Introduction

I do not care whether you expect some well turned phrases today. It is my duty to give you due warning by citing the Scriptures. "Do not be slow to turn to the Lord, nor delay from one day to the next, for His anger shall come when you know not." I cannot be silent; I am forced to preach on it. Filled with fear myself, I fill you with fear.

St. Augustine, *Sermon*

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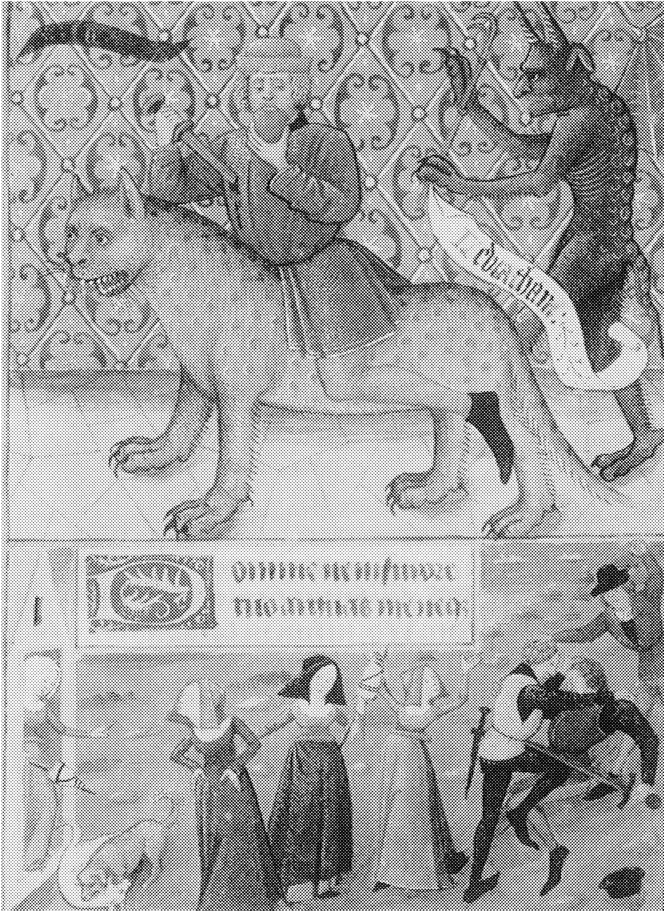

Illustration from a Latin Book of Hours from Poitiers, ca. 1480, depicting Anger, one of the Seven Deadly Sins instigated by the devil, a popular subject of sermon exempla. (Courtesy The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. M.1001, f.88)

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In 1214 the Fourth Lateran Council of the Roman Catholic Church met under the direction of Pope Innocent III to consider the spread of heresy, the decline in the quality of the priesthood, and its spiritual neglect of the laity. The council promulgated some seventy canons, a number of which dealt with sacramental obligations, those rites considered to have been established by Christ as a channel for grace. In regard to the sacrament of penance, all Christians were bound to make confession and receive the Eucharist at least once a year. The tenth canon asserted that in order for the laity to be properly prepared for this duty, they were to receive adequate religious instruction in their own tongue through the medium of more frequent preaching; and it stipulated that bishops appoint qualified men to assist them in preaching to the masses. The focus of the preaching was to be on the Seven Deadly Sins (pride, avarice, gluttony, lust, sloth, envy, and ire), the Seven Virtues, the Seven Gifts of the Holy Ghost, the Ten Commandments, the Twelve Articles of the Faith, the Seven Sacraments, the Seven Works of Mercy, and the Seven Petitions of the Pater Noster.[1]

Homiletic exempla, or instructive sermon stories, played a central role in the revitalization of the art of preaching.[2] In sermons to both clerical and lay audiences, in both Latin and the vernacular, the exemplum reinforced the doctrinal matter of the homily with concrete illustrations, providing religious instruction and effectively, if indirectly, inculcating the largely unlettered medieval populace with the societal norms of European Christianity.

Closely linked to the cultural, mental, and social life of the thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries, the sermon exemplum was characteristically grounded in a contemporary reality and often depicted realistic figures in ordinary situations. Theology was made vivid, and palpable life was given to the concepts of sin, contrition, and penance by descriptive—and often gory—details of the devil, hell, and the punishments meted out to the damned both in life and after death. In furnishing his exempla with mundane details from everyday life and creating scenarios of recognizable social behavior, however, the medieval preacher was not aiming for historical or sociological verisimilitude. Rather, his purpose was to show that there was no situation, regardless of how trivial or banal it appeared, that did not engage the issue of eternal life. What makes the popular homiletic exemplum irreplaceable as a cultural artifact is not so much that it depicts for us the material world of medieval life, for the incidental

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glimpses it offers us are more tantalizing than complete, but that it allows us to witness the interchange between popular and scholarly theology and, in doing so, permits us to discover those unselfconscious cultural notions that, by their frequent hearing and retelling in narrative context, became imprinted on the medieval mind.

