Fools are among the characters found in fourteen and fifteen century illuminated manuscripts. Although not in great numbers, unlike the angels for example, fools regularly appear intertwined in initials, within miniatures, and on page margins. They occur mostly in psalters and books of hours and at the turn of the fifteenth century they begin to appear in romances, such as the *Roman d'Alexandre* (*The Romance of Alexander*). Illuminators gave fools clearly identifiable visual features: they are shown tinkling bells and jingle bells, or playing bagpipes; they talk, shout, or sing; and above all their bodies are always in motion, an “inversed” kind of motion, in which their bodies twist in opposite directions, while they jump, frolic, and dance around, alone or in a disordered farandole. Fools embody inversion. The concept of a *mundus inversus* is typical of medieval culture and society, in the sense that any form of order, whether political, religious, or social, incorporates chaos. In the troubled context of the fourteenth and fifteenth century French and English kingdoms — the Hundred Years War, the papal schism, plague epidemics, and social unrest — the ecclesiastical and political elites swung between tolerating and even organising the celebrations of inversion, such as the Feast of Fools, and attempting to restrain them, often without much effect. This ambivalence could explain why in the visual arts dancing fools are always related to authorities and rulers, such as kings, dukes, or bishops. The fool’s ambivalent and inversed relationships are reminders that in the Middle Ages madness relates to wisdom — and less so to reason.

The miniatures reflect the culture of inversion peculiar to the medieval era, seen in the representations of jumping and dancing fools. They also bear witness to the visual creativity of miniaturists on how to evoke movement through static images by producing ancient forms of “cartoons”, a skill rooted in a deep knowledge of the Antique, biblical, patristic and historical fundamental concepts on madness, as well as those of music and dance. This approach shows how the association of madness with music and dance was a mode of understanding and interpretation of the human being — creature of God — within the medieval Judeo-Christian culture. It also reminds that images were not reproducing reality, but were — in the words of the art historian Pierre Francastel — a type of “figurative mode of thinking”,\(^1\), that is to say thinking the world and the society in images according to received cultural models, such as King David, Christ, or God. The study of madness *in* and *through* images of dance and music reveals the depth of theological and anthropological reflections on the human being and his Creator carried out by both miniaturists and their public.\(^2\) Far from being just an entertainment for readers, the “little dancing fools” perpetuate elements of the scholarly culture, so much so prestigious as conveyed through books, strong roots of the medieval culture.\(^3\) From this major cultural foundation the miniaturists addressed by the the
believer, ideally a literate person, versed in the arts of dance and music. They seem to have chosen a wayward means to discuss through images the questions of Man being made in the image of God and endowed with a body and a soul, rationality, and language. By creating wondrous figures, they appealed to the visual and mnemonical power of images to enlighten the reader on the matters of madness and wisdom.  

The analysis performed here builds upon the following questions: How and to what ends are the fools featured in relation to dance and music in medieval illuminations? What are mirroring the images of dancing fools?  

Dancing and music making fools depicted during the fourteen and the fifteen centuries are not mentally ill, but they simulate madness for religious and social reasons in accordance with the Christian calendar. Four depiction types prevail: (1) the senseless creature jumping around and gesticulating in front of King David, (2) the processions of the Feast of Fools, (3) the farandole of fools and the morisque in royal and princely courts, (4) the dance macabre.  

I. “Madness” and “music” or the common principle of inversion  

1) Madness and wisdom: the “ambiguous ambivalence”  

