‘For Our Devotion and Pleasure’: The sexual objects of Jean, Duc de Berry

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In the Middle Ages superbly crafted and precious artworks were used to glorify God as well as to attract more money through gifts and donations to institutions like monasteries and cathedrals. Wealthy individuals like kings, lords and bishops also amassed art objects in order to display their power. But it is only with Jean, Duc de Berry (1340–1416) that we can see the frenzy of accumulation, an impulse to own art, not in order to glorify or even to save an ego but rather to create one. The inventory made during the duke’s lifetime by his ‘garde des joyaux’ Robinet d’Étampes gives us some sense of the variety and scope of his collection. Most prized by the duke were the thousands of ‘joyaux’ or jewels, most of them now lost. Closely related to his precious stones were the scintillating surfaces of his illuminated books, culminating in the famous Très Riches Heures. He also acquired sacred relics, such as a spine from Christ’s Crown of Thorns, which he had encased in an elaborate gold and enamel reliquary, now in the British Museum. In addition Jean owned twelve magnificent châteaux which he filled with tapestries, sculptures and paintings. The most splendid, at Mehun-sur-Yèvre, housed a menagerie of exotic creatures, including a monkey, a camel and an ostrich, each of which had its own personal paid gardien.1

The acquisition of all these objects and bodies, living and dead, was made possible because of vast wealth produced from tracts of land. As well as owning the fertile lands of the Berry, Jean was Duc d’Auvergne, Comte de Poitou and governor of Languedoc, gaining large parts of southern France through his two political marriages. These lands were valuable because they brought with them thousands of serfs. In this sense the duke’s peasant subjects were also his objects, as they are represented toiling in the fields of his estates in one of his most precious possessions – the calendar of the Très Riches Heures (plate 1).2 These bodies provided the taxes and produced the crops that paid for every page of this manuscript in which they were pictured. The body and the art object were intimately connected not only on the level of production and power, but also in relation to another fundamental but often overlooked function – to give the duke pleasure.

Werner Muensterberger tries to explain Jean de Berry’s desire to amass so many beautiful things in his study of the psychology of collecting. At the height of the Black Death, the plague that swept Europe in 1349, he argues, nine-year-old...
Jean found himself motherless... Here is a telling example of how a trauma of this emotional dimension leaves a lasting mark on a person’s entire development and inner coherence. Jean de Berry became one of the foremost collectors of his time... not unlike many collectors he seems to have been essentially a lonely man, restless, dynamic, and enlightened... Jean de Berry had three sons. None of them survived him, and after the death of the last one, also named Jean, in 1397, he began (to us as observers, not at all unexpectedly) to collect on an even larger scale.3

Against this simplistic argument, however, one can say that a third of the population of Europe died in the Black Death but not everybody who survived became a collector. Only by exploring the objects of Jean’s desire can we begin to understand how his love of things intersected with his political position and power more generally. Rather than see his collecting as a symptom of personal trauma, I want to view it as a socially creative and recuperative act that was part of the projected self-image of a ruthless man of power.

The pathological view of the collector as someone who substitutes art for some lack is also easy to apply to another more controversial aspect of Jean’s personality – his supposed homosexuality. In the literature this aspect of the duke’s life is either totally ignored or it becomes the crucial ‘flaw’ in his character. Millard Meiss, in the hundreds of pages of two classic studies devoted to this figure, The Late XIVth Century and the Patronage of the Duke and The
Limbourgs and their Contemporaries, chose to ignore it. Meiss actually preferred to cite views ascribed to Jean in a debate on love held in Avignon in 1389 in the presence of the king. ‘Where women are concerned, he allegedly said in substance, the more the merrier and never tell the truth.’ Meiss was only interested in the details distinguishing the duke’s taste for the flesh of parchment, not of persons. Although he hints at contemporaries being uneasy at the duke’s lavishing money on various valets de chambre, this is merely stated as part of a short biography, separate from a chapter, called ‘The Duke’s Taste’. More recent historians like Richard Famiglietti have, by contrast, argued that ‘it was probably the duke of Berry’s homosexual activity that . . . offended his brother King Charles V to the point that Charles, a very pious man, cut him off in 1374.’ The present essay is not an attempt to ‘out’ the Duc de Berry. In fact I want to problematize the use of the modern, pseudo-scientific term ‘homosexual’ (not coined until 1869) to describe a much earlier phenomenon. As David Halperin has pointed out, ‘It may well be that homosexuality has no history of its own outside the West or much before the beginning of our century.’ In a more recent article entitled ‘How to do the History of Male Homosexuality’ Halperin reminds us, however, that any historical analysis of this subject must begin ‘with our contemporary notion of homosexuality, incoherent though it may be’. He goes on to argue that before the modern construction of homosexual (and heterosexual) identity, male sex and gender deviance crossed fluid categories, and consisted of at least four different types of behaviour: effeminacy, pederasty or ‘active sodomy’, friendship, or male love and passivity or inversion. Two of these types, the pederast who played the insertive role with men or boys of lesser status and the man who sought deep emotional friendships with other men, allowed same-sex desire to flourish without the subject having to relinquish the signs and status of his masculinity – marriage, political authority and power. Halperin’s categories work best for his own period – the ancient world – and do not exactly fit the Middle Ages, when another shifting and difficult term – sodomy – complicated the picture even further. This word was used to describe what the Church considered non-procreative sex, including masturbation.