In giving voice to these notions as they regard the devil, women, and Jews, medieval homiletic narrative speaks to us of an unholy trinity, a dark and distorted reflection of the orthodox trinity of Christian doctrine. Through popular sermon story, echoes of the medieval mentality, which linked these figures together and viewed them from a perspective of otherness, still resonate today.

Development and Diffusion of Exempla

While the term *exemplum* as used in the medieval preaching manuals was applied to a wide variety of illustrative materials such as biblical quotations and allegorically interpreted metaphors, the term in modern scholarship is generally limited to those relatively brief narratives incorporated into sermons that have the following characteristics: they are persuasive and didactic in aim and tone; they teach lessons of good conduct not only as the means to earthly happiness but, more importantly, as the means of eternal salvation; and they are told on the authority of recognized spiritual leaders as "true" events, either historical or contemporary, which supposedly took place as narrated.[3] It is these exempla, conveying the details of medieval life, reflecting the cultural notions of medieval society and permitting useful comparisons with their variants in other religious and secular sources, that form the basis of this study.

The use of illustrative narrative in moral discourse was not a creation of the medieval Christian pulpit. Greek and Roman writers of antiquity commonly employed historical and biographical anecdote in political and philosophical discourse, but there its use was largely to contrast the glories of past golden ages with the moral decline of the writer's own time or to persuade one's judicial or legislative colleagues to form or reverse certain opinions. The first methodical use of narrative exempla in Christian doctrinal writing is generally attributed

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to Tertullian, the third-century North African ecclesiastic in whose works, the first Christian tracts in Latin, we find examples of antique pagan anecdote—legend, history, or even animal fable—adapted to Christian purpose.

Like Tertullian, the fathers of the church writing from the third to the fifth century found brief narrative illustrations useful to make their presentations of doctrine more accessible to their audiences. Most of their anecdotal illustrations were pious tales of Christian hermits dwelling in the Egyptian deserts, whose lives were witness to the means by which spiritually advanced persons triumphed over demon-inspired desires of the flesh or religious doubts. By the fourth century, these rudimentary narratives of Christian holy men were elaborated into more formal, if still brief, stories and were anthologized with a variety of chronicles and saints' "Lives" to form a collection that was first called the *Vitae patrum* (Lives of the fathers) by Saint Jerome. By the fifth century, this amorphous compilation, now ten volumes of narrative and nonnarrative material with an affinity of theme and treatment, had become a basic resource of Christian preachers seeking edificatory narrative to enhance their homilies, and it continued as a staple of the medieval pulpit until the end of the Middle Ages.

With the expansion of Christianity and the Benedictine monastic reforms of the sixth century, sermon discourse shifted its focus from the relationship between a spiritual master and his disciples, such as we see in exempla about St. Macarius, to the reflection upon religious doctrines applicable to monastic groups or individual layfolk. The narrative exempla utilized in this new context were still almost wholly pious in setting and characters. This second stage of homiletic narrative development produced one significant volume which also became a popular resource for later medieval homilists: the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great, a purported colloquy between Pope Gregory (d. 604) and his deacon Peter, whose purpose was to inspire and instruct the populace during the difficult period of Lombard invasion, plague, and social decay in Italy at the end of the sixth century.[4] Book 4 in particular, composed primarily of visions illuminating various questions of eschatology and related topics, contributed much to the popular medieval conception of hell, devils, the nature of damnation, and the like.

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From the seventh to the twelfth centuries, the monumental changes that took place in the thrust of church dogma and the dynamics of religious instruction influenced the development of homiletic narrative in important ways. The geographical expansion of Christianity, with its conversion of new peoples and its concomitant need for appropriate teaching materials; the continual reexamination of church dogma in its struggle against repeated, if various, forms of heresy; the rise in veneration of the Virgin Mary and a multiplying number of saints; and the growth of distinct vernacular languages impelled a reexamination of church principles and policies regarding the spiritual needs of the laity. During this period Christian theologians expanded and systematized various doctrines pertaining to the sacraments, and clerical officiation in marriage, which took on sacramental status, increased. The doctrine of transubstantiation—the literal transformation of the communion wafer and wine offered at the Mass into the body and blood of Christ—and penance as a sacrament took on heightened significance. The theology of confession underwent expansion and refinement: there was a great movement towards the private examination of conscience; and secret confession, adopted in the seventh century, was required to be taken at least once a year. All of these concerns are reflected in the composition and compilation of the homiletic narrative of this era.

A host of tracts minutely defining and classifying such topics as the Commandments, the Creed, and the Deadly Sins were circulated to acquaint clerics with the new pastoral knowledge they required. In addition, with continuing monastic reform and expansion, a number of exempla collections were composed for the instruction of monastic novices. Sermons preached at the great monasteries also drew large lay audiences, for whom the exempla were an effective tool as well. Such sermons added to the eremetic and early monkish narratives of the *Vitae patrum* and Gregory's *Dialogues* a new stock of stories with wider appeal. Prominent among these were Miracles of the Virgin, emphasizing her role as an intercessor with Christ and protector of those who were faithful in their veneration to her. Composed by clerics devoted to the Marian cult such as Peter Damien, an eleventh-century Benedictine monk, these tales were widely circulated in both homiletic and secular contexts and were influential in shaping models of behavior for women in real life and female characters in popular vernacular *marchen*, or folk tale.