The study of madness as represented in medieval images is never without the risk of being anachronistic. On one hand, nineteen century historiography created the romanticized “post card” image of the court jester, 7 and we need to regain critical distance by rereading the medieval textual and iconographical sources and newer scholarly research, such as that of Jacques Heers, Danielle Jacquart, Muriel Laharie, Jean-Marie Fritz, Max Harris, or Olga Dull. On the other hand, the definitions of madness given by language dictionaries are framed by an epistemological perspective that, since the seventeenth century, opposes it to reason and makes it an issue of psychiatry, as expounded by Michel Foucault in his *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason.* This shared history of madness and rationality does not correspond, however, to what appears to have been the medieval perception of madness, seen as “nonsense”. In medieval medical treatises, as well as literary, theological, and juridical texts, madness has two faces, one positive and the other negative, one natural and the other artificial, and it is defined exclusively in respect to wisdom. Jean-Marie Fritz portrayed how since Greek and Roman antiquity the wise man had several fool types as counterpart. The first fool is so by nature, his state being one of both mental illness and innocence. The second fool is one who doesn't know God, his folly being absence of reason (*in-sania*, *in-sipientia*, *de-sipientia*, *a-mentia*, *de-mentia*) and source of his various name: *insipiens*, *stultus*, or *fatuus*. The third fool type is the wild madman, in behavior and reasoning, possessed by violent passions (*furor*), which shake his soul and body. In French vernacular languages, the opposition between *insania* and *furor* is made by through the words *dervé*, *forsené*, and *fol*. The etymology of *fol* is found in *follis*, a “pair of bellows”, a “bag full of air”, in other words “empty head”.  

The duality of madness is a complex “ambiguous ambivalence”, that varies with the authors and contexts of descriptions. An excellent illustration give the hermits, heretics, and religious order founders of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, those “Fools of God” whose faith is excessive to the point of madness. In the context of the Gregorian reforms inspired by the Oriental Christianity, such were men in love with God, like Saint Bruno (c. 1030–1101),
founder of the Carthusian Order, and Robert of Arbrissel (c. 1045–1116), founder of Fontevrault’s Abbey. The bishop of Rennes, Marbode (1096–1123), describes Robert of Arbrissel exactly in terms of an insipiens: “An abject outfit thrown over flayed skin, naked feet, unkempt beard, hair cut short, you advance into the crowd and provide a formidable spectacle; only the club is missing to give you the airs of a lunatic [lunaticus].”

Regardless of madness type and name, it is located in the soul and is connected to the body, the very places where music takes place, and our aim here is to present the dancing fools in connection to music.

2) “Musica”: Antique science and biblical wisdom

Musica is one of the seven liberal arts, legacy of the Athenian paideia, and consisting in the trivium – the sciences of language: Latin grammar, rhetoric, logic – and the quadrivium – the sciences of numbers or mathematics: arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, they were studied in monastic, cathedral, and urban schools. Since the thirteenth century, they belonged to the curriculum of the Faculty of Arts. The aim of this activity was the divine Logos: expressing it through liturgical chants, copying and decorating it in manuscripts, and ultimately interpreting it.

Musica is a mathematical science based on the Pythagorean theory of proportio, itself based on the “harmonious numbers”, which correlate sounds on a rational basis. It contributes along with ratio to a sound judgment by senses and intellect — we perceive here a link to foolishness and wisdom. This science is based on measured movement and refers to “the musical art audible to the human ear” through words, sounds, rhythms, and modes. Plato defines it as any form of art capable of generating order and harmony, such as chant, dance, or poetry.

The ancient and scholarly musica seems nevertheless different from the musica of the fool in medieval images, who plays the bagpipes or shakes the jingle bells while proffering mute, but readable, words. Moreover, with what kind of “music” are we dealing with, when the images relate it to madness? Is it harmonious, sonorous? Why do miniaturists play with this paradox, particularly in books intended for the educated elites — clerics and nobles? And what devices do they use to visualize the paradox?

Two relationship types help understand the paradoxical association in images of musica and madness. One is musical, the proportio described above, while the other is rhetorical, the inversio. In rhetoric, inversio is better known as permutatio in Latin and allêgoria in Greek, and is a verbal construct that means something different from what is manifestly stated. Inversion represents the essence of madness: the contrary of wisdom and the catalyst of mundus inversus. Madness operates through inversion in the realms of extremes, beyond proportion. It crosses all boundaries, insofar as it embodies at times an excess (of pride, for example) and at other times a deficiency in respect to a norm (lack of piety). Madness is defined by one’s relationship to the world and to God. The Book of Wisdom, 11: 20–22, defines it in musical terms: “But you have disposed all things by measure and number and weight. For with you great strength abides always […]. Indeed, before you the whole universe is as a grain from a balance […].”

As for dance, it is a kind of corporal expression based on rhythm and subject to the same
arithmetical and geometrical principles as music, embodying the harmonic, organic, and rhythmic musica. In medieval images the “solo dance” is represented by a raised leg or gesticulations, while collective dances take the form of farandoles, carols, and circle dances.

