

G.R. Owst: The Sermon Exempla in Medieval England

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Abstract

This paper is a subjective exposition on Owst's classic work "Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England." It briefly explores and analyzes Owst's research and discussion on the sermon exempla, a literary form which has had a major influence on the function and form of literature, poetry, drama and fiction in the Western literary experience.

Although the sermon exemplum (sermon exempla) was the most common form of preaching used by medieval English clergymen for imparting biblical history, teachings and principles, it also slowly evolved into a very effective means by which the more humanist and secular education of the medieval English commoners took place. The subject matter explored and critically examined within the parameters of the sermon exemplum ranges from the moral, spiritual and philosophical to the personal, social, even the scientific. Rich in humor, wit, satire, imagery and metaphor there is hardly a topic in the medieval experience that goes unexplored within the exemplum. It was this literary, one might say, genre that became instrumental in the evolution of the art and discipline of reading, critical thinking and the over-all general appreciation of literature during the middle ages.

Owst points out that although these sermons possessed little or no original creativity of their own, they did, however, provide a wealth of ideas and stimulus for fiction, drama, poetry and the novel for authors such as Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare and Boccaccio. Even

Today the sermon exemplum's influence is still notable in the standard nursery tale, the cautionary fable and parables for children, such as those authored by Theodor Geisel, otherwise known as "Dr. Seuss," and Shel Silverstein, as well as the modern-day Sunday-school lesson, comic books, etc.—all of these in one way or another find their literary roots in the medieval sermon exempla. It could even be effectively argued that this literary form was a fundamental element in the establishment of what we now call our "western literary tradition."

KeyWords: exemplum/exempla, sermon/preaching, moral anecdote

Resumen

En este artículo se entrega un planteamiento subjetivo sobre la obra clásica *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* de Gerald R. Owst. Se analiza brevemente su investigación y conclusión realizada acerca de los ejemplarios durante el sermón. Los ejemplarios o *exempla* son la modalidad literaria que ha tenido más impacto al moldear y establecer la literatura, poesía, drama y ficción de la vida Occidental.

Pese a que los clérigos ingleses predicaron a veces usando ejemplarios durante los sermones (*sermon exempla*) para impartir historias, enseñanzas y principios bíblicos, poco a poco se transformaron en un medio eficaz para que la educación humanista y secular de los plebeyos medievales ingleses se expandiera. La temática se estudiaba y analizaba a fondo dentro de los parámetros de los ejemplarios durante el sermón y variaba de lo moral, espiritual, filosófico a lo personal, social, incluso científico. Llenos de humor, ingenio, sátiras, simbolismo y metáforas, no hubo tema que los ejemplarios medievales no hayan abordado. Este género literario —si así puede llamarse— fue clave para que evolucionara el arte y disciplina de la lectura, el pensamiento crítico y la apreciación cabal de la literatura en la Edad Media.

Owst señala que aunque los sermones poseían poca creatividad u originalidad, éstos entregaban una riqueza de ideas y estímulos en la ficción, drama, poesía, y en novelas de autores como Chaucer, Spencer, Shakespeare y Boccaccio.

Hasta hoy la influencia de los ejemplarios durante el sermón es notable: cuentos infantiles, cuentos con moralejas o parábolas; por ejemplo, las de Theodor Geisel, conocido también como *Dr. Seuss*, y Shel Silverstein, o las lecciones en las escuelas dominicales actuales, comics, etc. Estos textos encuentran de alguna u otra forma sus orígenes literarios en los ejemplarios medievales. Por tanto, se puede argumentar que este género fue parte esencial para establecer la actual "tradición literaria occidental".