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The growth of trade; the Iconoclastic controversy, which made refugees of dissenting Eastern clerics; and the Crusades also made this period one of enormous interchange between the cultures of western Europe and the Middle East, both Christian and non-Christian. Through this culture contact a fascinating store of fables, animal stories, and other non-Christian narratives was introduced to the homiletic literature of western Europe. The *Disciplina clericalis* (Guide for clerics), for example, was an anthology of thirty-four animal fables, folktales, and fabliaux modelled on Arabic literary patterns written by the Cistercian monk Petrus Alphonsi (d. ca. 1140), a Spanish convert from Judaism serving as a scholar-physician to King Alphonso I of Aragon. The tales were set in a frame of advice from a father to his son, a structure ultimately derived from older Indian, Persian, and Jewish sources, but Alphonsi Christianized them by adding appropriate moralizations. A similarly Christianized collection of originally secular tales was the *Parables* of the English Cistercian monk Odo de Cheriton (d. 1240), who reinterpreted his collection of Aesopian animal fables and beastiary material for the medieval pulpit by appending appropriately Christian allegories to them.

Thus, by the early thirteenth century, when the Fourth Lateran Council articulated the importance of homiletics in pastoral care, a climate conducive to the compilation, composition, and dissemination of illustrative homiletic narrative, both narrowly religious and more broadly moralistic, had already been established. The two streams of exempla literature, pious and secular, melded with each other in ecclectic encyclopedias of narratives compiled to benefit succeeding generations of popular preachers. The most prominent example of such volumes was the *Speculum historiale* (The Mirror of history) of Vincent de Beauvais (d. 1264), a French Dominican with access to the French royal libraries, who brought together scriptural allusions, hagiographies, Marian miracles, and quasilegendary anecdotes into an enormous hodgepodge frequently utilized, though not often acknowledged, by later homilists. Another enormous work whose material was commonly excerpted for pulpit use was the *Legenda sanctorum sive historia Lombardica*, usually cited by medieval homilists as *Legenda aurea* (Golden legend). This compendium of almost 350 saints' lives, many of which include motifs from folktales and secular romances, was written by Jacobus de Voragine, the Dominican bishop of Genoa

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(d. 1298), and translated into Middle English by Caxton. The *Gesta Romanorum* (Tales from the Romans), a collection of romances and pseudoclassical tales written and allegorized for a Christian audience by the French Benedictine Pierre Bercheur (d. 1362), also underwent a medieval English translation and was immensely popular as a source of homiletic narrative.

The formation of the preaching orders of Franciscans and Dominicans in the 1220s and the continuing increase in the monastic movement gave an additional impetus to the composition and collection of homiletic narrative. While one branch of pulpit literature flowered through the Christianization of folktale, fabliaux, and romance, another blossomed with spiritual narratives of a more contemporary cast involving individualized characters both lay and clerical in recognizable life situations. These ostensibly true anecdotes, while largely concerned with apparitions of devils, visions of hell, and similar supernatural occurrences reminiscent of the tales of the *Vitae patrum* and Pope Gregory's *Dialogues*, were more concretely drawn than their formulaic ancestors and often took on a local flavor as they were circulated across Europe by preaching clerics crossing national borders, young men entering monastic establishments far from their native parishes, or travellers enjoying the hospitality of monasteries and convents along their routes.[5] In these socially contextualized exempla we find mirrored not only the religious tenets of the day but the cultural norms as well. One of the foremost exempla books conveying these sociocultural realities was the *Dialogue of Miracles*, a guidebook for young Cistercian monks at Heisterbach in Germany, written by the master of novices, Caesar of Heisterbach (d. 1240).

Another accumulation of contemporary tales enhanced by acutely observed social detail was the body of exempla incorporated into the sermons of Jacques de Vitry (d. 1240), a canon of Oignies in France and later bishop of Acre. De Vitry's fame as a raconteur of pious narrative was based on his homilies against the Albigensian heresy and in support of the crusade against the Saracens in 1214, and especially those directed to specific ranks and classes of both clergy and laity. Generally, two or three narratives were embedded in these sermons, seventy-four of which were collected under the title *Sermones vulgares* (Popular homilies). The extant manuscripts of de Vitry's exempla suggest that not only did his homiletic narratives circulate in conventional

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written volumes but that clerics in his audiences would take notes of his stories as he told them to compile their own collections.[6]

A new society was taking shape in the thirteenth century, one which was becoming increasingly diverse socially and economically. Its heterogeneous nature was acknowledged from the pulpit by apposite texts and exempla addressed to various emerging social groups, highlighting the sins to which, as the church perceived, they were most susceptible. Thus, for example, attacks on vanity in dress and sharp trading practices or usury are found in every exempla book of the period.