Based on these definitions and rhetorical principles, we will look now at the medieval images of the “dancing fool” in religious contexts: the insipiens and King David in psalters and books of hours, and the liturgical ritual of the “Feast of Fools”.

II. The madness of religious inversion: gesticulations and Feasts of Fools

1) The gesticulations of the insipiens before King David

The fool is depicted in prayer books as an isolated dancer, either alone or in company of King David, leg lifted, head askew, talking to his marotte, and often turning his back to the king in prayer. Miniaturists put special emphasis on the fool's twisted body and motions, made to look even more extraordinary by colourful clothes and bells.

This type of dancing fool appears in prayer books, particularly in the opening words of Psalm 52, Dixit insipiens. Placed across from David, author of the Psalms and king of the Old Testament, the fool speaks blasphemous words right from the first verse. He is not represented for graphical or entertainment reasons, but rather for moral purposes. In the Breviary of John the Fearless the opposition between King David and the fool is underscored by the kneeling king, addressing prayers to God, and the hopping fool, dressed in red, blue, yellow, and white, talking to the phony head on his scepter. On one hand here is David praising God in his soul, on the other hand there is the fool oblivious to the presence of God in his heart.

Likewise, in the Psalter of Charles VIII David dialogues in silence with God, dialogue suggested allegorically by a harp, while the fool speaks with his marotte, pointing his finger at the king. A chatty fellow, he commits in one streak the sins of loose talk and blasphemy: “The fool says in his heart, there is no God”. The verse’s meaning is not an ignorance of God, but a refusal of his existence in the fool’s heart. Thus the jumping fool represents sin and vice, whereas David embodies moral virtue.

At the same time, and once again within a religious context, the senseless creature’s gesticulations and jumping were sometimes established and approved by the Church, as in the case of the Feast of Fools.

2) The dances of the Feast of Fools in churches

The Feast of Fool is ritual organised by the higher clergy of the cathedral and enacted by the lower clergy, namely the deacons, subdeacons, and choristers. Initially known as the Feast of the Circumcision or the Feast of the Ass between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, it became known as the Feast of Fools in the 15th century, when it spilled out of Church buildings into the streets in the form of Carnival celebrations. Taking place the day after the Nativity of Jesus, it was a celebration of childhood, St Stephen’s day (26 December), and marked the opening of festivities that lasted until the Circumcision (1 January) or the Epiphany (6 January) depending on the location. Youngsters and children were reversing the ecclesiastical hierarchy, parodying inside churches the bishop and the canons. The
celebrations took the form of liturgical processions, dances, and conducti. Knowledge about the feasts is due in a good measure to the oldest manuscript with musical notation, containing the ritual of the Office of the Circumcision and attributed to the archbishop of Sens, Pierre de Corbeil (d. 1222), a member of the chapter of Notre-Dame.

The ritual may be summarised as follows. The feast began in the cathedral, where the choristers wore the canons’ cope and took their place in the stalls. At the vespers, the cantor performed the Magnificat: "Deposuit potentes de sede", "He hath put down the mighty from their seat: and hath exalted the humble and meek. He hath filled the hungry with good things: and the rich he hath sent empty away." Then the children elected a bishop and gave him a miter, a cape, gloves, and other bishop's accessories, after which he received the crozier, was put on the episcopal throne, and everybody bowed in front of him as if before a real bishop. He offered a banquet and wine. All night long, the feast alternated between vigils, songs, dances, and processions. The Beauvais Office also notes that the mock bishop proceeded down the nave mounted on an ass.

The donkey was led to the altar to the chanting of a conductus ad tabulam, and the cantor performed the Office of the Ass. He began with a joyful song, "Away from here all that is sad!" and introduced the "Prose of the Ass", Orientis partibus, the opening words of which are the joyful formulas "In januis ecclesiae / Lux hodie, lux laeticie" "This day is a day of joy [...] Those who celebrate the Feast of the Ass want only Joyfulness." The Prose of the Ass was followed by other elements of the Christmas cycle, according to the time of day or night. A reading of the Office does not in itself reveal anything scandalous. However, the joyous imitations of the donkey in vernacular language "Hez! sir asne hez! Hez", the recurrence of verbs and expressions signifying joy - gaudere, exultare, jubilare, felix - as well as conducti dedicated to play, drinking, and meals, represent an indulgent celebration of the time of the Eucharist within a joyful mundus inversus. With its focus on the ass and the children, this ritual of inversion was an exaltation of poverty of spirit, innocence, and sacred folly. It had its basis in the parables of the Gospel of Luke, where children and the poor were elevated to the ranks of the powerful in the kingdom of God.

