King Carnival in the Yoke of Humility

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Chapel XIII is typically named “St. Francis Led Naked Through the Streets,” or “Besozzo,” after the benefactor, the Milanese cavalier Costanzo Besozzo. Besozzo was a well-known figure whose joy in venerating Francis led him to join the Capuchin Order and take the name of Francis. The subject of Chapel XIII is Francis’ dismay over his own hypocrisy of eating meat when he was ill. Although the textual basis of the chapel concerns Francis’ humility, the central figure of Francis being led by a rope around his neck is in fact embedded in a visual swarm of Carnival celebrants who largely ignore the half-naked saint (see Chapter 2, Catalogue of Chapels, Fig. 47). Except for his four brethren, only a couple of the celebrants heed St. Francis’ humiliation. The chapel is a visual dialectic between Francis’ spiritual asceticism and the culture of secular excess as exemplified in seventeenth-century Italian Carnival.

The central penitent, Francis, is led along by four friars. Clustered around Francis and scattered throughout the chapel in a chaotic jumble are groups of two or three people, reacting (or not) in some way to the scene in front of them: some point without looking, some point and look, many are unaware. At the very front, a beggar points to Francis and looks directly at the viewer. To the viewer’s right of Francis, family groups seem to predominate. Three families look or gesture toward Francis, and one family even includes a monkey and a dwarf. Beyond them, to the far right, chaos breaks out with a large horse rearing up (while a man tries to control it with leather reins) and three drunken revelers roll on the ground (see Fig. 1). To the viewer’s left are several social groups in animated conversation. A crippled beggar, a half clothed man, gamblers, a cross dresser, children, horses, and soldiers make up this varied group (see Fig. 2). Also on the left is “King Carnival” on his horse which rears up while being attacked by a barking dog. All around the chapel walls, various ground level partygoers and women at the windows watch. One man waves a greeting to the viewer from the farthest left corner.

In his Life of Saint Francis, Thomas of Celano establishes the connection between eating and humility that continues to be an important theme of Franciscan hagiography, and central to the meaning of this chapel is Francis’ complex relationship with food. Francis was fastidiously careful about removing pleasure from eating, as part of his effort not to be indulgent in any kind of physical experience. Celano explains,

He zealously and carefully safeguarded Lady Holy Poverty. In order to avoid the superfluous, he would not even permit a small plate to remain in the house if,
rest, which he appeared to eat, he put in his lap, raising his hand to his mouth so that no one could know what he was doing. What shall I say about drinking wine, when he would not allow himself to drink even enough water when he was burning with thirst?

Francis sometimes went beyond this quiet subterfuge in order to create a dramatic exemplum. From Henry d’Avranches (c. 1235):

> Francis again gave orders to one of the brothers
> That whenever he was wined and dined by people
> With high notions, the friar was to heap insults on him
> And call him a dealer and mountain man. [bumpkin] Hard though it was To exactly fulfill these commands, the brother spared him
> Not a whit, as he sat among the distinguished.

If there was no one present willing to condemn him, he would do it for himself. According to The Assisi Compilation:

> Likewise, at another time, he was staying in a hermitage for the Lent of Saint Martin. Because of his illness, the brothers cooked the food they gave him to eat in lard, because oil was very bad for him in his illnesses. When the forty days had ended and he was preaching to a large crowd of people, gathered not far from that hermitage, in the opening words of his sermon he told them: ‘You came to me with great devotion and believe me to be a holy man. But I confess to God and to you that during this Lent in that hermitage, I have eaten food flavored with lard.’

Despite his personal restrictions, Francis would not allow his followers to practice strict abstinence. In the hagiographic literature, he actively urged them to eat enough to stay healthy, even procuring

Fig. 1. Drunken Revelers at Carnival in Assisi. Chapel XIII, Sacro Monte di Orta.