Yet in this era of social turbulence and transition, the popular sermon did not so much address social reform directly as focus on personal spiritual conversion as the root of all social improvement. The primary aim of the homily and its accompanying exempla was to bring about the spiritual correction of individuals in a public audience by exhorting fear of the devil, love of God, and sincere participation in the activities of confession, contrition, and penitence, which had moved to the center of the scheme of personal salvation. Sermon story reinforced homiletic material with unambiguous lessons on the wages of sin, the irrevocability of condemnation at the Last Judgment, and the everlasting tortures of hell that no member of the audience could fail to absorb. More than ever, as preaching was teaching, the exemplum played an indispensable role in the church's didactic program.

In one generation after the publication of the Fourth Lateran Council's directives, therefore, the less creative preacher working the pulpit *ad populum* had available a considerable and diverse store of moral anecdote upon which he could draw for pointed and engaging illustration of his homily proper. Notes taken at the sermons of master preachers passed from one cleric to another, fragmentary sermon collections containing exempla were copied and recopied, manuscripts were circulated that included illustrative narrative among other religious material. One refinement was necessary, however, before this potentially rich treasure of sermon stories could be conveniently utilized: the exempla had to be logically organized so that individual anecdotes were linked to corresponding religious topics. To meet this need, a new generation of ecclesiastical writers turned to the compilation of homiletic narrative under alphabetically arranged, cross-referenced rubrics pertaining to the penitential process and other standard subjects of pastoral care.

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With fresh cadres of knowledgeable homilists provided primarily by the preaching orders, the composition of manuals on the art of pulpit discourse and the compilation of anthologies of exempla sensibly arranged for the specific use of the working preacher were not long in arriving. One of the best known of these exempla anthologies was the *Liber de septem donis* (Book of the seven gifts) of the Dominican preacher and inquisitor Etienne de Bourbon (d. 1261). This volume of basic religious instruction contained not only conventional patristic anecdotes but also more interesting contemporary tales, many supposedly heard at first hand. Piggybacking on Etienne's tract was the *Liber de dono timoris* (Book of the gift of fear) of Humbert de Romans, the fifth master general of the Dominican Order (d. 1277), whose compendium drew about four-fifths of its exempla from its predecessor and was prefaced, as was the earlier work, with suggestions for preaching to the masses and the appropriate employment of pulpit exempla.[7]

In the Dominican generation following Etienne and Humbert, Arnold of Liège, a master of theology at Paris, produced another volume similar to these, the *Alphabetum narrationum*. Arnold's 805 exempla, ranging from hagiographical and patristic anecdotes to contemporary *exempla terrible* (grisly cautionary anecdotes featuring details of the punishments accorded sinners), fables, and legends, almost all derived from standard written sources, were arranged under alphabetized topics from *Abbas* to *Zelotipa*, with the final narrative under each rubric followed by a cross-reference to other tales on the same subject listed under different headings. This efficient arrangement, whose use Arnold described in his prologue with the hope that it would prove convenient for preachers on a variety of occasions, undoubtedly contributed to the *Alphabetum narrationum*'s immense popularity over the next century and a half.[8] The work is cited both in later exempla handbooks and in actual sermons throughout England and Europe, and uniquely among such encyclopedia, the entire compendium was translated into English in the middle of the fifteenth century as *An Alphabet of Tales*.

From the mid-thirteenth century on, the same enthusiasm for the moral and didactic function of art that found expression in the stained glass, frescoed walls, and carved portals of the medieval church was embodied in homiletic narrative. The sermon story, at once edificatory

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and entertaining, carefully crafted for its purposes by highly regarded churchmen, was regarded as a legitimate means of making profound and complex theological doctrines more accessible to the untutored. Illustrative narrative served almost as a catechism in story, revealing the medieval Christian conception of the universe and the individual's role in it. Pulpit tales provided a stock of images and events that linked personal morality, religious dogma and social mores, and anchored the medieval masses in their culture by binding them together in a similar world view. The widespread dissemination of a common fund of homiletic exempla over many generations helped to perpetuate a perceptual and psychological mindset that became deeply ingrained in the popular imagination.

Exempla as a Genre: Form and Function

A rationale and analogy for the use of pulpit narrative in preaching to "*omne genus hominum*" (all manner of men), to the "*simplices*" (untutored) as opposed to the men of "*alte sapiencie*" (high learning), was provided by Christ's use of parables to express great truths to the folk of his own time. By the dramatic telling of a cautionary tale, those who slept during the sermon proper could be awakened, and those who were diverted from the sometimes dry and dull homiletic text by gossiping or doing business could be brought back to the spiritual matters at hand by the announcement of an illustrative story to come. Jacques de Vitry compared the use of exempla in the sermon to the blowing of the trumpets that alerted the Hebrew people to move out of Egypt and begin their Exodus. "Believe my experience," de Vitry wrote, "I preached a sermon one day and saw the multitude of people bored and sleeping. One little word and immediately they woke and paid attention to me. Thanks to the exemplum."[9] Robert Mannyng of Brunne, an English preacher whose sermon tract *Handlyng synne* was half filled with illustrative narrative, also justified the use of exempla by referring to the "vulgar people's" love of tales.[10]

While the entertainment value of the homiletic narrative was by no means despised, and even bawdy tales found a place in some preachers' repertoires, certain limits were articulated regarding exempla use.