Throughout the Middle Ages, the Church’s position on the Feast of Fools was ambiguous, given that the church condemned its excesses — to little avail —, but did not really prohibit them. In the twelfth century the Feast is tolerated, as illustrated by Odo, Bishop of Paris, who reformed it rather than abolishing it. Some clerics at Notre-Dame wrote musical pieces particular to this celebration, such as a certain Pérotin, who wrote a conductus for three voices, Salvatoris hodie. Then the condemnation became gradually firmer: in 1198, the Papal Legate Peter of Capua wrote to the same Odo, Bishop of Paris, to deplore the "enormitas", "pollution of words", and bloodshed; in 1210, Pope Innocent III (1160-1216) denounced these practices as unworthy of members of the clergy; the council of Paris in 1212 renewed the ban forbidding archbishops or bishops from tolerating or, worse, supporting this type of ritual; in 1435, the council of Basel condemned the Feast of Fools.

Despite such condemnations, the Duke of Burgundy, Philip the Good, decided to maintain the feast and had the charter for the Privilege of Fools drawn up at his chapel, in which he asked the fools to make “good and marry” feast, “without fail”. There is perhaps a correlation between the depiction of the “bishop of fools” in the Bible of Nicolas Rolin (c. 1450), chancellor to Philip the Good, and the institution of the Feast of Fools in the ducal chapel on the same date in 1454. At the same time, a fools’ bishop was featured in the Bible of Nicolas Rolin, the...
chancellor of the Duke. Covered with bells, he is topped with a pair of bellows on his head pointed the word “wisdom” (sapientiam) in the Proverbs of Solomon. This “pair of bellows” could correspond to the definition of “fool” - “fol” in ancient French, which means a “bag full of air”, in other words an “empty head” filled with air. This page may be interpreted as a mirror of madness and wisdom for the chancellor of the Duke.

Further, the same year saw the creation in Dijon, Burgundy of the “Company of Mère Folle” and with it the carnivalesque and satirical Feast of Mère Folle. This Feast was celebrated by about five hundred “fellows” of “each and every quality”. Her members dressed in disguise danced in the city and performed satirical acts on carts during Carnival. The headdress of the “Mère Folle” was yellow and green with bells — it is now preserved in the Musée de la Vie Bourguignonne in Dijon. Her banner features two fools who are jumping around while standing head to tail and farting (pétant au nez) in each other’s faces. For so behaving, they were nicknamed Pétengueules.

By means of inversion, foolish feasts consolidated the social order. In their own way, rich manuscripts represented this order by depicting dancing fools.

III. Fools in courtly dances: the farandole and the morisque

1) Farandoles and disguises

Representations of dancing fools can also be found in secular, royal, and princely books, such as the Roman d’Alexandre (Romance of Alexander). This precious manuscript was illuminated in Bruges in the 1340s, to be offered by Queen Philippa of Hainault as a gift to King Edward III of England (1327-1377). Almost all the pages are decorated with margins of dancing fools, jugglers, costumed characters, monkeys, and singing birds. For example, folio 84 v depicts two fools playing the portative organ and bagpipes, and five dancers disguised as fools and wearing bichromatic headdresses (red and blue, or pink and red) fitted with bells. They all form an “impossible” farandole, moving, twisting, turning, and jumping in opposite directions. Their disguises and dances are a reference to the celebrations of the Carnival.

Home to renowned festivities, the court of Edward III was attended by a great number of fools, as well as minstrels, jugglers and animals. The feasts, like those held at the Burgundian court in the fifteenth century, also feature a fool playing music (the bagpipes), dancing and making the court dance, as shown in the miniature of The Chronicles of France and England by Jean of Warvin. One of these “foolish dances” is the morisque, and can be found in some of the religious and secular manuscripts that belonged to the nobility.

