Mère Sotte and Balaam's Ass: Title Pages in Pierre Gringore's Propagandist Works

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As a celebrated poet and playwright in early sixteenth-century Paris, Pierre Gringore became one of the chief propagandists of the political and military policies of French King Louis XII. Between 1505 and 1515 Gringore wrote and performed in *soties* and *farces* with humorous political overtones, while at the same time becoming one of the earliest poets not only to have his works published, but also to be engaged actively in the publication process. Cynthia. J. Brown, a principal Gringore scholar, has argued convincingly that Gringore blurred the lines between his own identity and that of his well-known stock character Mère Sotte by portraying himself as Mère Sotte on the title page of his satirical *Les Folles Entreprises* (1507), *Coqueluche* (1510), and *Le Jeu du Prince des Sotz et Mere Sotte* (1512).[1]

For this conference focusing on politics and performance, I continue my study of illustration by considering one aspect of this author-portrait in Gringore's published works of the early sixteenth century (fig. 1). Brown has established Gringore's involvement in their design and determines that this self-promotion "reveals the author's struggle to redefine and publicize an increasingly independent status while continuing to utilize and depend on the patronage system."[2]

Figure 1

The primary argument of Brown's study has been that these title pages—the "first scenes," as it were—of Gringore's polemic works highlight his desire for self-promotion as poet, actor, and editor. She rightly claims that "Gringore's ubiquitous, personalized Mère Sotte woodcut served as his device, for it embodied not only an image, but a motto as well, one that can be understood as an invitation to explore the text behind his own and his book's exterior."[3] She does not emphasize, however, the very symbol helping to create the contradictory motif in this device.

I would like to explore further the contradictory formal elements of this image of Gringore/Mère Sotte and by extension its significance to the understanding of the text that it introduces. Namely, Mère Sotte, as a female, is recognizable by her dress; but were it not for her cap with donkey ears, she would appear, if not dignified, certainly serious and not comical. It is the donkey ears, from which derive the jester cap as standard apparel for players in the *sotie*, that visually represent the "*sotte*" and the "*folles*" of Gringore's title. At the same time, this comic figure, echoed by two younger fools who surround it, is framed by the lofty and rational motto, "*Tout par raison, Raison par tout, par tout Raison*" ("Everything with reason, Reason everywhere, Everywhere reason").[4]

Gringore's Mère Sotte most evidently follows in the tradition of "fools' literature," which was highly popular in European literature of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Sebastian Brant's *Narreschiff*, or *Ship of Fools*, was published in 1494. Like the descriptions found in Gringore's satires, the passengers on Brant's ship represent the gamut of human foibles and characters.[5] Interestingly, all of Brant's fools are associated with donkeys: each chapter is accompanied by a woodcut of the fool under discussion wearing prominent donkey ears (fig. 2). Brant, in his

Figure 2

chapter "Of Insolence Toward God," asserts, "Heaven was meant nor then nor now / For geese, nor will a fool or cow / Or ape or grunting swine or ass / To heaven's timeless kingdom pass." Brant highlights the traditional association between asses and vices, particularly lechery and sloth.[6] In an article on the ass for the *Dictionary of Christian Lore and Legend*, J. C. J. Metford emphasizes that in late medieval continental Europe, "to be mounted backwards on an ass denoted degradation and thus convicted criminals were often led in this (way) to be punished."[7] An animal that today is almost exclusively associated with stubbornness and indeed, stupidity, the donkey corresponds well, by our lights, with the idea of a Mother Folly character or a jester.