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Tales should not be offensive, asserted Robert Mannyng, and he, for one, would not speak of "pryuytees" (intimate acts). Gross, obscene, and explicit sexual or scatological references were to be avoided, especially descriptions of sexual activity that might awaken sin in the listeners that they would not have thought of themselves. One preaching manual cites a narrative of Gregory the Great about father-daughter incest as one that should not be preached *ad populum* lest it plant a hitherto unthought of sin into the minds of its listeners; another homiletic tract, the thirteenth-century Franciscan *Liber exemplorum* (Book of examples), states that while a certain dialogue between Alexander the Great and Denes the Philosopher denotes man as a "vessel of excrement," the preacher utilizing this exemplum should substitute the description of man as a "small [insignificant] thing," thereby capturing the meaning of the original without its rude language.[11]

Other instances of the necessity for tact are discussed as well. The *Liber exemplorum*, for instance, dictated prudence in depicting religious figures. It admonished the homilist to avoid negative characterizations such as the English ecclesiastic Bede's reference to a vicious-living monk: since a "monk" is a "man," the *Liber* suggests, a substitution of terms can be made without deceit.[12] The *Liber* further advises preachers to avoid the naming of recognizable political figures in their exempla; for homiletic purposes it is sufficient to describe the situation and the character in general terms.

While in the earlier centuries of Christianity, the exemplum had the nearly uniform structure of a battle between good and evil in which the chief opponents, a saint and the devil, appeared to be playing symbolic as much as literal roles, by the the thirteenth century an evolution in the sermon story had taken place. The exemplum's didactic purpose impelled every aspect of it in the direction of concreteness. Narrative action became particularistic and anecdotal, limning recognizable instances of sinful conduct and scenarios of vice. Exempla delineated tavern sins such as gambling and drunkenness through dramatic conflict and dialogue; warnings against lust and avarice were enhanced by tales of adultery and usury; preachers fulminated against vanity by describing exaggerated dress trains or a cleric's compact with the devil for arcane knowledge. In the exemplum the spiritual weight of a sin became a physical burden: a sack of sand bowing down a corrupt

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abbot's back or a burning cloak enveloping an ambitious scholar. Vividly depicted physical punishments tortured the damned in hell: limbs were torn off or draughts of liquid fire were ingested until the flames poured out of the ears. No longer mere symbols of good and evil, exempla characters became distinctive human beings functioning in clearly recognizable social contexts.[13]

Yet, as has been noted, the elaboration of the exemplum was not introduced for its own sake. The pedagogic nature of the sermon story was clearly marked, was indeed a defining characteristic of the genre. The exemplum interpreted for the masses an ideological system which viewed human beings as feeble creatures continually beset by devil-inspired temptations, incapable of choosing or even desiring their true happiness—eternal life in heaven—without the constant instruction of the church. The realistic details of the sermon story were part of the didactic technique that illustrated for its listeners why and how to carry out the precepts crucial to the irrevocable disposition of their souls: whether to salvation with God, Christ, the angels, and the saints, or to the eternal torments of damnation in hell with Satan and his devils, unchaste women, Jews, and other sinners.

The *exemplum terrible* in particular mirrored the genre's purpose as more than an illustrative appendage supporting an abstract theological lesson. Its structure was in itself a rhetorical argument that impelled the listener to confession as the first step towards penitential reconciliation with God. The central portion of the *exemplum terrible* was the story, usually an anecdote relating a simple, purportedly true occurrence. The usual elements were the devil's temptation of the sinner in specific situational terms, the sinner's acceptance of or resistance to that temptation by specific actions, and the evaluation of his or her behavior as meriting reward or retribution. Thus, in a sense, the narrative exemplum recapitulated the penitential process itself.

The straightforward story line of the homiletic exemplum conveyed the singlemindedness of the homilist's aim. As a culminating exhortation to convert the listener to the specific conduct articulated in the sermon proper, the exemplum was required to have a single, unequivocal meaning. Ambiguity in character or situation that permitted multiple interpretations would have clouded the eschatological issue at hand and diminished the drama of the tale. The exemplum was intended to be not a multilayered, densely populated social narrative but rather a

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focused, linear unrolling of action shaped to illuminate a specific theological precept. Its scheme opposed good and evil in simple terms: the Virgin aided sinners to defeat the devil; lustful women were severely punished unless they underwent sincere contrition and confession; Jews assaulting the Host were struck mute or blind until they acknowledged Christ's grace and miraculous powers. While a sermon audience was composed of many disparate social elements, all were expected to resonate equally to the shorthand of received notions presented in the exemplum. The relative brevity of the didactic narrative assisted this objective, for greater length or development might have opened the way for misunderstanding, thus vitiating the narration's impact. Yet despite its brevity, the exemplum had to appear as a complete rhetorical object; its structure had to convey a sense of closure leading logically to its moral. It is this structure, rather than length, which is an important criterion of the genre.