The assumption that Jean de Berry was a ‘homosexual’ is based upon two textual sources. The first is the account of the contemporary chronicler Froissart, who was an eyewitness to many of the events he described. He was not part of the duke’s entourage, however, but was working for Gaston, Comte de Foix. The forty-eight-year-old duke was then in negotiations with Gaston to try and obtain his twelve-year-old ward, Jeanne de Boulogne, for his second wife, after the death of his first wife Jeanne d’Armagnac, who had given him seven children. Froissart provides an interesting term to help us understand how Jean de Berry’s relationship to things could become confused with his relationships to persons. He tells us that ‘Most important of all the fantasies (fantaisies) and pleasant ideas (plaisances) he had, was that of remarrying.’ Elsewhere in his chronicle Froissart also describes the duke’s fantasie in creating his château at Mehun-sur-Yevre – ‘one of the most beautiful houses in the world’, at the cost of 300,000 francs. The word ‘plaisance’ was also used to describe many of his most prized objects, especially small things like jewels and cameos. It is during this description of the duke’s marriage in May 1389 that Froissart introduces an even more scandalous
fantasy. He describes how the duke had fixed all his ‘pleasure’ upon a boy (‘ou la greigneur partie de sa plaisance s’arrestoit’) called Tacque-Tibaut. This person whom the duke loved (Froissart’s term is ‘avoir en ame’) was a mere varlet or servant. He is described as a faiseur de chausses – what we would call a hosier, or maker or dealer in knitted underclothing.\textsuperscript{10} We know that Tacque was also very young, as Froissart later refers to him as ‘a boy of no worth’ (‘ung garchon aussi de nulle valeur’). The duke enriched his favourite with ‘bons jeuiaux’ and kept him in lavish style in his château at Nonette, spending 200,000 francs on this person, whom the indignant chronicler describes as ignorant and without any apparent good qualities. It was the poor peasants on the duke’s estates in the Auvergne and Languedoc, Froissart complains, who were taxed three or four times a year, who allowed the duke his pleasant follies (‘folles plaisantes’). Froissart’s use of this term ‘plaisance’ in another context, describing the duke’s donation of art to the Sainte-Chapelle at Bourges, has been seen by one commentator as an indicator of his ‘love of art’ with its associations of delectation and personal pleasure.\textsuperscript{11} The same term deployed here seems a not-too-subtle hint on the chronicler’s part, that the duke’s pleasure was sexual. Froissart combines it with the word ‘folles’. Only in modern French does the word ‘folle’ mean effeminate homosexual, but in the fifteenth century this word already had such associations. To ‘faire la folie’ meant to have sexual intercourse, for example. In the highly misogynistic discourse of the period, which associated the feminine with the foolish and grasping wordly appetite for things, Froissart went further than he did, in calling the duke ‘the most covetous man in the world’ (le plus convoitteux homme du monde) but coded that urge to possess as itself perversely feminine.

The second document attesting to the duke’s sexual proclivities is a political pamphlet in verse written by an anonymous Parisian in 1406, which was clearly written from the Burgundian point of view and which is highly critical of the Valois rulers of France. The Songe véritable is a poem of 3,174 lines in which allegorical characters bemoan the dire condition of France.\textsuperscript{12} As well as describing Charles VI’s Queen Isabeau as being greedy and foolish and having an affair with her husband’s brother, it accuses the Duke of Berry of ‘immeasurable outrages against the Order of Nature’.\textsuperscript{13} This passage mocks Jean de Berry’s obsession with another man, a paveur (literally a road-paver or ‘construction worker’) whom the duke, then in his sixties, showered with gifts of clothes and jewels, raised to the nobility and married off to a rich noblewoman. The nineteenth-century editor of the poem believed ‘this strange favourite of the duke’ to be the same person Froissart referred to as Tacque-Tibaut, but the poem was written fifteen years after the period of the latter infatuation, suggesting that we are dealing with a different individual. For a collector like Jean de Berry a single object can never be enough: in Baudrillard’s terms, ‘the impulse of physical possession, as such, can only be satisfied by a string of objects, or by the repetition of the same object, or by the superimposition of all objects of desire.’\textsuperscript{14} The fifteenth-century poem goes further. Instead of being guided by the rules of Nature, Jean is led to acts of horrible excess by ‘Folly and Sotise’ (‘Ou au moins Foleur et Sotise,/Qui maintesfoiz le conseillerent’). Here the word ‘sotise’ would also have had disturbing implications of same-sex desire, for a sot not only meant a fool but, as
Ida Nelson has shown, a sodomite. Linked to the English term to be ‘besotted’ or doting on something, ‘chooses sotties’ were not only obscene things but meant, according to the *Medieval English Dictionary*, ‘to secure the availability of the posterior of one’. But what most suggests that this poem contains an accusation of sodomy is the reference to Jean’s acts overturning Nature’s laws, which was a traditional *topos* of scholastic attacks upon ‘the unnatural vice’.15

Both these accusations against the duke are, of course, clearly biased. The charge of sodomy was a common one to hurl at one’s political enemies in the Middle Ages as the Templars and a number of unfortunate individuals had already experienced. Another convention visible here is the *topos* of the royal favourite being advanced over others – well known since the scandal of Edward II of England’s relationship with Piers Gaveston earlier in the fourteenth century. It is more about politics and power than perceived sexual preference. According to Froissart, no great man was without his favourites who from beneath his feet gave him bad counsel. These ‘marmousets’, as they were called – the same word used to describe the little squatting figures of atlantes who hold up statues on Gothic cathedrals – were loathed at court. As ‘arse-lickers’, they embodied the abject position of being ‘under’ someone else.16 Even a complimentary observer like the poetess and courtier Christine de Pisan, who described the duke in 1405 flatteringly as a man of distinction, makes the point that he was unusually ‘debonaire a ses serviteurs’, or generous/courtly with his servants.17 We have to remember that medieval society was rigidly hierarchical. Jean de Berry was literally in the second tier below his brother, the king, standing on hundreds of nobles, who in turn stood on thousands of lesser nobles, who stood on even more peasants. This is what made all the more amazing the fact that Jean bypassed these hierarchies and made persons of much lower rank, labourers and underwear-makers, his personal favourites. The taste for ‘rough trade’ among modern homosexual men like E.M. Forster, does not help to explain the duke’s actions. As Halperin has observed, ‘friendship/love’ demands an equality of rank between partner, whereas pederasty/sodomy depends upon a socially significant difference between the partners in age, status and sexual role. We do not know, for example, whether or not Jean’s love for these men ever took a physical form, or whether he took these inferiors as erotic objects in the traditional pederastic sense, or whether they were the active dominating partners, as was the case in Forster’s fantasies. That the latter may have been the case is suggested by the fact that both François Villon and the fifteenth-century authors of the Sottie plays use the name Tibaut as the nickname for an active – or ‘straight-acting’ – sodomite, someone who will only play the ‘male’ role in intercourse.18 Were this the case, it would have made Jean not a pederast/sodomite but an effeminate or invert. This was perhaps possible, as Halperin describes, because ‘effeminacy applies especially to those men who are high enough in rank and status’ to take the risk of social approbation.19 What seems to have shocked contemporaries, however, was not the gender of the object of the duke’s affections but the class to which that object belonged.