Not the food itself, but the lust for it was the sin. As a famous man, Francis was often invited to eat with others. He strove to accommodate himself to custom and also to scripture by seeming to eat. Celano relates that:

> Often, when he was wandering through the world to preach the gospel of God, he was called to a dinner given by great princes who venerated him with much fondness. He would taste some meat in order to observe the holy gospel. The
food for them when needed. He himself would eat to prevent a brother from following his own extreme example: “He had sympathy for all who were ill and when he could not alleviate their pain he offered words of compassion. He would eat on fast days so the weak would not be ashamed of eating, and he was not embarrassed to go through the city’s public places to find some meat for a sick brother.”

Francis’ primary method of teaching was always example rather than preaching; he created the teachable moment for his followers to imitate. But in the case of food, his method is complex and often confusing. He follows his own personal code, he enacts the most stringent of guidelines, he makes his extreme actions known to others, and yet interestingly he does not want to be copied. In this instance, his humility fails him in his desire to be the most abject. Francis did, on occasion, eat meat for two reasons. The first was to follow scriptural admonitions. The disciples were instructed in Luke 10:7 “And in the same house remain, eating and drinking such things as they give: for the laborer is worthy of his hire.” He also ate to distance himself from heretical teachings. Fasting itself was not the issue because for medieval Christians as a whole, fasting was a regular practice. Nearly a third of the Christian year was made up of fast days. And, the early Franciscans also had additional fasts:
According to the First Rule, the brothers fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays, and with the permission of blessed Francis, also on Monday and Saturday, and ate meat on other days when eating meat was lawful. 

But Timothy 4:1–5 warns:

The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons....They order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.

One of the particular groups seen as disobeying this teaching were the heretical Cathars, who held vegetarianism as one of their distinguishing beliefs. Cathars refused meat and dairy products altogether because they refrained from anything produced through sexual relationships, though Malcolm Barber notes other critics who posit that Cathars abstained from eating meat because of their teaching about the transmigration of souls: the flesh might contain a morsel of soul that would somehow become even more earth-bound if ingested and metabolized. Francis presents meat as a necessary evil, a difficult to resist temptation. But in contrast, in a way that is essential to Francis’ way of teaching, he also uses the image in a countervalent way, cutting across previous meanings to access another insight which startles the reader. For Christians, the essential meaning of Christ is that he was spirit made flesh, incarnated to redeem humankind. This flesh, this carne, is in all ways good, accessible in an essential way that offers salvation in the way nothing else can. Christmas, the Feast of the Incarnation, was St. Francis’ favorite holiday. Once, when Christmas fell on a Friday, a regular fast day, Brother Morico suggested that the friars should not eat meat and should fast. Francis replied, “You sin, Brother, calling the day on which the Child was born to us a day of fast. It is my wish,” he said, “that even the walls should eat meat on such a day, and if they cannot, they should be smeared with meat on the outside.” Meat now becomes the ultimate pleasurable gift, a sanctified indulgence, the means of celebration. The word “smear" evokes a careless abundance usually so absent with Francis. Just as the carnal body of Christ is eaten for salvation, all of creation, even inanimate buildings, consume meat to celebrate the Incarnation of the Redeemer. Death and redemption are like Carnival and Lent in their linked opposition. At its core, Francis’ minute attention to eating is a part of his lifelong obsession with denying the lust for material satisfaction. His initial forays into Christian service involved divesting cloth from the family business. Vauchez argues that Francis’ knowledge of the divine was embodied, perceived through the body itself rather than the heart. And where he once rejected clothing and material comforts in pursuit of denying inappropriate desires of the body, he later came to a vexed relationship with food much like many female medieval religious. While “consumerism" might be a defining characteristic of modernity, consumption of products beyond basic needs has always been a part of being human. The two meanings of logos, the word of God and mercantile signifiers, have always been at war. Francis’ relationship with materiality in that sense seems very feminine. The specific incident illustrated in Chapel XIII first appears in The Life of Saint Francis:

As normally happens, sometimes the craving to eat something came upon him, but afterwards he would barely allow himself to eat it. Once, because he was ill, he ate a little bit of chicken. When his physical strength returned, he entered the city of Assisi. When he reached the city gate, he commanded the brother
who was with him to tie a cord around his neck and drag him through the whole city as if he were a thief, loudly crying out, “Look! See this glutton who grew fat on the flesh of chickens that he ate with-out your knowledge.” Many people ran to see this grand spectacle, and groaning and weeping, they said: “Woe to us! We are wretches and our whole life is steeped in blood! With excess and drunkenness we feed our hearts and bodies to over-flowing!” They were touched in their hearts and were moved to a better way of life by such an example.6

Here, the core narrative is presented: because of his guilt over eating meat, he presents himself as a “spectacle” to expose his hypocrisy to the crowds. He presents himself “as if he were a thief” in that he has stolen a bit of chicken that was not his to eat and the trust of the crowds who did not know of his deceit. In his desire for humility, he exaggerates his actions in “glutton” and “grew fat.” But unlike the model presented in Acts 2:37 (“Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?”), where the crowd repents, the inhabitants of the chapel carry on with little self-reproach.

Henri d’Avranches tells essentially the same version, but ratchets up the intensity of Francis’ transgression.6 While Celano presents Francis condemning himself (and leaves it, I think, to the reader to see how unjustified they are), Avranches uses the accusatory tone. His piece of chicken becomes a “blood red feast,” and “fat chickens.” Francis becomes a “parasite glutton, a glum-looking fraud.” He is even compared to the hypocritical faster of Matthew 6:16. Subsequent versions add more details. In The Assisi Compilation,13 the friar is anguished to tether and drag the holy man, when Francis has not recovered yet from malaria. Although Francis confesses that he ate meat and broth flavored with meat, the sympathies of everyone, including the narrator and the crowd are clearly with the innocent Francis. Bonaventure adds that Francis gives a sermon on “the stone where criminals received their punishment,” which is represented in the chapel by a pillar along with a handcuffed Jewish prisoner. Even Bonaventure observes that this kind of humility is hard to imitate: They were well aware of his austerity, and so their hearts were struck with compunction; but they professed that his humility was easier to admire than to imitate. Although this incident seemed to more a portent like that of a prophetic utterance than an example, nevertheless it was a lesson in true humility instructing the follower of Christ that he must condemn the fame of transitory praise.15 Francis became sensitive to being called a hypocrite after a particularly unfortunate encounter in which only a miracle saved him from being unjustly called a fraud. In Celano’s version: Francis is honored by a believer who prepares a fat capon for a feast. A man of demon-like intentions, “a sort of Belial” pretends to beg alms. When Francis gives him a piece of chicken for the love of God, the man hides it away as evidence. He presents it to the crowd the next day to expose Francis’ hypocrisy, but God had changed the chicken to fish. After the accuser repents, it miraculously becomes meat again.16

Chapel XIII then unambiguously interprets the medieval narrative which shows Francis being led in penance as he makes his body a sermon for humility. But what of all the contrasts surrounding him, the secular, public, unleashed celebration of Carnival? Francis’ contrast of the material and spiritual becomes embedded in the very real social climate of the northern Italian experience.

In Cardinal and Milanese Archbishop Carlo Borromeo’s work with the reforming Council of Trent, he was instrumental in promoting reforms in Catholic practice, and in the use of didactic literature and art. He passionately supported the traditional idea of seasonal penance and made it one of his favorite preaching themes.17 He had an equally
fervent desire to blot out what he saw as the secular dissolution of Carnival, the celebration which preceded the forty days of fast. His Discorso contro il Carnevale bitterly denounces the inappropriate liberties practiced at Carnival, especially by women. On March 7, 1579 Borromeo “issued an edict attacking the customary carnival entertainments in unusually sharp terms, and prohibiting all jousts, theatrical performances, tournaments, dances, and masquerades during the Sundays and feast days of the Lenten and pre-Lenten season. Organizers and participants were excommunicated, while spectators and assistants automatically incurred the interdict.” This attack provoked the Milanese civil authorities and general population into a significant protest which ended with an appeal to the pope, who sided with the Milanese.