Palabras claves: ejemplarios, sermón, anécdota moralista

The most common and effective form of preaching among medieval English preachers was the sermon exempla. There is scarcely an aspect of life that in one way or another goes unexplored and/or critically examined within the scope of this, one might say, literary genre. From which ever perspective one approaches the sermon of example, i.e., morally, spiritually, philosophically, socially, scientifically, linguistically, one finds a mode of oratory and discourse rich in humor, wit, satire, critical thinking, imagination, and religious principle. Greatly instrumental in the development of the art and discipline of reading and the appreciation of literature during the middle ages, these sermons were also responsible for much of the seminal thinking that would eventually manifest itself in the Protestant Reformation and latter the European Renaissance. Some of the more historically recognized English preachers such as Bozon, Bromyard, Mannyng, Rypon and others, were inspired to begin using this form of religious oration in their church services for two main reasons: 1) Christ Himself, as stated in The Saint James New Testament, Mark 4, verse 2, "taught them many things in parables"(152), and 2) because of the well known story related by the priest/historian Saint Bede discussing the miserable failure of a bishop who habitually used this subtle and intellectual approach on his English audience, and how his replacement by a preacher much less literate, but preaching through anecdotes, parables and examples, "succeeded in converting well nigh the whole of England"(152).

Conceptually and structurally the sermon exempla can be either true or fictitious in that their function is not to expound nor necessarily promote Biblical doctrine but provide examples of moral spiritual principles that relate to the human experience and which can be internalized and practically applied to the social/moral life of the individual. This lack of artistic restriction also allows the preacher to draw not only on traditional Christian sources, such as the Old and New Testaments and imagery to define and exemplify the spiritual and moral precepts being conveyed, but leaves him free to draw on the richness of secular, pre-Christian, pagan and classical sources as well. Another important conceptual quality of

the sermon exempla, and medieval sermons in general, was the avoidance of involving the sermons in the larger universal spiritual concepts and complicated abstractions such as, for example, the question of anthropomorphism with respect to the nature of Jesus the Christ; mankind should, however, definitely know the difference between those personal and social behaviors that lead to loftiness and nobility and those that lead to abasement and humiliation.

In terms of structure, the imagery of the exempla, for the most part, was centered in the concrete and the practical. This was more than likely due to the primitive level of reader consciousness than any inherent incapacity for abstract reasoning. The common man basically came to an understanding of God through a personal relationship with a specific saint, which served as a kind of mediator between himself and the Creator. Personification of vices and virtues, such as the seven deadly sins, was therefore a common method used by preachers to assist this primitive consciousness in its ability to identify and differentiate between desirable and undesirable human qualities and behavior.

An integral part of the sermon exempla was the use explicit moral principle to illustrate moral ideals and sensitize conscience. One superb example of this usage of the concrete is found within the category of the "moralized anecdote." This mode of exempla served as a didactic and at times very humorous device for increasing understanding as to the necessity for not only living a spiritual life in general, but in particular was very effective at creating awareness with respect to the moral and spiritual requirements that should govern the relationship between man and wife in the sphere of the home and other practical familial concerns. Owst points out that this mode of exempla take its subject matter essentially from specific local and community sources and experiences. The example he cites is taken from the *Speculum Laicorum*:

A certain man, who had a greedy wife, roasted a fowl for them both to eat. When the bird had been roasted, his wife said to him, "Give me the wing!" And taking it she ate it up, and likewise devoured alone every part of the fowl. Her husband, who watched her, said at length, "You have eaten

up the whole thing yourself: there is nothing left but the spit. It is only fair that you should have a taste of that too!" And with that spit he beat her handsomely (164).

This same type of humorous moral anecdote also proved a very effective means by which to expose and criticize fellow-clergymen. As competition was not only quite common but also somewhat intense between the "regular" and the "secular" clergy, both would often resort to ridicule and mocking through anecdotes in order to illustrate the failures and weaknesses of their competitor(s) while aggrandizing their own piety and virtue. These competing clergymen presented their anecdotes to their audiences with a more or less humorous and comic spirit in an attempt to humiliate by satire and irony instead of directly deriding or insulting one another. One to which Owst alludes involves a rich commoner on his death-bed who had his very abundant treasure chest set in front of him as he lay dying. By the time the priest arrived to help him draw up his will, the dying man had lost the power of speech. The priest then suggested a plan to the family members in which a "Ha!" from the dying man would be taken as a sign of agreement to the priest's proposals with respect to the proper benefactors of his will and estate, by remaining silent the dying man was in disapproval. All agreed to the idea and the priest turned and addressed the victim:

'Do you wish to bequeath your soul to God after your decease, and your body to Mother Church for burial?' And the latter replied—'Ha!' Then said the priest to him 'Do you wish to leave twenty schillings to the fabric of your church, where you have chosen to be buried?' But the other made no reply and kept a complete silence. Forthwith the priest pulled him violently by the ear,

whereat the man cried—'Ha!' Then said the priest 'Write down twenty schillings for the church fabric: for see, he has granted it with his "Ha!"' After that the priest

pondered how he could get for himself the chest with the aforesaid treasure. So he said to the sick man--'I have some books, but I have no chest to keep them in. That coffer over there would be most useful to me. Would you like me, therefore, to have that coffer to put my books in?' But the other said nothing whatever to these remarks.