Just as we cannot describe the duke as homosexual in the current sense of the term, neither does he fit into currently conceived notions of the heterosexual. Today a man seeking a sexual relationship with a twelve-year-old girl would be
vilified as a monster. Although people commented on the discrepancy in age between the duke and his twelve-year-old bride, they would not, however, have seen him as a pervert in the modern sense. Girls as young as seven were brought to the altar for reasons of diplomacy. Froissart, however, records a conversation between the duke and King Charles VI, who warned his uncle of his ‘grant folie’ in marrying Jeanne de Boulogne. The duke was said to reply ‘If the girl is young, I can save her for three or four years, even longer if she turns out to be a beautifully formed woman.’ Charles is supposed to have replied with the witty retort: ‘But, my dear uncle, she will not save you!’ This exchange not only reveals how much Jean was thought to see people as ‘things’, to be kept over time, but that his contemporaries saw what we would call a perversion in terms of a vice that could damn the soul for ever. Same-sex desire was likewise viewed not as a condition but as a taste. Although in some advanced medical circles there were theories of a natural cause for male homosexuality, for most medieval commentators such tastes, like bestiality, were choices rooted in the soul’s responsibility, or what Thomas Aquinas called ‘the non-natural pleasures’.

The modern historian Richard Famiglietti, on the evidence of the two texts just quoted, comes to the tentative conclusion that ‘it is perhaps impossible to say with certainty that the duke had a sexual appetite for children . . . it is documented that his sexual activity was unusual. He felt a strong attraction to men of the lower classes and maintained several, at different times, as his lovers.’ This attempt to apply modern categories to sexual behaviour is problematic because we are dealing here not so much with the history of sexuality but with the complex matrix of gender, politics, marriage and kinship. In a society controlled by a male elite in which women, children and social inferiors were treated as political pawns as well as easily obtainable sexual objects, twentieth-century terms like ‘child abuse’, ‘lover’ or even ‘homosexuality’ are misleading.

Nonetheless, there is evidence of the duke’s desires, I believe, embodied in the objects that once formed part of his collection. These show that he did indeed have an interest in looking at the genitals of the lower classes, both male and female. These were painstakingly painted in all their minute majesty in the famous February page of his Très Riches Heures where, in a little hut protected from the snow, a young man and a woman expose their large genitals before a roaring fire (plate 2). These details were so shocking to American audiences of the 1950s, when the calendar was reproduced in Life magazine, that these offensive parts were prudishly air-brushed out. The joke is not just the fact that the lower orders did not wear underwear (one remembers that Jean’s beloved Tibaut served the noble classes as a hosier) and were uncouth exhibitionists, but that the duke is being invited to take a peek up their skirts. On the February page the peasants warm the organs of hot lust before a roaring fire, just as in the previous picture, in the famous January page, the duke is warming his. The duke’s genitals however are not visible, from where we see him seated behind the table (plate 3).

That is, at least, not literally. For I shall be arguing that there is perhaps no fifteenth-century manuscript image as phallic in its imagery as this glorious courtly ritual painted by Pol de Limbourg for the January page of the Très Riches Heures (plate 3). The calendar, like the rest of this manuscript, remained unfinished when both the patron and the artist brothers died of the same outbreak
of the plague in the summer of 1416. This completed page is often described as if it were the snapshot of an actual historical event. It has even been suggested that it records a particular time and place – the Hotel de Giac on 6 January 1414 (the Feast of the Epiphany) when, after secret negotiations with the English, Jean de Berry welcomed particular members of his entourage.23 Here I want to interpret this famous image, not as a reflection of historical reality, but as a component of the duke’s fantasy. I use this last term in the sense used by Laplanche and Pontalis in their essay ‘Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality’, to show how all phantasmatic projections involve a relay between the subject and the object. ‘Fantasy is not the object of desire, but its setting. In fantasy the subject does not pursue the object or its signs: he appears caught up in their sequence of images.’24 The duke is portrayed sitting at his table on the first day of the year, the day when gifts were exchanged. This is a space suffused with the duke’s presence, both as a body and as a sign. The heraldic display of wounded swans and bears is usually described as symbolizing his love for a mysterious lady called Ursine (ours – bear, plus cynge – swan) but these are just as likely to emblazon aspects of a more personal inventory of selfhood. The bear was the only animal to copulate face-to-face like humans.25 It is interesting that the duke had chosen these two contrasting creatures – one
rapaciously grasping, dark and masculine and the other white, graceful and feminine – as emblematic of his own nature. He owned whole troops of bears and at one time bought fifty swans, as though the sheer act of repetition could convert an appetite into an art.

Pol de Limbourg has alluded to the duke’s propensities in this scene in an even more direct way. The handsome young cup-bearer who pours his master’s wine elegantly at the far left is presented as the duke’s Ganymede – a common classical allusion to a male sex-slave for, as many poems of the medieval period describe, after being ravished by Jupiter in the form of an eagle, the boy served as Jupiter’s cup-bearer by day and as his bed-partner at night. This witty allusion is also evoked by the appearance of the totally naked water-bearer in the top right of the blue, white and gold zodiacal frame above (plate 3). Ganymede was synonymous with the figure of Aquarius throughout the Middle Ages. The ‘earthly’ Ganymede and body-servant of the duke is highly eroticized on this page, not through nudity but through dress. Visible against the dark elegance of his robe is a clearly phallic object – similar to that which sticks out from between the legs of the duke’s carver, who performs his office at the table beside the pantler. These corkscrew-like objects are not only insignia of office, they are playful emblems of youthful virile sexuality. These six beautifully dressed young men in the foreground, one of whom crosses his differently decorated legs, stand out in the foreground of the scene as ‘cross-dressed’ in a courtly sense. Their male bodies are just as eroticized as female ones. If the February page displays to the duke the penises of his subjects, so too, in a more allusive way, do these courtly phalluses of the January page play upon the power of the penis, so crucial to the princely persona of the period. Here I disagree with Odile Blanc and Danielle Régnier-Bohler who have both argued, with reference to the history of costume, that the medieval male body was not eroticized as an object during the Middle Ages. They argue that the masculine body can only be ‘the subject of desire’ and when naked it recalls human savagery and rupture with social life rather than anything sexual. Yet historians of costume have also been the ones to show that it was in the French court of the late fourteenth century that male dress went through one of its most profound transformations – newly shortened tunics revealed the legs and buttocks to the scandal of many churchmen. The topos of the courtier as an effeminized man, who takes more care of his appearance than in following the manly arts of war, goes back to the twelfth century when English courtiers were accused of being sodomites and growing their hair long in order to make themselves more appealing to women! Pol de Limbourg’s pretty boys on this page show how the newly fashionable short haircuts for male courtiers also created a newly charged erotic zone of the medieval body – the swan-like nape of the neck.