2) The fools’ morisque

The morisque is represented in courtly manuscripts. It is featured in the illuminations of the manuscripts of The City of God by Augustine of Hippo, a copy of which is kept in The Hague. The images depict fools from both genders dancing naked to the sound of jingle bells and tambourines; they are associated with the idolatry and paganism that Augustine’s text condemns. The quickness of their steps is reminiscent of the “moresca”. As the name suggests, this is a fast-paced Moorish dance that was popular in the European courts of the
fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. There are references to the oriental origins of the dance in works such as *Book of the Marvels of the World*, a chronicle of the Italian merchant Marco Polo’s travels across Asia. The workshop of the Boucicaut Master completed the task of illumination for John the Fearless, who offered it to his uncle, John, Duke of Berry, in January 1413. All the musicians and dancers depicted in this manuscript look like minstrels or court jesters, but they are dressed with oriental turbans, colourful mid-part scarves, and bells.

In fact, the accounts of the Duke of Burgundy, Philip the Good, mention the employment at the royal court of a morisque dancer by the name of Estevenin Paresis, and the Duke likely employed other dancers. Moreover, these accounts show the similarities between the costumes of morisque dancers and those worn by court jesters: they are colourful, cut in luxurious material and decorated with bells and jingle bells. For example, in 1428, Hue de Boulogne, Philip the Good’s painter and valet, received an order for "seven pieces of draping clothes made out of colourful silk and put together in a strange fashion, suitable for morisque dances and embellished with gold and silver Brazil skin, along with a pair of canvas hose made out of snakeheads streaked with gold, shoes and bells for all costumes used in morisque dances".

Did the agility and flexibility required by the morisque, together with its oriental origins, contribute to the perception that it was a fool’s dance? If so, this could explain why illuminators included fools in the representations of the dance, both in religious and secular manuscripts.

However, fools’ dances are not all quite as joyous, as shown by the *danse macabre* in the late medieval era.

**IV. The dance of death, a reflection of the living and society**

The frequency of representations of the danse macabre increases in Europe in the fifteenth century, particularly in murals, illuminated manuscripts and printed books (incunabula, if printed up to the year 1500). The origins of these representations can be traced back to *The Three Living and the Three Dead* (a copy of which can be found in the *Psalter of Robert De Lisle*). The depiction of the danse macabre alternates between a living and a dead character, the two holding hands. They are represented by a farandole ordered according to the social hierarchy: the first living its double are the pope, then the emperor, the king, the prince, the cardinal, etc., to the plowman, and the child. Skeletons symbolise the living when they die, their doubles of sorts.

Following the rhythm of the music produced by the skeletons, the danse macabre is presented either in the form of a farandole, more precisely a *trepidum*, or as an ensemble of dancing pairs, each containing a dead and a "bright" character. The dead usually play the bagpipes, the organ, the harp, the trumpet and the tambourine. They either stand in front of the dance and at a certain distance from it (as seen at the Abbey in La Chaise-Dieu or at St. Mary’s Church in Berlin), or they lead the dance (as seen at the Church of St. Germain in La Ferté-Loupière, Burgundy). On the basis of the instruments they play, the dead are believed to be a reference to psychopomps, such as sirens, the guides of souls into the afterlife.

Dressed in a costume with bells, the *foi* is part of the farandole. He goes under the name of *le sot* and is present in the incunabula of *La Danse macabre (The Dance of Death)* by Guyot.
Marchant and Antoine Vérard. He dances in the farandole because, like the king and the bishop, he is a member of society. However, the humanistic themes in vogue at the time most likely account for his presence. Indeed, poets such as Charles of Orléans and François Villon deplored the foolishness of humanity, the melancholy of time, the fleeting nature of life, and the fear of death. In the danse macabre, the sot engages in the farandole of a life that leads inexorably towards death. He prefigures the fool who, in The Praise of Folly of Erasmus (1511), speaks his truth to everyone, denounces the tragedy of the world’s madness and calls for the moral consciousness of humans.