Then the priest pinched his ear so hard that those who were present declared afterwards that the pinch drew blood from the man's ear. Then (the dying man) in a loud voice said to the priest before the all—'O you greedy priest, by Christ's death, never shall you have from me as much as a farthing of the money which is in that chest!' Having thus spoken, he turned to his devotions and expired. Accordingly, his wife and relatives divided the money between them. This happened in England, so it is said (165).

These comic sermon-anecdotes, the focus of which centered mainly on the vices, as opposed to the virtues, of the clergy, not only reflect the moral concerns of the English medieval preacher and pulpit and the creative wit and satire through which these concerns were expressed, but indicate a keen awareness as to the need for the establishment of a more perceptive and critical eye on a profession that had a regular tendency to fall into severe lapses of spiritual corruption and degradation. This tendency more often than not victimized the common man and his family through extortion, bribery, blackmail, and other infractions of civil law. The reader must also appreciate, or at least be cognizant of, the strong sense of realism, or what we might refer to as the 'raw humanity' expressed in these moral anecdotes. Owst in this same connection observes here that it is these sermons with their colorful and creative wit that set the foundations for a "new and conquering Humanism," which, armed with the figurative weapons of satire, irony, metaphor, and example, would eventually "provide a large part of the basis for the sense of humour and comedy that would later emerge in Renaissance drama"(168).

These sermons were also effective at expanding the common people's vision and awareness as to the world and their involvement in the human experience. Impressions and observations recorded by travelling priests, missionaries and friars provided much of the material for these sermons. There is a clearly defined concern for the social, moral and spiritual condition of humanity reflected in these stories of travel, experience and adventure. The degenerate condition of the medieval feudal socio-economic system is freely and openly criticized, satirized, even blatantly attacked,

as is the immoral and treacherous nature of the cruel and oppressive landlords, or as they are commonly referred to in many exempla, "the others in far away lands" (176), who unconditionally and without question control and manipulate the system to their own social, political and economic benefit. It must also be pointed out, however, that although these sermons had the effect of broadening awareness as to the world, they also reinforced and inspired a sense of ethnocentricity and/or class, even racial, superiority leading in turn, in many instances, to glaring social prejudices within medieval English consciousness.

A focus of many of these stories and anecdotes was on the life style of the so called "aliens" who were generally classified by the peasants and commoners as mercenaries, thieves, and beggars, or anyone else who could not be placed within the established social context or the commonly known territorial parameters. Even, or maybe especially, the above mentioned landlords, who were usually far removed geographically from their lands and property, more often than not were classified by the laymen in terms of this same "aliens" category—most of the time with a very strong emphasis on the "thief" characteristic. Others fell within the category of morally degenerate fringe groups such as highwaymen, vagabonds and vigilantes. Friars travelling through Italy provided some fairly instructive material on the quite questionable moral and spiritual conditions of this society. One such friar indicates that travelling alone without the protection of armed soldiers, even within the city, was extremely dangerous for both merchants and pilgrims on their way to Rome and that even the armed escort should be dealt with very cautiously in that his collusion with the enemy, sometimes from within the ranks of the friars themselves, was always a distinct possibility. The friar continues, 'The swarm of mercenaries that infests Italy only tends to maintain disorder, ever increasing the destruction and spoilation of towns and castles alike' (174). He goes on to point out that the state is in constant political and social turmoil as well as internal warfare and that the anarchy inherent in mob-rule is prevalent everywhere (174). Owst cites one story that reflects the nature of this condition

in a somewhat ironic tone. A group of brigands who turned their sons out upon the road to assault and plunder the passers-by were known to adhere to the motto of: 'Those who have gold or silver or other things of use upon their person, you shall plunder. Those who carry nothing, or those whom you cannot overwhelm, you are to allow to pass on, for the benefit of your father's soul' (175)!