The elaborate hair and elongated effeminate beauty of these young men make them living equivalents of Pol de Limbourg’s Zodiac man in the same manuscript (plate 4). This is one of the earliest male nudes in post-classical art modelled not on the naked Adam of Christian iconography but upon the nude ephebe seen in the statues of antiquity, and which the duke could relish full-page in his private prayerbook. We know that the duke collected ancient cameos and medals which he obtained from Florentine dealers. Some are described in inventories as little naked
idols, no longer seen as the traditional site of demons to be repudiated by the saints but now as delightful objets d’art to be collected by the connoisseur.29 One is reminded again and again of ancient sources, such as Pliny, which describe how legendary imperial collectors, such as Caligula, became ‘inflamed with desire’ (libidine accensus) for two of his paintings and how Brutus owned a statue of a boy sculpted by Strongylion that he loved so much that he adopted it as part of his family.30 Discussing these accounts Maurizio Bettini sees ‘the person who loves images’ as a transgressor ‘to be grouped with the lawless tyrant . . . or someone who loves his own sister, deranged by a passion that is typical of beasts’. These stories constitute a discourse crucial to the organization of culture: ‘the rules according to which one is supposed to behave with these beautiful substitutes (perhaps even more beautiful than real people could ever hope to be)’. Within the Christian regime of images these substitutes should serve only as signs to the higher and ineffable God, but increasingly represent Christ in highly corporeal, even erotic poses. The duke of Berry’s perversion was not so much his alleged transgression of sexual norms but his thwarting of this semiotic system through being physically rather than mystically seduced by images. For Bettini, ‘To love an image is something very close to loving a sexual partner who is absolutely and strictly prohibited.’31

4 Pol de Limbourg, Zodiac Boy’, detail of the Trés Riches Heures, for Jean, Duke of Berry. Musée Condée, Chantilly. (after Durrieu)
One of the unusual features is found in no other example of this conventional medical image of the body with the zodiac signs attached to its various members which were thought to come under that particular sign’s influence – the fact that he has his own dark twin. The frontal blonde youth has his arms spread out while his backturned double is his mirror image, except for having dark hair and his arms drawn up to his chest. The editors of the partial facsimile went so far as to suggest that this doubling was sexual and referred to the cosmic principles of male and female in order to evoke a kind of hermaphroditic presence. While sexual difference is indicated laterally by the male and female signs of Gemini, the twins pulling in different directions at each of the figure’s shoulders, like tutelary spirits, the front–back axis of the two big bodies here seems to me less an articulation of a male–female split than a rupture within masculinity itself. Why did Pol de Limbourg create this anomalous image of double-man? Was it another of his jokes? Despite theories of royal splitting in the king’s two bodies, this was never visualized so literally in the period. D. Vance Smith has noted that, during the Middle Ages, ‘the male body takes on two forms: on the one hand the material body, which is subject to the mutability, degeneration and corruptibility of all matter; on the other hand, a figurative body that seemingly transcends these problems, suggesting the coherency of all matter and a masculinity that transcends materiality.’ In the zodiac page, apart from the sheer visual pleasure of showing the smooth-fleshed youth’s curving shoulder and left buttock, perhaps indicating the model was a perfect statue or living person – this doubling sets up a powerful image of masculinity divided against itself, a repetition – a need for more than one – that I would argue lies at the very centre of Jean de Berry’s duplicative model of desire.

Back in the January page Jean is surrounded by pairs of boys, a blonde and a dark butler and pantler serve before his table and another bifurcated pair, again blonde and dark-haired, stand back to back at the left of his table, serving his every need. These visual tropes of doubling, with probable reference to the traditional sexual sign of Gemini in late fourteenth-century Books of Hours, also point to the fantasy of the mirror and the popular Ovidian myth of Narcissus’s desire as an idolatrous desire for the same. To one side, as the interminable voyeur of this constant coupling and coming apart, sits Jean de Berry, static and one in the midst of his proliferating, generating things – his guests, his subjects, his pets and his phallicized minions. He is protected from the blaze of the fire by a vast wickerwork screen that gives him a kind of profane halo – the hangings behind him and his own body are emblazoned with the heraldry of his office and power. The hearth was in the Middle Ages the pre-eminent site of the female body, associated with the wife’s domestic control of warmth and food as well as the generative powers inherent in her womb. Just as it was possible for Jesus to be a mother, Jean scandalously appropriates the feminine space of the hearth as his own, in order to place himself at the centre of all procreation. Like pilgrims approaching a sacred shrine the figures move towards the right where the object of their adoration sits behind his altar, their hands raised not so much to ‘warm their hands by the fire’ as Meiss suggests, but in playful pseudo-proskenesis. ‘Approche, Approche,’ exclaims the chamberlain as they come before their idol. His possessions are everywhere, the witty art of the Limbourgs seeming to confuse
the animate and the inanimate. Two tiny lap-dogs have left their master’s body to wander over the white tablecloth and lick at scraps. Jean de Berry owned 1,500 dogs in 1388 (mostly for hunting) and also presented a faithful pooch with a life pension in 1373 for remaining day and night in a ditch by the corpse of its master, who had been killed in a skirmish with the English. Baudrillard, in his usual pathological discourse of collecting as sublimation, has described how pet dogs are perfect metaphors of the ideal collected object: ‘the poignant devotion to such creatures points to a failure to establish normal human relationships and to the installation of a narcissistic territory – the home – wherein the subjectivity can fulfil itself without let or hindrance … although alive pets are … as sexually neutral as any inert object.’