It is important to recognize, however, that mystery plays and art of the earlier Middle Ages offered the donkey just as often, if not more, as a symbol of the positive attributes of docility and steadfastness. A beast of burden associated with the poor, in contrast with the rich, the donkey became a figure of humility in conventional Christian iconography. Widely known and represented Gospel passages underscore the merits of a donkey's lowly status. Mary, the Virgin, rides an ass on her way to Bethlehem and in her Flight into Egypt. An ass and an ox are included in Nativity scenes, where they symbolize that the humblest and least of the animal creation were present when Jesus was born and that they recognized Him as the Son of God. Their presence at the birth of Christ refers to the prophecy of Isaiah 1:3: "The ox knoweth its owner, and the ass his master's crib." Further, it is an ass that Jesus chose to ride into Jerusalem, just before the Passion. In his *Homilies on Matthew*, the early Church father St. John Chrysostom says that Christ's choice "graphically depicts him as Prince of Peace, not driving chariots, like the rest of the kings (on horses), not demanding tributes but displaying his great meekness even hereby." Chrysostom also sees the ass "as signifying the Church, a 'new people, which was once unclean, but which, after Jesus sat thereon, became clean."[8] Thus, the donkey became an image of a transformed figure, the unredeemed creature who by means of penitence is made docile. In turn, medieval hagiography emphasized the ass as an agent of conversion. A heretic of Toulouse refused to believe in the presence of Christ in the Eucharist unless his ass left its stable and knelt before the Sacrament—an impossibility, given

an ass's expected unenlightened and ornery nature. Nonetheless, when Anthony of Padua, a thirteenth-century friend and disciple of St. Francis of Assisi, was leaving the church a few days later to carry the sacrament to a dying man, the ass met him at the steps and knelt before the Sacrament. Needless to say, the man was converted. Because of this legend St. Anthony is often portrayed with a kneeling ass.[9] Legends of the life of St. Jerome also describe a faithful donkey companion.

St. Francis was known for calling his own body "Brother Ass," and C.S. Lewis's commentary on the metaphor offers a succinct commentary on the ass's ambiguous nature: "Ass is exquisitely right because no one in his senses can either revere or hate a donkey. It is a useful, sturdy, lazy, obstinate, patient, lovable and infuriating beast; deserving now the stick and now a carrot; both pathetically and absurdly beautiful."[10]

The donkey as divine messenger derives from the Old Testament story of the diviner Balaam, and it is this source which is perhaps of most interest in a discussion of Mère Sotte. The passage from Numbers recounts how Balaam's ass refuses to carry him on his way to support Balak of Moab, who sought to discredit the Israelites. Despite being beaten, the ass, who can see God's angel barring the path, refuses to do Balaam's bidding. He then is given voice by God and says to Balaam,

> What have I done to thee? Why strikest thou me, lo, now this third time? Balaam answered: Because thou hast deserved it, and hast served me ill: I would I had a sword that I might kill thee. The ass said: Am not I thy beast, on which thou hast been always accustomed to ride until this present day? Tell me if I ever did the like thing to thee. But he said: Never. Forthwith the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel standing in the way with a drawn sword, and he worshipped him falling flat on the ground. And the angel said to him: Why beatest thou thy ass these three times? I am come to withstand thee, because thy way is perverse, and contrary to me: And unless the ass had turned out of the way, giving place to me who stood against thee, I had slain thee, and she should have lived.[11]

Here the ass, from Balaam's perspective, is a donkey *in extremis*: not doing its master's bidding and becoming more obstinate as it

is beaten. And yet it is only doing its true Master's bidding and by God's grace revealing to Balaam his unjust behavior toward her and, by extension, toward the Israelites. God's angel favors the ass over Balaam, preferring to slay him rather than her. Evidence of the widespread popularity of this biblical tale appears in the thirteenth-century north stained-glass rose window of Notre Dame in Paris.

By the late Middle Ages, both standard and distorted versions of these motifs of the, at times humble and steadfast, at times blinkered and unthinking ass existed simultaneously. The popular Feast of the Ass originated from a celebration of the animal that the Virgin Mary rode, both to Bethlehem and in the Flight to Egypt. It developed, in turn, from the inclusion of Balaam's ass in the *Procession of the Prophet*, a dramatic representation included in the Christmas liturgy. However, by the thirteenth century, it had become the occasion for so much ribaldry that it was banned by the Church authorities. Spectacles often offered a donkey as an incarnation of deprivation and penitence. Anrique de Mota's spectacle *Lamentaçao da Mula*, from approximately 1500, concludes with the donkey telling of his day's pilgrimage: "I am very pleased to find you, my Lord, in this land and am compelled to tell you that I was given nothing to eat. If you want to hear, I will tell you of my inherent suffering, the great pain and grief which I endured."[12] Narrative II ii 4 of Erasmus's *Adages* offers a more comic version, at the expense of the donkey: "A doltish little ass carried a figure of Isis, having the revered mysteries upon its curved back. Everyone near the goddess reverently adored her, and on bended knees sent forth their holy prayers. But the ass believed such honour was being shown to him, and swelled up, filling entirely with his pride—until the driver, who restrained him with whips, said 'You are not a god, little ass; rather, you bear a god.'"[13]