The sermon exempla were also very effective at providing the audience with graphic examples of divine chastisement administered to an unchaste, rebellious and/or degenerate people. Warning-visions were related to remind the community of the need for strict obedience to church law and doctrine and the deadly fate that awaited those in positions of temporal and spiritual power who transgressed the bounds of justice and abused their divinely ordained power and position. *The Cistercian Odo of Cheriton* tells of the vision of 'King William Rufus beholding himself devouring the hands of Christ' (159). Owst suggests that the spiritual, or at least the clerical, interpretation of this horrific vision centers around two flagrantly cruel acts of which this king was unquestionably guilty: 1) his ruthless destruction of churches and towns merely to appease his savage and degenerate nature, and 2) his imposition of extremely unfair and unjust taxation upon the subjects of his realm (159-60). These types of gruesome stories were also quite common among friars and were very effectively used to frighten and warn those, committed to the religious order of life, i.e., other friars, clerics, prelates, pardoners, priests, monks, summoners, nuns, etc, regarding to the severe penalties in store for transgressing the moral/spiritual codes that defined their moral and spiritual conduct. Another warning-vision that Owst refers to from the same *Odo of Cheriton* deals with a nun with a reputation for unquestioned chastity and stainless purity with whom King Richard I had fallen in love. Rather than see him, or be seen by him looking upon her with sensuous desire, she took it upon herself to preempt the punishment for this transgression, which was most certainly inevitable, and blinded herself by tearing out her eyes then having them sent to the King (160).

Even though most medieval preachers drew freely on classical as well as pagan traditions for both ideas and images, there was still some question in the mind of church officials as to just how much a good Christian minister should depend on these 'outside' sources. The educated and more liberal divines made extensive use of pagan philosophies and classical verse which referred to astrological images such as "Jupiter omnipotens" and "Divina Venus," and which succeeded in drawing the wrath of orators such as Master Ralph of Acton, who was convinced that instead of 'trafficing in demons,' the Christian preacher should be praising the Almighty and condemning those preachers who left the Gospels out of the sermon (179). Other classical images and characters that fell under suspicion of the official eye were the Chimera, the Harpy, the Hydra, the Labyrinth, the warring Titans, the Scylla and the Charybdis, and numerous other classical Greek and Roman mythical gods, monsters and legends.

However, the enlightenment afforded by many of these pagan philosophies and classical legends regarding moral and spiritual issues is undeniable. They clearly and very effectively exemplified and elucidated the moral principles and precepts in question. Owst refers to Austin Friar, John Waldeby, who, while discussing the theme of "Carnal Delectation," very succinctly moralizes on lust, a special vice of prolific practice among the prelates of the medieval English Church, employing the particular legend of Orpheus and Argus,

Argus with the hundred eyes signifies each prelate, who ought to have eyes in every direction, seeking in advance to avert the perils of those committed to his charge. Whence the prelates in Ezechiel and in the Apocalypse are Called 'beasts full of eyes, before and behind.' Orpheus Singing sweetly to his lyre is the Flesh with its promptings to Lust, which sends to sleep all the eyes, siezes and cuts off reason which like a head should direct man as the head directs and rules the members (187).

Within the tradition of the sermon exempla, and its corresponding moral anecdote, it is certain that one of, if not *the*, most important functions, was didactic. Owst states that "certain types of popular sermon might almost be described as forerunners of

the modern University Extension Lecture" (188). The sermons coming from the English pulpit in the latter years of the middle-ages began to deal with the world of nature and in one way or another touched upon practically every observable natural element and event. Preachers who for decades had been relating the mysteries of God, the gods and heaven, and focussing primarily on man's spiritual and moral problems, deficiencies and development, were now beginning to explain the mysteries of nature as they perceived and understood them. The pulpit began to resound with ideas and theories regarding such topics as the nature of clouds, the rays of the sun, the moon's halo, the changing seasons, the nature of the creative processes taking place within and around the earth, which as stated in Albertus' *de Proprietatibus Elementorum*, bryngeth fortheg so many thinges of dyvers kyndes, as corne and gresse, flowers and trees, metals and precious stones of sundre vertews. And the skill is this: the firmament is rownde abowten the erthe, and the erthe stondest but as a poynte in the midward; and therefore the bemes of the sonne and the steres gadere therto, and ther thei reste? (192).