But one might just as well see Berry’s collecting of pairs of dogs, pairs of leopards etc. as extensions of his aesthetics of control – like Noah gathering pairs of creatures in the ark or Adam naming the animals. Lord of his domain, Jean has a kind of dominion over all the beasts of the earth. Although the life of action is suggested in the tapestry that hangs behind depicting a scene from the Trojan wars (which the French often used as an emblematic parallel during the Hundred Years war) Jean seems to be withdrawn here into his own world of pleasure and contemplation.

What has gone unrecognized in previous commentaries on this famous page is how much this is a totally homosocial space. Neither the Duchesse de Berry, who was notoriously absent from the ‘give and take’ of the inventories, nor any female courtier is present. Millard Meiss thought he recognized Pol de Limbourg’s wife, Gilette de Mercier, in the half-hidden face behind the man drinking from a cup at the far left. This was the girl to whom we shall return again, whom the duke had first tried to procure as gift for his favourite painter when she was eight years old and who would still have been a child at this date. She would be totally out of place in this conversation between these powerful men. Just as Trojans and Greeks battle in the fictive tapestry behind them, these are all men performing their prowess and masculinity for each other, within the homosocial fiction of the duke’s ‘folle plaisance’. Something which adds another dimension to this drama of same-sex desire is the fact the duke made his favourite artist and author of this page, Pol de Limbourg, a *valet de chambre*, and thus part of the prestigious, inner circle of servants who were literally close to his body. Such an erotically charged repositioning of the image-maker as sharing and constituting part of his master’s most intimate space – his bedroom – is an aspect wholly forgotten in Warnke’s otherwise exhaustive treatment of the rise of the court artist. The young Pol de Limbourg was not only painting his patron but his master in a physical sense, not necessarily with the modern sado-masochistic inflection, but in terms of the total control that the duke wielded over the bodies of all his subjects, wives, favourites and artists. Pol received from his master as a New Year’s Day present in 1408 not only a golden ring set with an emerald in the shape of the duke’s symbol of the bear but an eight-year-old heiress, the daughter of a Bourges merchant, Gilette de Mercier, for his future bride. Jean de Berry had the girl abducted and locked up in his castle at Etampes when her mother refused to allow the marriage. Jean was as rapacious when it came to obtaining things in order to give them as gifts to others as he was about his own ‘joyaux’. The word *joes* was also the slang term for the two testicles, just as we still talk about the ‘family jewels’. Jean, it seems, wanted
two of everything – wives, dogs, favourites – as though such duplication defined his procreative masculinity.

Pol was fond also of playing jokes on his powerful master, of playing the artist–fool. On New Year’s Day 1411, only a few years before this scene was painted, Pol and his two brother-illuminators had presented their patron with a beautiful volume covered with white velours and fastened by silver clasps enamelled with his arms. But when the duke tried to open the book he found it was only a block of wood painted along the sides to resemble one of his coveted sumptuous manuscripts. The January page is also, I would submit, filled with such jeux alluding to the duke as a collector of sumptuous surfaces, textures, patterns and signs. There are ‘hidden’ portraits of the three brothers, whose faces are covered by hats as though they were picture-puzzles for their patron to find below the surface of the picture. Pol himself is perhaps the third figure on the left from the duke’s fool, whose profile is occluded. The image is full of portraits of things as well as people. Among the objects piled on the table is the great ship salt-cellar, also known from the duke’s inventories as the salière du pavillon; on the far left a cupboard displays golden goblets and plates. It is important to recall that many of the artworks in the duke’s collection, books as well as objects, were not private things in our sense of the word, pored over in isolation, but signs circulated, given as gifts, exchanged and displayed at public festivities such as the one represented here. In this sense one could argue that the detail and complexity of the Très Riches Heures makes it a kind of pictorial inventory. The duke’s things were prominent and had, like him, a promiscuous social life; passing through the delicate hands of these young lords or the rougher palms of Tacque-Tibaut, they were, in a sense, parts of his body, marked with his heraldry or insignia. Does this not also suggest a common fantasy of the powerful – of being overpowered and controlled by another? In fact there is visual evidence to suggest that this might have been a fantasy that the duke enjoyed, at least in that peculiarly charged world of his books.38

In his largest Book of Hours, the Grandes Heures, painted for him by another group of artists half a decade earlier in 1409 and which, at 4,000 livres, cost eight times as much as the Très Riches Heures, the margins are full of images of sometimes highly sexually explicit acts between old and young men. One shows a gorgeous blonde youth being fellated by a hooded figure with a turban (saracens were commonly designated as sodomites in the period) whose lower body turns into that of a beast but whose ‘rod’ is only at half-mast (plate 5). The boy, in flouncy yellow, rings three little bells. The number three, or ‘trois’, was a slang term for the male genital organs.39 Such chimes have always been associated, since the ancient votive statues of the tintinnabulae, with the phallus (‘Come on baby, Ring my bell’ is only its most recent manifestation).40 But before we jump to conclusions and take this to be a court artist’s view of toy-boyTacque-Tibaut getting his jewels polished by no less a person than the duke himself, we must remember that marginal motifs were conventional and passed down in the form of workshop patterns. This very same image had, in fact, been invented by the innovative illuminator Jean Pucelle (whose name suggests he was himself viewed as effeminate) for an even more famous earlier royal manuscript, which was made for a woman – the Hours of Jeanne d’Evreux, now in the Metropolitan Museum,
5 Follower of the Prement Master, line ending from the *Grandes Heures*, featuring a boy bell-ringer being fellated by a monster. Bibliothèque nationale, Paris, MS919 fol. 8v.

6 Jean Pucelle, line ending from the *Hours of Jeanne d'Evreux*, featuring a boy bell-ringer being fellated by a monster. Metropolitan Museum, New York.

7 Detail of old man (Jew?) exposing himself while reading from the *Grandes Heures*. Bibliothèque nationale, Paris, MS919 fol. 42.
New York (plate 6) – painted eighty years earlier for the child bride of the King of France by Jeanne Pucelle. Madeline Caviness has convincingly argued that the marginal imagery in this book acts as a sort of sexual primer for a child bride on her wedding night, a stimulus to her subjugation to her husband’s phallus and her responsibility to bring fruit to the stem of his blood-line.41 For Jean, with his love of soft young flesh, the bestial male’s attraction to the loins of blonde beauty must have had an altogether different charge.

