him, and paraded him before the eyes of his former pupil, Alexander the Great, is a favorite of the misericord carvers.²⁰ This is not an impossible situation, but one that could only happen in a world where the natural hierarchy is crumbling.

¹⁴ Malvern Priory: Mice hang the cat.

¹⁵ Bristol Cathedral: The Geese hang the Fox..

¹⁶ Lausanne Cathedral, side chapel: The cock eats the dead fox.

¹⁷ Fight for the pants in the family may be seen in France at the collegial in Villefranche de Rouergue, and twice on the choir stalls of St. Catherine in Hoogstraten, Belgium.

¹⁸ Chichester Cathedral: Woman kills lion.

¹⁹ France: St. Martin-aux-Bois (Oise)

²⁰ Examples of The Lai of Aristotle may be seen on misericords at Dordrecht, Oviedo, Rouen Cathedral and at Isle Adam (Val d'Oise)

The Visible Becomes Invisible

Another type of reversal is the visible rendered invisible. One way to achieve this reversal is to wear masks, which hide the divine world. Masks, which abound on misericords, are mainly of lions; green men, a pagan symbol; or foliage (Fig. 15). On the foliate mask from Montreal in Burgundy, there are holes for eyes and even the hint of an eye gently carved into the seat behind the mask. These masks are probably similar to those worn in processions at festivals, not only for the feast of fools but for seasonal festivities as well. They may bring out qualities men wish for but cannot, or are forbidden to, attain in the right-side up world. The masks show courage, rebellion, and pagan ritual.



Fig. 15: Mask

Cartmel Priory, Cumbria

Impossibilia and Folly

There is a grey area between “folly”, as illustrated in proverbs, and the profound social reversals of “impossibilia”. The Bruegel painting, now called “Netherlandish Proverbs”, was once called

“The World Upside Down”, although Bruegel never assigned this name.²¹ The focal point of the painting is a woman placing a blue cloak on a man, presumably her husband. The blue cloak, also once a title of this painting, refers to a proverb concerning a cuckolded husband. Behind the figures hangs a tavern sign with the symbol of the “world upside down” — a globe with a cross underneath rather than on the top. Did Bruegel intend this insignia to refer to the entire painting, or only to one proverb?

My contention is that the world of folly, shown through proverbs, and illustrated with paintings by Bruegel and others, is quite different from the world of the “impossibilia”. Follies are the actions of individual human beings; men can control their actions. The proverbs tell them what actions to avoid so that they will not live in the world of folly. The man who casts roses before swine is being told that he should not waste his treasures and wisdom on those who do not appreciate or cannot use them. The man who cannot decide which chair to sit on and falls into the ashes between them is advised to make up his mind promptly and avoid indecision. Proverbs bear morals and show, often through a negative image, the proper action that individuals should take to survive in the social order.

The “impossibilia”, however, are not based on morality. They do not illustrate maxims or explain how to live the good life. The “natural” impossibilia can exist only on paper and in words, as far as we know, for the sky will never be under one’s feet and the ground above. There is no question of good or evil here but, rather, a situation that cannot exist.

The impossibilia referring to human actions do not indicate the proper path, but rather the path that cannot be taken without violating the immutable social laws of medieval society. The husband cannot stay home and spin while the wife goes to war, the

²¹ For further discussion on Bruegel’s proverbs and impossibilia see David Kunzle “Bruegel’s Proverb Painting and the World Upside Down,” *The Art Bulletin* 59:197-202. (1977).

wife cannot “correct” the husband, the servant cannot walk before the master. These actions are not “impossibilia” in the same sense as inversions of nature. Not only are they possible, many of them actually have come to pass. Today there are house-husbands and women soldiers. Children often have a voice in family decisions. A person who begins a career in a subservient position can outdistance his superior if he has the ability to do so. Only in the medieval mind were these actions truly impossible.

Furthermore, the social impossibilia refer to groups: servants and masters; husbands and wives; young and old; rather than to individuals. Anyone — man, woman, child or monk — can cast roses to swine or sit between two stools. He or she need not belong to a particular age or social group. The topsy-turvy world differs in this way from the proverbs, which feature the actions of individuals.