The nature of the animal kingdom, herbs, healing qualities of roots, flowers and leaves, even the spiritual and moral effects of these elements are discussed. Again referring to Albertus, 'The leaves, fflowres and ffrute be vertuou to kepe and cause continence and chastite, iff thei be caste in howses, or borne upon man.' Further he explains that if 'the fruit off gthyus herbe Criste Jhesu by sprynkytt and trewyd in the howses off owr sawles wyth continuall and besye devocion, than pur continence, chastite, and clenness shall not ffeyle' (193). Holcot discusses the properties of the magnet and the stone, Myrc indicates astronomical distances in a rough attempt to explain the various properties of the universe and its immensity. Optical phenomenon is discussed by Bromyard. One outstanding metaphor used by Bromyard in his discussions on the attribute of humility is especially instructive,

Anyone at the bottom of a deep well (here used as a metaphor suggesting lowliness and humiltiy) can see the stars in clear daylight (a metaphor suggesting a deeper sense of spiritual sensitivity and

perception), or at least would see the heavens more vividly than another person who was not standing in so deep and dark a spot (194).

Falling stars, rain storms, the tides of the sea, the eclipse, the planets all became subject matter in themselves as well as providing very effective concrete symbols, images and metaphors by which to exemplify and illustrate spiritual law and moral principles (195).

The lunar eclipse was a common metaphor used to by many preachers of the sermon exempla to elucidate the spiritual problems that occur when 'other' priests and prelates become obstacles between the common people and the light of the spirit as expressed in the teachings of Christ. As a result of this "occultation," as it were, the relationship between God and man is simply cut off and men's souls are kept in the darkness of spiritual ignorance as the earth is physically darkened when the moon during a solar eclipse interposes itself between the sun and the earth. Owst cites a sermon rich in metaphorical allusion which very effectively reinforces this eclipse idea:

With thre thynges the material sunne is maad derk fro men: that is, with ny3t, and with cloudes and with the eclipce. The thridde thyng that letteth the schynyng of the sunne is the eclipce 3e schulleth understonde that the derknesse of the eclipce is of no defaute in the sunne, as it semeth in mennis si3t. But, as clerkys seyn, whan the noone is directli be-twixe the erthe in which we dwellen and the sunne, than is causid the eclipce. Ri3t soo, whan man of holi cherche, that is, prelates and prestes which principalli shulden take li3t of kunnyng of the sunne of cristis lawe, as the comen peple, with al hire power stoppyng and hydyng fro hem the verrei knowyng ther-of, than is caused a greet goostli eclipce of the sunne of cristes li3t and his lawe in cristen mennes soules (190).

A summary/transcription of the above explains that there are three natural or material elements which inhibit or block the light of the sun and make the earth dark: night, clouds and eclipses. The third thing that inhibits the light of the sun is the eclipse. We should understand that the darkness of the eclipse, however, has nothing to do with the sun as it might seem

to our eyes. The eclipse should be understood, as the clergymen say, when the moon is directly between the earth where we dwell and the sun, then there is an eclipse of the sun's light. So, too, it is with the clergymen of holy church, that is, the prelates and priests, who take the coming of the sun (Son), which is the light and law of Christ, to the common people. But they, with all their power, block and hide from men the sun or light and knowledge of Christ's teachings. This, then, obscures the light and law of Christ, the Son, and causes a great spiritual darkness (eclipse) in the souls of Christian men (KTD).