What is most significant about this marginal scene and others in the duke’s book showing sexual play, is that the older male is often shown subservient to the younger. Another image in the Grandes Heures shows an old man kneeling on top of a small animal whose head is lost in his crotch, his buttocks bare and his genitals dangling alongside a large feather (plate 7). He is also reading an open book. Is his sin bibliophilic or bestial? His strange phallic hat (often associated with Jews) is the same as that worn by an old man a few folios later, whose eyes are covered and who seems to be lying on top of a prostrate boy in blue, with one hand on the boy’s head and the other on his bottom – next to the Latin phrase Opera manuum (‘The work of thy hands’).42 These three marginal scenes are all examples of anti-sodomitical imagery linked with Jews and heretics in a tradition going back at least two centuries in French religious art.43 Perhaps we should not be surprised to see what we would today call homophobic imagery in the possession of a man like Jean, who would have agreed with the traditional view of sodomy as the most bestial of all sins. Another manuscript he owned, a lavish copy of the Bible moralisée, also painted by the Limbourgs, pictured a pair of sodomites – a priest and a layman embracing – and has the French caption: ‘les sodomites signifient tout homme et tout femme qui contre nature abusent l’un de l’autre par leur desordene desir corrompu et charnel.’ (plate 8) Like all powerful men of his world, Jean spent much of his money on art that looked forward to the next life, on relics, chapels and churches as well as prayerbooks. His enemies certainly felt he deserved the torments of Hell, not only because they believed he practised sodomy but because of the sins of luxury, gluttony and pride. In the Songe Veritable Damnation has a long speech to Reason in which she explains how the duke, who has enjoyed such luxury in life, will get his just rewards in Hell, for his ‘delights’. The scorching flames will burn up his body and all his precious stones of diverse colours, and his fifty dogs, fat, old and overfed (like him) will bite at his flesh a hundred times a day. Instead of those servants who were soft and gentle, he will have a thousand smelly and hideous devils to serve his body, only now ‘Trop bien il sera baculé/ Et bien ara le cul brulé’ (he will be fucked in the arse and his bum burnt). This topos of the sodomite penetrated for eternity in Hell, suggests how strong was this society’s view of the gender inversion, in which the male plays the humiliating position of the female. Jean will play the role in an horrific endless replay of the sin he supposedly enjoyed in life.44

There was thought to be no contradiction between Jean’s vast sexual and artistic appetites and his devout religious faith. He looked forward to salvation partly through the accumulation of objects, many of which he donated to powerful religious establishments. His prayerbooks were a primary locus of devotion as well as delight.45 In 1384 Pope Clement VII gave him some fragments of the nail of the True Cross and he was the proud owner of the chalice from which Christ had drunk at the Last Supper. He owned a whole head of one of the thousands of

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innocents massacred by King Herod but was unable to procure, though he tried many times to buy it, one of the three extant relics of Christ’s only residual body-part – the holy foreskin. Moreover, the duke had himself represented along with his brothers in the miniature for the Office of the Holy Spirit in the very same Grandes Heures where saracens fellate eager and angelic boys, waiting to gain entrance at the gates of heaven (plate 9). A massive masculine St Peter, keys in hand, glowers sternly and takes Jean by the wrist, which dangles down. This has nothing to do with current notions of limp-wristed effeminacy but in this period was used to represent submission – being taken prisoner, or giving oneself over to another.46 Millard Meiss was also shocked that with his other hand the duke seems to ‘finger a sapphire at the gates of heaven’. It looks as if he is attempting to bribe St Peter with a large jewelled brooch at his neck. In this, the strangest of all the strange, hybrid images in the Grandes Heures, the duke was placing all his faith in the salvific power, not of the works of his body but of the things adorning it, things which, in this picture at least, he gets to take with him. As Jean-Yves Ribault has shown, even when he made an expensive donation of a beautifully enamelled reliquary of Salome presenting the Head of John the Baptist to the Chartreuse of Paris, ‘Pour le salut et sauvement de nostre âme’, he included a clause that whenever he was in Paris, the monks would have to lend it back to him for his ‘dévocion et plaisance’, which can only be translated as ‘for his devotion and pleasure’.47 This suggests that he just loved looking at it. Many of the thousands of precious objects listed in the inventories – gobelets, forks (a new invention), brooches and pins – are made of bright lustrous matter like mother-of-pearl, crystal, jasper and of course gold and silver. The word most often used to describe them is ‘jouyaux’ – which we might translate as trinket, toy, a little thing with no use except to bring pleasure – joy. The duke was most passionate about the smallest things, the minute details pictured in the scintillating landscapes and châteaux painted on the pages of his Book of Hours, and his jewels too, probably cost as much as many of the buildings themselves. He went to court in order to obtain a particular ruby that a Florentine merchant had promised him. Another unflattering literary portrait of Jean by the Italian Thomas Marquis of Saluzzo described him as interrupting tense diplomatic meetings in order to look at gems brought in by two Venetian merchants ‘for that is what he liked best’. Meiss describes how the inventory even lists his owning a sapphire that he took from his wife’s tiara.48 The clear-cut beauty of stones seems to take precedence. Precious gems were thought to ward off certain diseases and protect the wearer from the evil eye. Jean did not have some Liberace-like taste for Las Vegas opulence avant la lettre. His love of shiny surfaces, of what many today would describe as a kitschy brightness, was stimulated probably more by belief in the inherent magical properties of the shining and its apotropaic power to ward off evil and protect the wearer from the poisons of enemies.

We should not be surprised to see this alignment of the sacred and sexual in Jean’s tastes. Indeed, I have argued elsewhere that one of the most innovative aspects of the blandly termed ‘International Gothic Style’ that was popular throughout Europe c. 1400 is its highly eroticized and infantilized representation of the body, especially that of Christ.49 Brigitte Buettner has drawn attention to the representation of voluptuous female flesh among the female martyrs of the duke’s
Jean before St Peter from the *Grandes Heures*. Bibliothèque nationale, Paris, MS Lat. 919, fol. 96.
Belles Heures and one can argue that the same scopic regimes of eroticization are at work in the elegant nude male saints in the same manuscripts. Jean was exceptionally advanced for his time in his ability, as a layman, to combine intense religious devotion and erotic sensation. Yet unlike the sensuous symbolic systems created by lay and cloistered religious men and women of his time, which as Caroline Walker-Bynum and Jeffrey Hamburger have shown tended to embody their desires through the materiality of the female body, Jean de Berry’s devotion was radically masculine. Rather than the corporeally fluid metaphors of blood and milk, Jean’s accumulation of shimmering things was an idealizing anti-mysticism, as hard and crystalline as the phallus.