For the medieval sermon audience, the fusion of religious ideology and human experience represented in the sermon exemplum was given added weight by the introduction of a voice of authority. References to respectable authorities—Humbert de Romans states that bishops and cardinals, for example, are witnesses whose tales would be worth repeating—gave an exemplum credibility, an aspect not to be slighted, since many sermon stories involved supernatural occurrences or legends of the past whose veracity might be open to question.[14] Whether extended and localized like the citations of Caesar of Heisterbach or attenuated to *pro forma* phrases such as "I read," whether incomplete, garbled, or erroneous, the citation provided a meaningful perspective for the exemplum's events: here was an engaged observer so struck by the spiritual significance of what he heard or saw that he felt compelled to communicate it to others as a warning. Rhetorically, too, like "Once upon a time" or "A funny thing happened to me on my way here" in other narrative genres, the citation functioned to prepare its listeners psychologically for entrance into another world of reality. Although John Bromyard, a prominent fourteenth-century English homilist, advised preachers to tell their audiences only of "notable and believable things" and to avoid the "incredible" in their exempla, in fact it was a suspect supernatural event upon which the sermon story turned.[15] The citation, therefore, provided a link between two realities and assisted the preacher in

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deflecting or rebutting skepticism, such as that exhibited by the peasant who interrupted a homilist's description of hell by calling out that the preacher had never been there.[16] The trenchancy of a tale was strengthened by a belief in its "truth," and that "truthfulness" was enhanced by the constant repetition of its motifs and notions under the authority of some respected figure. Whether the "truth" of the exemplum was factual was not at issue. For the medieval preacher and his audience, "that which [was] transmitted by a tradition . . . constant and multiple [was] assimilated under the name of history."[17]

From a comparison of exempla in their anthologized form with their analogues set in actual sermons delivered to live audiences, it is clear that the medieval preacher, having put his audience on notice that an illustrative narrative was in the offing, brought an active storytelling sense to his source material.[18] By his deliberate choice of diction and detail and the introduction of dialogue, the preacher *ad populum* made his tales more dramatic, more colorful, and more appropriate to layfolk than were his originals. Syntactic structures in the exemplum were simpler than in the sermon proper; alliterative and rhythmical collocations were frequently employed; and verb, noun, and adjective doublets were used to impart emphasis and memorableness to certain pieces of information. Even versification was introduced. A colloquial lexicon which included a rich occupational vocabulary, the imaginative use of homely metaphor, and the employment of proverbs and other folk phraseology marked the vernacular pulpit story in contrast to its written Latin sources.

As oral literature, the exemplum required a redundancy and belaboring of points that was often supplied by the preacher's conclusion to the narrative. An exemplum's "truth," its moral or lesson, was usually generalized on one or more levels. The preacher might end his narrative with a straightforward commentary on the behavior of the *dramatis personae*, whether virtuous or sinful, as a reinforcement of the doctrine of the sermon itself, or he might extract from the narrative a rule of action which more or less explicitly advised the listener how to behave in the future. On an allegorical level the homilist might spin out a symbolic interpretation of his narrative, keying each discrete element to some aspect of Christian teaching. This Christian application would be particularly important if the narrative base were a secular romance or non-Christian legend, as is evident in the *Disciplina clericalis* and the

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Gesta romanorum. For the medieval preacher, the urgency of his message warranted the exploitation of the same homiletic ground in several ways. His exemplum was not a perfunctory adjunct to his sermon but a vital part of his instruction, inferior in grandeur, perhaps, but not in purpose or impact, to those visual media of painting, carving, or stained glass that adorned the church in which the homily was being delivered.

The Medieval Mentality and Its Notions of Otherness

Despite the efforts of the medieval church to exert its hegemony over every sphere of human experience, such totalization was never possible.[19] The church hierarchy itself did not think with a single mind or speak with a single voice on the issues of the day, nor could it defend itself against the energy of heresy, clerical laxity, or the lethargy of the laity with equal success everywhere. Spiritual doubt assailed both the untutored and the highest representatives of the church, and skepticism existed even among the untutored. The sacramental status of matrimony was often breached in practice: marriage without benefit of clergy, irregular unions, adultery, and priestly concubinage were apparently common enough to fuel homiletic ire throughout the Middle Ages. Nor, if we take as evidence the many ecclesiastical documents attempting to regulate Jewish-Christian relationships and the implicit evidence of the exempla themselves, was the church wholly successful in segregating members of the two communities.

Yet through the revitalization of preaching, the church was largely successful in its efforts to bring all segments of society into closer conformity with desired social and religious practices. Like the sorcerer who drew a magic circle around those enchanted, from which outsiders were excluded, the preacher attempted to articulate a clear, simple, and achievable set of core beliefs and behaviors that would mark off the Christian, with his hope of life eternal, from the condemned Other.[20] The rebellion of Satan and his devils, which had thrust them into a liminal state, forever rejected by God and shut off from their former angelic bliss, operated as a referent for otherness in the human society addressed by the homilist. As the original and archtypical Other, the devil was forever and irretrievably alien to the community

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of Christ, but the sinners whom the devil instigated could, through sincere contrition, confession, and penance, be repeatedly salvaged.