Fig. 3. Well-dressed men and women at Carnival in Assisi. Chapel XIII, Sacro Monte di Orta.
Francis’ desire for abstemious self-control and humility in the face of human failings makes a fitting vehicle for another attack on Carnival culture, still robust a century after Carlo Borromeo began his anti-Carnival crusade. The crowd in Celano’s medieval narrative look at Francis and are very aware that they are being called to repentance. The Carnival revelers within the chapel are also called to reflection (with disappointing results). In addition, the pilgrims who have come to see the chapel create another layer of viewing, as they are offered the chance to evaluate their terracotta peers. The very human viewers have even greater temptations, for they see not only Francis the exemplar but also specific lures of human desires. Luxuria, the outward expression of overweening pride, a sin in which the Carnival crowd seems to indulge, wages war with Humility. To further augment the affective experience for the pilgrims, everyone in the carefully rendered crowd reflects contemporary post-Reformation (rather than medieval) Assisi material culture, and thus seems to recreate contemporary Carnival culture.

From the fourteenth century, Milan had a long history of crafting and selling complex textile crafts and armor. Public rhetoric that argued youth and women were indulging themselves in the worst excesses of fashion produced the sumptuary laws promulgated at the very end of the century (1396). In the Late Medieval Period, local Italian governments issued sumptuary laws regulating the “useless,” “grave and onerous,” and “costly” expense of clothing and ornaments. Milan, for example, had a long history of crafting and selling complex textile crafts and armor. Public rhetoric that argued youth and women were indulging themselves in the worst excesses of fashion produced the sumptuary laws promulgated between the mid thirteenth-early fourteenth centuries. Fashion is thus carefully observed in the chapel. Among the revelers are a number of well-dressed women who reflect the fashions of the late seventeenth century, rather than the imagined world of Francis or that of his world shown in medieval art. Many of the clothing styles of the well dressed men and women in the chapel are reinterpreted, simplified versions of high fashion which at this time was coming from the French Court. One well dressed woman (see Fig. 3) exemplifies the problems in identifying some didactic specifics—she might illustrate the problem of consumerism, or the appropriate use of resources, or both. She reflects a number of contemporary styles and offers a pleasant model to encourage female viewing. Her hairdo, which is reminiscent of a cockateel’s crest, is distinctive. It appears to be a rendition of the “fontage” which had become the most fashionable women’s hairstyle in the late seventeenth century. Named after a mistress of the French King Louis XIV, it was condemned as absurd by social critics. This Italian reveler has created her own version, probably by using the newly invented hair crimp and keeping the edifice in place with gum arabic, a popular sticky, resin-like substance imported from Africa. Her dress demonstrates other fashionable details. Lace was increasingly becoming a luxury item, and her lace collar is a fashion statement. Her dress has golden scrolling motifs, woven but probably embroidered considering Milan’s fame for gold thread embroideries on silk. The v-shaped neckline, short wings at the shoulders which could hide fasteners for separate sleeves, and tight sleeves with a cuff are all part of the popular design. Altogether, this appears to be a very fashionable, and very costly, outfit.

Many of the men wear short garments, padded shoulders, elaborate hats, slashed and elongated sleeves, and bright colors (see Fig. 3). Military affectations seem to be the most popular costume. A few men are playfully dressed as women, a practice popular during carnival and representing the inverse social mores of the hedonistic festivities. All of this very careful attention to fashionable detail draws in the audience in a powerful way.
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strengthen the affective identification and encourage the pilgrims’ self-examination.