It is all too easy to demonize Jean de Berry, to think of him as a superficial, lascivious sexual predator, a hypocritical tyrant, self-hating, manipulative and grossly self-obsessed – a sort of Roy Cohn of the fifteenth century. He was certainly loathed by many of his contemporaries and today tends to be admired only by art historians who think he had great taste and who all too easily forget that he was only able to exercise it through coercion, power and domination. But in concluding I want to find some other models for understanding this man as a collector apart from the cliche of the manipulative Maecenas type, models which incorporate his perversion as more than mere sublimation or compensation. For although I think it is impossible to know what were the sexual tastes of Jean de Berry, we are still left with the fragmentary projections of the difference of his desire in the form of his collection. Just as we cannot know or see the body of Tacque-Tibaut, most of Jean’s beloved things no longer exist. This is where the inventories are so crucial. Robinet’s inventories of the duke’s things, completed in 1413–14, are as important as the things themselves, for, as Meiss realized, his keeping a record of acquisitions in detail is ‘a practice that became normal only in later museums’. As the contemporary writer Neil Bartlett has described in relation to Oscar Wilde as a collector and his description of Dorian Gray (who by the way was an inordinate lover of gems), part of the pleasure is in the list of things.

The eroticism of the catalogue is not surprising. Pornography too is a catalogue. It lists parts of the body and their attendant fetishes just as a catalogue might list rare and precious things, with an identical effect of intoxication. It is a naming of pleasures. It too is mechanical in its operation, and we love it because it promises and gives us exactly what we want, with no effort beyond purchase. . . . The catalogue gives the object the vigour of a body, and a body the purchasability of an object. The list itself is satisfying.

Millard Meiss was interested in the duke as a kind of proto-art historian whose tastes, and the categories in the inventories, made distinctions between the Byzantine and classical artefacts, viewing Jean as an Italophile, like himself, and a connoisseur of ‘art’ in the modern sense. But many of the duke’s things came to him through a very medieval mode of exchange – that particularly charged and reciprocal phenomenon of the gift. Robinet’s inventories list 350 objects that were given as gifts, of which 177 joyaux and 80 manuscripts were presented as etrennes or New Years’ presents. This aspect of Jean de Berry’s collecting requires further research.
One of the best recent discussions of the collecting impulse, precisely because it incorporates a more sophisticated model of human agency and desire, is Susan Stewart’s *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. This describes how making things small is a means of incorporating them to oneself.

To toy with something is to manipulate it . . . to dally with and caress . . . The miniature, linked to nostalgic versions of childhood and history, presents a diminutive, and thereby manipulable version of experience . . . The collection is a form of art as play, a form involving the reframing of object within a world of attention and manipulation of context.  

Jean de Berry was a master reframer, creating new settings for his relics and adding new to old in a variety of ventures, all of which show he had an advanced sense of distinct styles – the antique as against the modern, for example. The duke entered the frame himself, especially in the minute simulacra of the page, where he could play at salvation and redemption. Stewart culminates her analysis of collecting with a section on the Female Impersonator. From a discussion of the word ‘kitsch’, coming from the German *kitschen* meaning ‘to put together sloppily’, Stewart introduces a more complex term. ‘Camp’, according to *The American Heritage Dictionary*, has come to mean ‘an affectation or appreciation of manners and tastes commonly thought to be outlandish, vulgar, or banal . . . to act in an outlandish or effeminate manner.’ ‘Fashion and fad take place within the domain of the feminine not simply because they are emblematic of the trivial . . . rather the feminine-as-impersonation forms a discourse miming the discourse of male productivity, authority and predication here.’ In a similar vein Naomi Schor sees an association ‘between the small, and the finely wrought . . . with the feminine sphere’. This impersonation of the feminine, which we see in camp, is a fact of modernity and was not practised by Jean de Berry. Then, jewels, silky surfaces and miniaturized objects were not emblematic of the feminine at all but signs of predominantly male power and wealth circulating in society. What looks to us like the excess and surface, what in modernity has been the impersonation of the feminine, was part of the duke’s masculine prerogative. The pugnacious mug of old Jean as he sits at his New Year’s Feast (plate 10) looks surprisingly like that of Gertrude Stein as she sits for her portrait in a detail of a photograph taken by Horst P. Horst (plate 11). I make this comparison not in order to see the duke as an old queen, but to mix up his gender and sexuality into something more strange. It is not because he appears feminized by finery and fur hat, that his voracious gaze seems to us today to be homoerotic. It is because we have come to associate excess in art with feminine consumption, so that it is hard for us to see this image as one of pure unadulterated male power, the power that Stein herself was appropriating in her brilliant macho-self-projection. The first great collector in Western art seems to be attempting what Baudrillard terms the ‘superimposition of objects of desire’. On the surface Baudrillard’s ‘System of Collecting’ seems to fit with Jean de Berry. It ultimately involves the collector’s withdrawal into an all-encompassing object system synonymous with his loneliness, which ‘lacks communication with others’ . . . ‘the ultimate signified
10 Jean/Jesus as mother, detail of the January page of the *Très Riches Heures* of Jean, Duke of Berry. Musée Condée, Chantilly. (after Durrieu)

11 Gertrude Stein as father (detail of portrait by Horst P. Horst).
being, in the final analysis, none other than himself'. At the end of his bloated life, isolated politically and many of his castles looted and his lovely things destroyed or melted-down to pay for wars, Jean appears to have become an isolated monster eating up everything around him just as he is pictured in the Songe Veritable. A similarly unflattering final image of the duke is the marble gisant by Jean de Cambrai, his feet resting on a bear, which was carved for his unfinished tomb, now in the crypt of Bourges Cathedral but originally intended for his Sainte-Chapelle at Bourges (plate 12). At his death in 1416 it remained unfinished in the sculptor's workshop, like his beloved Très Riches Heures. There was no one interested anymore. His second wife Jeanne de Boulogne, who had unusually borne him no children during their long union, remarried only months after becoming a widow. All of Jean's seven children by his previous marriage had already died in infancy, with the exception of Marie, wife of Jean I of Bourbon, so there were few left to mourn. Ultimately his detractors have had their day. The whole surface of the marble monument is covered with graffiti, made by centuries of French visitors who have finally gotten their revenge through defacing him, scratching their names and other epithets with knives into his scrunched-up and stern face. How inscrutable he looks, impenetrable to the gaze of analyst or art historian. There does seem to be something grasping in his deep-set eyes, as though they have just caught sight of a delectable morsel of jasper or of pearl on the heavenly horizon. No one has inscribed the word pede or homo here. To do so now would be simply to reenact the violence done throughout history to multiple bodies, so labelled, catalogued and thereby controlled.