While the ecclesiastic authority could never entirely stifle the voices of dissent or disbelief, and figures from the margin were continuously, to a greater or lesser degree, disrupting the hegemony of orthodox ideology, there was, nevertheless, no alternative guide to conduct or system of information that could successfully compete with that of the church. Its dogma became received notions through popular preaching; its rituals and feast days and the ubiquitous didacticism of its plastic arts dominated the quotidian life of prince and peasant alike. One's interpretation of the world and one's effort to make some sense of emotional turmoil, disease, misfortune, and evil derived almost entirely from the instruction of the church. While Christianity may have been superimposed on a non-Christian folk strata, which still ran deep in certain areas, whatever social dynamics had been derived from pagan or folk belief were, by the Middle Ages, either transmogrified into acceptable Christian forms or became occasions of sin and the subject of constant homiletic fulmination. Certainly through fear, as the preponderance of sermon narrative suggests, as much as by logical argument or the presentation of exemplars of virtue, the medieval church compelled all stations of society, if not all individuals, to acceptance of its central tenets.

The axis of medieval religious thought by which the homiletic exemplum was informed was the paradoxical notion that a just God created a world manifestly evil. The resolution of that paradox lay in God's offering to human beings the free will to choose between virtue and vice, thereby either ensuring the salvation of their immortal soul in heaven or consigning it to eternal damnation in hell. Once having accepted eternal salvation as the only rational purpose of existence, it followed then that the avoidance of sin (that is, specific human transgressions against divine law) and the practice of spiritual cleansing by confession, contrition, and repentance if one had fallen into sin became the only rational behaviors to pursue.

Devolving from this view was the constant, almost obsessional concern of medieval homiletics and their exempla with the literal battle of good against evil.[21] No compromise was possible between these two forces, understood actually, not merely symbolically, as the heavenly host and the horde of Satan and his devils. By this conflict, under the

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ever present threat of the Last Judgment, in which all of an individual's acts would be weighed, medieval humankind was held in a continual spiritual tension characterized by pairs of opposites: body and soul, heaven and hell, life and death, angels and devils, men and women, Christians and nonbelievers. Within each of these seemingly polarized categories, however, there was a contiguousness as well as a separation; perhaps they might be viewed as obverse sides rather than opposites of each other. Devils both possessed angelic power and were wicked beyond redemption; women might be either dangerous temptresses or imitations of the Virgin Mary; Jews might be both forerunners of Christianity and its archenemy. But the ultimate paradox which resolved all others was that evil was necessary so that man might choose good and be found worthy of salvation on the day of Judgment.

Humanity's free will was the key to the seemingly contradictory core of Christian theology. Through the freely chosen desire to know good and act in accordance with it, human beings could accrue the points that would tilt the scales of the Last Judgment in their favor and gain them access to the gates of heaven. Sin and evil were encompassed within God's scheme as the necessary instruments by which people were tested and ultimately earned or lost salvation.

In the uncompromising hierarchal universe construed by the medieval mentality, where all phenomena were assigned fixed places in a grand chain of being, those things not holding to their designated places or partaking of two realms simultaneously were monsters, ominous departures from the accepted structure and purpose of their kind with a potential for mischief-making that could threaten an individual's mortal soul. Yet these same alien forces were not without their appointed roles in the salvatory scheme. Devils, women, and Jews embodied an otherness that threatened one's redemption and necessitated one's constant vigilance and opposition, but in the very threat they posed they were an instrument of God's will, for it was by struggle against the evil they generated that Christians proved their steadfastness to their faith.

The alterity which characterized devils, women, and Jews in the medieval mind was the inescapable result of the origin and inherent nature of these figures as viewed by the medieval eye.[22] Satan and his devils, formerly angelic in being and power, had been thrust out of heaven into hell for the sin of pride; their brilliance literally and

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metaphorically extinguished, they now kept to the the shades or dark places on the margin of human existence; iniquitous themselves and instigators of sin in human beings, they garnered souls only through recourse to stealth, disguise, and dissimulation.

Women too, like devils both potent and inferior, embodied the paradoxical oppositions central to the medieval imagination. Born in paradise from the body of the male, and responsible thereafter for giving life to humankind, it was, nevertheless, the female sex, inheriting its disobedience and seductiveness from Eve, that lost us our blissful state and brought work, misery, and death to the human race. While the female saints, and preeminently the Virgin Mary, were present in the exempla as the church's model of the feminine ideal, the genre in the main depicts the female sex as vain and corrupt, vulnerable to damnation by their nature and a threat to the salvation of the male. The Jew, similarly, was an alien figure in the landscape of salvation. Although some ancient Hebrews might be acknowledged in theology and the popular religious arts as prophets and the progenitors of Christ, the post-Christian Jew, by his rejection of Christ's invitation to grace and the message of the Gospels, and by his stubborn adherence to the literalism of the "Old Law," inevitably became the third point on the nexus of alterity.