Gringore's emblematic title page offers a composite of these conflicting notions of the donkey. Mère Sotte, by her very name and donkey ears, is a humble player who can only inspire guffaws. Yet these same donkey ears literally approach the word *reason*. Hence the motto which surrounds her suggests that, rather, or perhaps at the same time, she is a voice of Reason who imparts this Reason to those who listen.

Given France's war with Italy in the early sixteenth century, Gringore's publications of this period are chiefly works skewering

authorities particularly associated with Italy, such as the Pope and the Venetians. Designed to encourage the French troops, the performances and published plays represented a bourgeois, rather than chivalric, outlook, and the vices and abuses described could be taken as universal to all those in authority.[14] In his opening lines of the *Folles Entreprises*, Gringore describes the world in which he writes as a topsy-turvy and, by extension, unjust one. Metal being worshipped as gods, children receiving prelatures, and just clerics being scorned are some of his examples of the world gone awry. The single description involving an animal is his next to last example, that of "asses generously reimbursed." His term for "reimbursed," *prébendés* is a term reserved for payments to the clergy.[15]

This instance of undeserved payment evokes the well-known adage of the day, "Horses run after earnings; donkeys catch them." The adage implies that, due to its very stubbornness, the donkey will prevail in its demands. So with his introduction, Gringore quickly establishes the resemblance between the donkey or ass and some clerical members of the Church.[16] He concludes his introduction by saying that given his own lack of smarts, he will leave interpretation to his more esteemed readers. The body of the work consists of decasyllabic rhymed verses describing foolish *enterprises*, or occupations and, by extension, character types such as the prideful, the envious, the greedy, and so forth. It is the Acteur, understood to be Mère Sotte, who pronounces most of these verities. At times Gringore personifies a vice: Papelardise or False Piety, also a woman, refers several times to asses—understood to be corrupt clerics. She takes credit for their receiving undeserved homage at the expense of honest clerics: "I have the asses exalted, and the good priests oppressed . . . If I see a united church . . . I arrange for the masses to be sung by asses."[17] All of Mère Sotte's examples of asses are those who, despite being privileged or rich, behave foolishly or selfishly. While these vices are universal, as seen in the *Narrenshiff*, Mère Sotte does not emphasize that beggars or the hard-working bourgeois may suffer from the same failings.

I believe that Gringore's audience and then readers, upon seeing the Mère Sotte costume, would have appreciated multiple and contradictory allusions which perhaps escape us today. The jester's cap of donkey ears underscores the ambiguity of his

message: here is a character, nicknamed for her silliness, and yet declaring to approving bourgeois audiences truths about powerful figures of authority which more learned persons dare not broach. Like Balaam's ass, Mère Sotte is a lowly, yet prophetic, messenger. In the actual plays she serves as messenger principally to popular audiences. Once transformed as an opening textual emblem, she becomes a sign to the more erudite.

Gringore used this author-portrait exclusively in his publications for ten years. In later editions he embellished the basic design by adding stars to the background and providing more foliage to the ground on which the actors are standing. It would appear that by doing so, Gringore wanted to fill in as much white space as possible. It is important to note that he did not, however, change the overall design of Mère Sotte. In every version she stands front and center, towering over her two fellow sots, arms linked in unity, with the donkey ears of her jester's cap grazing the words, "Raison par tout."