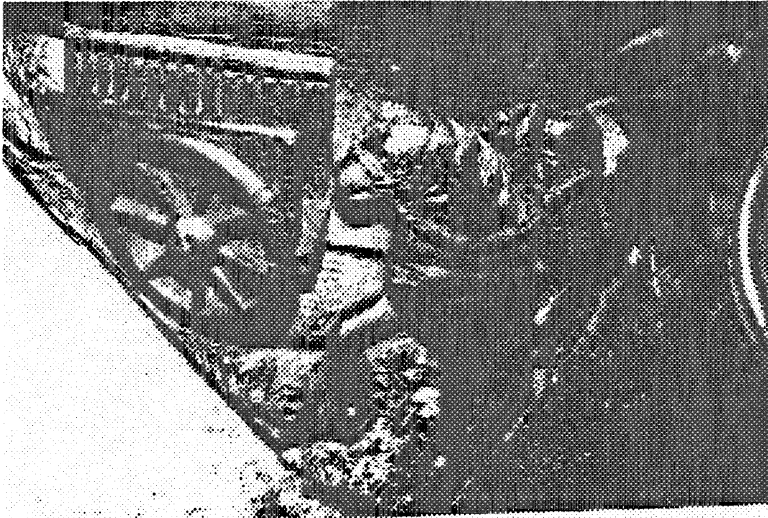


Fig. 16: Cart Before the Horse

Beverly Minster, Yorkshire

Occasionally the images of folly and impossibilia overlap. To put the cart before the horse, for example, is considered a proverb, and also an impossibilia. It appears on a misericord, most likely as a

proverb, at Beverley Minster and also on “topsy-turvy” broadsides. It is not, however, in Bruegel’s painting of Netherlandish proverbs and this is probably significant. Was it considered a social problem or an individual action? If the man foolishly ties the horse to the rear of the cart it is indeed a foolish action — a folly. If, however, the horse can only stand behind, not before, the cart, then it becomes an impossibilia. The “folly” becomes the proverb “To put the cart before the horse”, meaning that one must do first things first. In modern terms, one should dial a phone before saying hello. However, there are some sequences over which we have no control: We must plant a seed before it grows; we eat food before it is digested. To reverse these would be “impossibilia” and the cart before the horse then falls into the “world upside down” category.

Milking the bull might also be either folly or impossibilia. A more complicated carving on a French misericord shows a fool “urinating” a pig. Several reversals are involved, probably with anti-judaic overtones.

The Topsy Turvy World in the Twentieth Century

Rabelais created one of his own topsy-turvy worlds when he invented the kingdom of the Quintessence in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*.²² Officers ploughed sand with three pair of yoked foxes; some extracted water from pumice; some sheared asses and got wool; some gathered grapes ripening on thorn bushes. They milked he-goats and caught milk in a sieve. (Two misericords in Westphalia show the gathering of water in a net.) They chased the wind, and collected and sold the farts of animals. These are all inversions of the commonplace.

At a much later period, Lewis Carroll created a world of iconographic inversions for his heroine, Alice — a world in which the animals speak, a Cheshire cat smiles from the sky, and a deck of cards becomes a group of real people.

²² Francois Rabelais. *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Book V: chapter 22.

The tradition of the topsy-turvy world continues today as social comment in art and literature. To mention only a few examples: Claus Oldenburg, with his soft sculpture, has inverted one element to make his world of papier machier hamburgers and collapsed electric fans. Salvator Dali has given us soft watches and impossible landscapes. Rene Magritte has inverted day and night, outdoors and indoors, and makes an egg stare at the eater instead of the reverse. In "I and the Village", Marc Chagall has placed the Village within the person. These techniques make us look more closely and critically at our environment.

We believe that the world today would benefit from some of the topsy turvy inversions. When Aucassin went searching for his Nicolette, he traveled through the kingdom of Torelore, and saw armies that lacked the tradition of fighting unto the death.

Aucassin s'est arrete
appuye a l'arcon (de sa selle)
et se met a considerer
cette formidable bataille rangee
Ils avaient apporte
beaucoup de fromage blancs
et des pommes sauvage blettes
et de grands champignons de prairie:
Celui qui trouble le plus les gues,
est proclame vainqueur.
Aucassin le vaillant, le noble
commenca a les regarder
et se mit a rire.

Today, at a time when mankind's aggressive traditions have led to nuclear warfare, the medieval inversion of lethal weapons with farm cheese, rotten apples and wild mushrooms would make our world a better place in which to live.

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