Conclusion

During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the images of “dancing fools” feature a variety of dances and fools: the senseless creature in the Dixit insipiens of Psalm 52, the fools’ bishop officiating at the Feast of Fools, the dancers of Carnival, the morisque dancer, and the sot in the danse macabre. The visual forms do vary. Nonetheless there are common and vivid models and themes in the images, in the context of significant political, religious and social turmoil. They always relate to the inversion of social and religious hierarchies, and to the concomitant tensions and oscillations between piety and impiety, order and disorder, laughter and the macabre, life and death.

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2 Clouzot, Martine: Musique, folie et nature au Moyen Âge. Les figurations du fou musicien dans les manuscrits enluminés (XIIIe - XVe siècles), Bern 2014, 500 p., 13 ill.
7 Jacquat, Danielle: La réflexion médiévale et l’apport arabe, in: Bancaud, Jean, Quétel, Claude; Postel, Jacques (Hg.): Nouvelle histoire de la psychiatrie, Toulouse 1983, p. 43-53.
8 Laharie, Muriel: Images de la folie au Moyen Âge (XIIe-XVe siècle), in: Marie-Laverrou, Florence (Hg.): Le fou, cet autre, mon frère : littérature, civilisation et linguistique, Paris 2012., p. 19-34.


Bruxelles, Bibliothèque Royale, ms. 9511, f. 387 v Breviary of Philip the Good, c. 1450.


Bruxelles, Bibliothèque Royale, ms. 9511, f. 387 v Breviary of Philip the Good, c. 1450.


43 Sens, Bibliothèque municipale, ms. 33, f. 1: « Ce jour est un jour de joie (...). Ceux qui célèbrent la fête de l'âne ne veulent que de la gaieté ». 

44 Sen, Bibliothèque municipale, ms. 33, f. 27 verso: « Conductus ad Ludarium ».

45 Sens, Bibliothèque municipale, ms. 33, f. 28 v : « Conductus ad Poculum ».

46 Sens, Bibliothèque municipale, ms. 33, f. 29: « Conductus ad Prandium ».


49 See the detailed ritual by John W. Baldwin, art. cit., p. 647.


51 John W. Baldwin, art. cit., p. 647.

52 Innocent III, Cum decorem: “Sometimes performances and plays were put on in churches (...), at certain feasts, deacons, priests and subdeacons were bold enough to partake in this folly and buffoonery (...); cited by Du Tilliot, Jean-Bénigne Lucotte: Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de la fête des fous, qui se faisoit autrefois dans plusieurs églises, Lausanne, Geneve 1751, p. 58.

53 M. Du Tilliot, op. cit., p. 102-103. This order led to the birth of the “Company of Mère Folle”: this fraternity consisted of a court of fools led by a sovereign wearing a headdress with bells and bearing a sculpted wooden stick. The company was responsible for organising festive and carnival events in Dijon. The Company of Mère Folle was not an isolated case. Several societies of l'histoire de la société, trade guilds and companies of fools were founded in the 15th and 16th centuries. Cf. Heers, Jacques: Fêtes des fous et carnavals, Paris 1983 p.105; Rossiaud, Jacques: La prostitution médiévale, Paris 1988.


58 Cf. Wright, Craig: Music at the Court of Burgundy, 1364-1419. A documentary history, Henryville/Ottawa, Binningen 1979 (Musicological Studies, 28); Munrow, David; Previn, André; Kiefe, Laurence: Les Instruments de musique du Moyen Age et de la Renaissance, Paris 1979;

59 La Haye, Museum Meermanno-Westreenianum, ms. 10 A 11, f. 48 v.

60 Ibidem, f. 52 v. La Cité de Dieu, 1475-80.


63 Archives nationales, B 1938, f. 72.

64 Archives nationales, B 1938, f. 125: « sept habis de drap de soye et de plusieurs couleurs de estrange fachon, propices à danser la morisqu et icheux enrichy d'ouvrage de peaulx d'or et d'argent (...) une paire de chausses de toile ou sont faictes testes de serpent de bature d'or party (...) solliers et sonnettes pour a tous icheux habiz danser la morisque ».


70 Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Estampes, Te. 8 Rés. C. 21297–301, f. 23 et 24, La Danse macabre d'Antoine Vérard, 1490.


72 Foucault, Michel: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique, Paris 1972, p. 45.