Linked by pride, disobedience, and carnality, devils, women, and Jews found a preeminent place as figures of both fear and scorn in the medieval exemplum. Like a catechism, over a long period of time, pulpit exempla simplified and reiterated a very narrow range of images of women and Jews, demonizing them through continual association, both explicit and implicit, with Satan and his minions. In sermon story, Christian doctrine mingled with popular piety to imprint these notions on the medieval mind.

The medieval triangulation of devils, women, and Jews germinated in the origins of Christianity itself, in the history of its ideological development and in various social, political, and economic circumstances that took shape in that period we call "the Middle Ages." Specific aspects of these connections will be explored in the introductory sections to the exempla. However, one phenomenon underlying this triangulation must be examined, albeit briefly, at this juncture: the mechanism of projection. Through this unconscious psychological process, the individual, having been taught that certain feelings or

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desires are unworthy, becomes conflicted over them, and to escape the pain this conflict engenders, he or she denies such feelings by detaching them from the self and projecting them on to an external Other.[23] It is neither fanciful nor frivolous to accord this phenomenon centrality in the medieval perception of devils, women, and Jews. Indeed, as one of the most insightful of modern scholars on the subject of otherness has asserted, it may be that the recognition of the unconscious, which leads us to discover the Other in ourselves, is the dividing point between the medieval and modern mentality.[24]

Indisputably, the medieval exemplum, in throwing a harsh spotlight on human transgressions in order to promote a saluatory course of conduct, illuminates a medieval conception of wickedness that owes much to this psychic process. Medieval folk, having been taught that particular impulses of the flesh were "bad," unconsciously repressed them by attributing them to the external Other, embodied, through the instruction of the church, as the devil. With the image of woman drawn from the Hebrew Bible's story of Eve's surrender to the serpent's/devil's temptation in the Garden of Eden and her persuasion of Adam to join her in sin, and through the association of the Jews with the death of Christ and their rejection of Christ's redemptive grace, both women and Jews emerged in the Middle Ages as concomitant objects of hostility linked to the devil. The devil, the woman, and the Jew became an unholy trio, a dark reflection of unresolved doubt and anxiety projected as obstacles to salvation that were legitimate targets of enmity.

On the heels of projection inevitably followed rationalization and justification for excluding, belittling, harming, or exterminating these Others. Within the ambit of an omnipresent and nearly omnipotent church, clerical influence moved these Others to the margin, determining for women and Jews, without their consent, how they could lead their lives. They were perceived not as people living by legitimate social rules and values imposed by their gender or religion, but as imperfect versions of dominant Christian masculinity. In the medieval mind, the blame for the spiritual marginalization of Jews and women lay within these sinners themselves. They were freely able, should they have desired, to move into the orbit of God's grace by the performance of simple, concrete acts of assent. If they persisted in remaining aloof from spiritual enlightenment and right action, as manifested on

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earth by the doctrines and directives of the church, then by their perverse and sinful conduct they would remain, like the devils who voluntarily cast themselves out of heaven, liminal creatures properly subjected to the opprobrium and opposition of those who made up the center.

Eluding, and thereby disturbing the fixed classifications that medieval Christian doctrine assigned to all elements in nature and society, demons, women, and Jews, like their counterparts in tribal societies, were frequently associated with wilderness, invisibility, darkness, and death. They partook of two natures: although originally infused with God's goodness they stubbornly rejected it, thereby removing the locus of their relationship to the Christian community from the center of authority to the margin. Christian hermeneutics concretized in homiletic narrative made it abundantly clear that devils, women, and Jews, in their "natural" mode as tempters, deceivers, and corrupters, had closed themselves out from the desirable possibilities of Christian life. In its content and imagery, the medieval exemplum reflected and reinforced these fundamental beliefs in which medieval European Christendom was grounded.

Like a popular medium in any age—Hollywood of the 1930s and 1940s and television in our own day immediately come to mind—the homiletic exemplum was an artifact that both mirrored and shaped the cultural notions of its audience. It was a witness to the assumptions and prejudices, the cognition and unconscious projections of its society. On a conscious level, as an instrument of salvation, the pious narrative was a manifestation of its society's continual striving to give concrete shape and iconographic form to the abstract notions central to the Christian scheme of salvation. The exemplum proved to be remarkably well suited to this ideologic purpose. It may be said of the exemplum that it was both "fact," that is, an event in the actual world, and metaphor, or a figure of a spiritual concept, with one aspect inextricable from the other. The exemplum, therefore, had power not only as a constructed artifact illustrating both desirable and undesirable behavior but also as a spiritual act in and of itself, a moral lesson by its very nature, its context and the part it played, not figuratively but actually, in the conversion of the listener to Christ. Because the occurrences described in the exemplum were believed to be "history," that is, "facts" that really happened, they were believed to have future

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applicability and thus were appropriate for repetition and reflection, since the future so often repeats the past. The exemplum, when successful, was a step in the penitential process. What it conveyed, therefore, about the interconnectedness of devils, women, and Jews, and their pervasive role in iniquity and unrighteousness, was accepted with the same trust and became as deeply ingrained as the sacramental principles enjoined by the homily itself.

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