Satirical *soties*, which so pleased King Louis XII, were far less popular with Francis I, who became king in 1515. Only a year after his ascension to the throne, Francis I had three Parisian sots, or actors, taken before him "at Amboise in chains . . . for having played farces in Paris concerning the nobility: among other things suggesting that Mère Sotte ruled the court and was taxing, robbing and pillaging everyone. The King and Queen-Regent were very angry about this."[18] That same year Gringore's work became more moralistic rather than satirical, and two years later he left Paris to join the Duke of Lorraine's court in Nancy. Notably, his subsequent publications offered an altered device: Mère Sotte and her jolly companions have been replaced with a hooded falcon holding a scroll, which states in Latin, "After darkness, I hope for light."[19] Below the falcon is printed "Raison par tout" (fig. 3). This sober, more erudite image with its elimination of Mère Sotte mutes Gringore's ironic and ambiguous use of the expression, "Reason everywhere."

Figure 3

Thus, the disappearance of Mère Sotte, both from the printed page as well as the stage, marked the beginning of a more stable but less creative period in Gringore's career.

Gringore often is considered the last of the French medieval poets. I would argue that, rather, his emblematic design announces the early French Renaissance, a period whose literature highlighted ambiguity and paradox. As Barbara Bowen has put it so succinctly, the French Renaissance writers Rabelais (1494-1553) and Montaigne (1533-1592) are masters of bluff, her term for the "conscious effort to disconcert the reader." Because these writers' aesthetic outlook emphasizes complexity, enigma and antithesis, their texts present riddles while never bothering to give us the answers.[20] Gringore's emblem, if not his poetry, anticipates this trend.

Notes

1. Cynthia J. Brown, *Poets, Patrons, and Printers: Crisis of Authority in Late Medieval France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).
2. Ibid., 151.
3. Ibid., 145.
4. All translations are the author's.
5. These works are non-ironic, unlike Erasmus's mock encomium, *The Praise of Folly*, which would appear in 1509.
6. Sebastian Brant, *The Ship of Fools*, ed. and trans. Edwin H. Zeydel (New York: Dover Publications, 1944), 92-93.
7. Metford, J.C.J, *Dictionary of Christian Lore and Legend* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1983), 36.
8. St. John Chrisostom, "Homily 66.2 Matthew 20:29, 30," *The Homilies of St. John Chrisostom on the Gospel of St. Matthew: Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, trans. Rev. Sir George Prevost, vol. 10 (London: Oxford, 1851), p. 406. Quoted in entry "Ass" by David L Jeffrey and John V. Fleming in *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature,* ed. David Lyle Jeffrey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 61.
9. George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 105.
10. C.S Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1960), 101. The author is most grateful to fellow presenter, Dr. James W. Harrison, for alerting me to this quotation.
11. Numbers 22: 28-33.
12. William Tydeman, *The Medieval European Stage 500-1500* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 587.

13. Desiderius Erasmus, *The Adages of Erasmus, ed. William Barker* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 161.

14. Pierre Gringore, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1, Œuvres politiques, ed. Charles d'Héricault and Anatole de Montaiglon (Paris : Jannet, 1858), xxv.

15. Ibid., 1:13. "Que aucuns asnes éstoient haultes prebendez."

16. Ibid., "Ce sont les chevaux qui courent après les bénéfices, et las asnes qui les attrappent." Gringore does not maintain consistently this implicit analogy between clerics and donkeys later in his work. On his examination of pastors, he compares them, rather, with wolves.

17. Gringore, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:111.

> "Quant du cas ecclesiastique
> A le gouverner je m'aplique,
> Faisant les asnes exaulser ;
> Et qui veult scavoir la pratique,
> Comme c'est que l'Eglise on picque,
> Il se fault à moy adresser :
> Je fais les bons clercs oppresser,
> Et metz en bruyt ung tas de sotz ,
> Sans craindre de Dieu offenser;
> *C'est entreprise* des bigotz.
> Quant je voy une Eglise unie,
> Tant fais que union est bannye ;
> J'endure que asnes chantent messe."

18. Tydeman, *The Medieval European Stage*, 336.

19. Brown, *Poets, Patrons, and Printers*, 147.

20. Bowen, Barbara C., *The Age of Bluff: Paradox and Ambiguity in Rabelais and Montaigne* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), 163.