In contrast to the fashionable ladies celebrating in the streets are a group of women portrayed looking at the scene from the windows above (see Fig. 2). It creates a *mise en abyme*, as viewers of the chapel see their own voyeurism reflected back at them. They might be intended to represent “idlers” as Leon Battista Alberti described in his famous book on the family “those lazy and foolish women who spend the whole day sitting idly at the window with their elbows on the sill, and who as a pretext keep something to sew in the hands and never finish it.” These women might even have a more lascivious connotation, for both literature and drama of the times show the window as the place for the courtesan to procure her customers. Whether an object lesson for chaste women or evocative of prostitutes, the windows situated on an upper level occupy “a borderline between the safety and privacy of the bedroom and the openness of the traditionally male-dominated piazza,” a place which Carnival gives women access. Interestingly, the

Fig. 4. A well-dressed Black woman among the Revelers at Carnival in Assisi. Chapel XIII, Sacro Monte di Orta.
chapel does not portray any women dancing, which is surprising since dancing was an acknowledged part of Carnival. Women may well be omitted from the scene given the Borromean condemnation of dance.

Careful observation of the material world, both ordinary and exotic, makes the chapel dense in images. Representations of Black characters appear scattered throughout the chapels, such as II, IX, XIII, and IX. In Chapel XIII, two young Black young servants are represented; one rushes to control a horse and another gives a horrified gasp. A Black woman, well dressed, stands prominently in the sight line behind Francis, and her role is much more ambiguous (see Fig. 4). She stands with another woman and a cross-dressing man. She wears pearls and clothing as luxurious as the woman next to her, so whether she is an attendant or a free woman participating in Carnival is unclear. She’s not, however, clearly in an entourage. Thomas Hahn has noted that in the Middle Ages, artists began to represent ethnicity as “a coherently recognizable, reproducible category of identity... The increasingly visible and realistic appearance of Black Africans, in scores of paintings from the middle of the fourteenth century and afterwards, seems irrefutable evidence of a keener awareness among European artists (and their audiences) with respect to geopolitical diversity and racial difference.”

For the Renaissance audience, this woman in the Carnival crowd adds an exoticism and interest to once again draw the attention of the pilgrim and to provide a sense of exciting reality.

Francis’ biographers write that, in the thirteenth century, when Francis pursued holiness, he did so by ridding himself of the temptations of the physical world. Following Christ’s words, he attempted to take up the yoke, the rope of discipline, and make himself a physical sign of self abnigating humility. As a young man, he liked giving feasts and he liked his clothes, and those became two of his most constant sacrifices. Later in life, when he feared his message would be sullied by hypocrisy, he stripped himself of both again: regretting the food and stripping himself of clothing. He does this to edify his followers and bring them along on the path of humility. The story of Francis being paraded through the streets of Assisi was consistently retold in Franciscan sources for four centuries, and when it is once again fashioned for a chapel at Orta, the same Francis is illustrated there. Yet this time, Francis’ story was set inside another frame of reference, the Borromean cultural critique of Carnival. In Chapel XIII, the didactic intent of Francis’ act is the same: it is a lesson of Humility. But here the secular, material world which must be denied is contemporary and lavishly displayed, and it is also here that the wide, open tracery of the grille and the absence of kneelers encourages the pilgrim to lose themselves among the crowd and become immersed in the chaos. Rather than demand a devotional position and even identity, the pilgrim might abandon, if for a fleeting moment, their purpose. This curious relationship between pilgrim and Carnival crowd, seemingly antithetical to the didactic program of the chapel, and the shrine writ large, may be an ironic manipulation intended to underscore the vulnerability to temptation, especially during the season of Carnival, of even the most devout.

The didactic intent of Francis’ act is the same: Humility. The secular, material world which must be denied is contemporary and lavishly displayed.
Endnotes

1 A version of this chapter was previously published: Cynthia Ho, “King Carnival in the Yoke of Humility,” Medieval Perspectives 30 (2015): 9–29.
3 Ibid., 3:235.
4 Henri d’Avranches, The Versified Life of Saint Francis, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 1:478.
5 The Assisi Compilation, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 2:182.
7 Angelo Clareno, The Book of Chronicles or the Tribulations of the Order of Lesser Ones, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 3:399.
9 Thomas of Celano, Life of Saint Francis, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 3:199.
14 Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, Major Legend of Saint Francis, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, 2:570.
15 Ibid.
18 Ibid., 248.
20 Ibid., 28.