Yet this monster is a crucial figure in the History of Art because he is the first clearly documented instance of a subject using art for pleasure, not in any crude, sensational sense but in a complex construction of desire, in which things become signs of perpetual erotic possibility. Art for Jean de Berry was not a means of sublimating his otherwise inexpressible sexual feelings. It would be quite wrong to imagine Jean having a private orgy of objects, feeling the flesh of the parchment page, finger ing the bony relic, jiggling his joyaux until he arrived at jouissance. Desire seems to have been expressed for him in the act of collecting and exchanging, giving and possessing things rather than in physical interaction with the things in themselves. This is why collecting, even at its most sexually charged, is always, in this sense, social rather than solipsistic. It is also where I ultimately disagree with Jean Baudrillard, who argues that ‘the practice of collecting is not equivalent to sexual practice, in so far as it does not seek to still a desire (as does fetishism). None the less, it can bring about a reactive satisfaction that is every bit as intense. In which case, the object in question should undoubtedly be seen as a “loved object”’. Baudrillard's theory of collecting is, as Naomi Schor has noted, bound up with a modern, phallocentric, hierarchical notion of male subjectivity. Describing the charm of confining objects, he notes that ‘one is hardly inclined to lend another person one’s car, one’s pen, one’s wife’ because these are ‘within the jealousy-system, the narcissistic equivalents of oneself; and were such an object to be lost or damaged, this would mean symbolic castration. When all is said and done, one never lends out one’s phallus.’ If this normalizes the collector as male authority, Baudrillard’s bleak view of perversion as solipsistic and closed, as ‘an inability to grasp the partner totality we call a person’, reeks of humanist
nostalgia for that same male authority and fails to see the productivity of the pervert’s desire. By contrast, another theorist of things, Gilles Deleuze, understands that the perverse is crucial to the collecting impulse, since it is always about setting up and creating boundaries. For him the pervert is ‘someone who introduces desire into an entirely different system, and makes it play, within that system, the role of an internal limit’. Another French psychoanalytic writer who rejects Baudrillard’s model of the ‘normal’ vs. the ‘pathological’ collector and the abnormal fetishist is Jean Laplanche, who has argued that sublimation is less a negation of the sexual than its intensification, and that the process ‘involves the idea of a sort of repeated, continual neocreation of sexual energy’. This is close to a Foucauldian notion of sexual pleasure as performance ‘in which the interrogation of the limit replaces the search for totality and the act of transgression replaces the movement of contradictions’. Jean de Berry’s polymorphous sexual desire was embodied and articulated through his collection in this productive sense. The illuminated manuscripts and other artworks that have, up until now, been viewed only within the framework of his patronage and personal devotion also need to be explored in this broader sense, as the dynamics of the power of ‘plaisance’ taken to the limit.

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Notes


10 Ibid., tome 13, p. 313: ‘Si en escriwerent au duc qui se tennoit a la Nonette-en-Auvergne, et Tacque-Tibaut deles luy, ou la greignier parte de sa plaisance s’arrestoit. Ce Tacque-Tibaut estoit un varlet un faiseur de chausses, que le duc de Berry avoit en a`me, on ne savoit pourquoy, car en ledit varlet il n’y avoit ne sens, ne conseil, ne nul bien, et ne tendoit fors a ` son grant plaisir s’arrestoit. Ce Tacque-Tibaut dele ´ s luy, ou` la greigneur partie qui se tenoit a ` la Nonette-en-Auvernge, et.


13 Moranville, Il. 1650–1672.


22 For this and other details of the later history of the manuscript see Michael Camille, ‘The Trés Riches Heures: An Illuminated Manuscript in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, *Critical Inquiry*, XVII (1990), pp. 72–107.

23 See the description in the partial fascimile by J.


37 This story is recounted in Meiss, *The Late XIVth Century*, op. cit. (note 1), p. 48. For ‘jewels’ as sexual signs see Nelson, op. cit. (note 18), p. 60.


41 For this manuscript, see Madeline Caviness, ‘Patron or Matron? A Capetian Bride and A Vade-Mecum for Her Marriage Bed’, *Speculum*, vol. 68 (1993), pp. 333–62; and for the re-use of certain of its motifs in the *Grandes Heures*, see Meiss, *The Late XIVth Century*, op. cit. (note 1), pp. 352–3.

42 See the facsimile by Marcel Thomas, *Les Grandes Heures de Jean de France Duc de Berry*, New York, 1971, pl. 15 (boy with bells); pl. 60

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(old man with book); pl. 99 old man handles youth. Other marginal scenes include old and young men on fols. 10v., 19r; naked youths on fols. 9r., 20r. and the ambiguously gendered kissing couple on fol. 82.


44 Moranvillé, op. cit. (note 12), ll. 3075–6. This anal penetration of naked male sinners by the fists of devils was carved a century and a half before on the central western portal of Bourges Cathedral. Nearby was another image which the Duke’s enemies later made into a specifically anti-Berry one; a great bum on the exterior frieze of the chapel that was paid for by the Duke before his death.

45 François Avril has shown how interested Jean was in the texts of the Books of Hours in his commentary to the facsimile of the *Petits Heures*, see F. Avril, L. Dunlop and B. Yapp, *Les Petites Heures de Jean, duc de Berry*, 2 vols, Paris, 1989, pp. 65–6; and for the liturgical interests of Jean more generally, see Margaret M. Manion, ‘Art and Devotion: The Prayer-books of Jean de Berry’, in *Texts and Images in Medieval Illuminated Manuscripts*, Melbourne, 1990, pp. 177, 200.