The animal kingdom also provided many interesting examples for these preachers to expound upon various moral and social principles. These stories probably have their roots, as Owst suggests, in the Oriental fable and were also used to stimulate wonder and awe as well as entertain the listener. They were fond of using beasts both actual and mythological: birds, bees, lions, panthers, bears, fish, urchins, elephants, the hippopotamus, etc. One such anecdote (however humorously erroneous) on how to catch an elephant is especially noteworthy: An Olyvantehath no joyntes in his lymmys, and therefore he may never bowe; and when that he wyll reste hym he lenythe him to a tree. And so, when what men be in purpose for to take hym, then wehn he is absent, they go and cutt this tree almost a-two. And when this beste is dysposyd for to go and reste hym, then he gothe to this tree and lenythe hym there to; and then sodenly he fallythe downe, and so he is taken. And by no menys he may not a-ryse, by cawse that he hathe no joyntes (198).

A summary/transcription of the above reads as follows: An elephant has no joints in his limbs and therefore he cannot bend over. And when he rests he has to lean against a tree. And when the hunters want to catch the elephant they wait until the elephant is gone. Then they approach the tree and cut it in two leaving it sufficiently intact to stand. When the elephant returns and leans against the tree to rest, the tree suddenly falls down and the elephant is captured. There is no way he can escape his captors because he has no joints or limbs to allow him to rise up stand to support himself (KTD).

It is in this didactic and educational function that one of the most important ironies in the history of the Christian church resides. Owst perceptively questions, "Could minds thus awakened and stirred be expected to stop further inquiry at the arbitrary bidding of the priesthood, where no actual barriers existed" (189)? Little did the church know that in allowing the religious sermon to include these vast amounts of new 'secular' knowledge, it was inspiring a demand and a taste for intellectual growth and development that would result in creating just the right conditions for its own fragmentation and disintegration and would eventually lead to its demise. In the later years of the middle ages, as history demonstrates, the unassailable principle, as expounded by church officials, 'Thou shalt not melle the no farthur, but to believe as holychurche techeth the plenly' (189-90), would be forced to confront a much stronger and louder plea 'Lord, give thou to me wysdom that standith about the setis' (190)! Indeed, we see the deeply entrenched foundations of simplistic blind faith being severely challenged here and it would eventually find its most critical expression in the Reformation instigated mainly by Martin Luther and John Calvin and would find severe critical assent and reinforcement in the coming Age of Reason.

Something should also be said in this same connection as to the influence of these sermon exempla on literature in general. Owst suggests that although these sermons possessed no original creativity of their own they nevertheless provided a wealth of ideas for fiction, drama, poetry and the novel for many of the western world's greatest authors. Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare all drew liberally from the material contained in these sermons, as did Boccaccio, whom Owst considers "the very father of Renaissance wits and humanists" (150). It would be safe to say that one of the major effects of these sermons was to set the pattern for the foundations upon which would evolve the literary standards for almost all writers, certainly within the western literary tradition, from the Renaissance to the present. Even the nursery tale, the cautionary fable and parables for children (the work of Theodor Geisel, otherwise known as "Dr. Seuss," and Shel Silverstein are two outstanding

examples of contemporary authors who have produced a wealth of work within this genre), as well as the modern-day Sunday-school lesson, comic book stories, etc. all of these in one way or another owe their existence to the medieval sermon exempla.

The sermon exempla, although traditionally associated with the English medieval religious experience, are still very much used in modern-contemporary church sermons, t.v. evangelism and preaching throughout the Christian world. Although the imagery is taken from our experience within the modern world and is therefore somewhat more psychologically and socially complex, the objectives of the sermon exempla remain very much the same, i.e., to expound on moral and spiritual truths, to warn non-believers of the severe consequences of their unbelief, to warn the believers as to the spiritual dangers inherent in succumbing to the temptations and trappings of worldly desire, and to challenge those who call themselves Christians to spiritualize their lives and bring their attitudes and behaviors into conformity with the will of God as expressed by Jesus Christ in the New Testament.

We should be reminded here, too, that the modern expression of these sermons reaffirms the traditional precept that long, laborious and sophisticated intellectual discourse, cerebrally oriented, basically bores and alienates. The sermon exempla, on the other hand, directed towards the heart and emotions of the individual capture the true spirit and the essential objective of the concept of preaching by:

- 1) inspiring the believer to a deeper emotional and spiritual awareness as to the need for the fear and love of God in one's heart.
- 2) encouraging the believer to maintain constant contact with the 'creative word,' the source of his spiritual inspiration, through disciplined and habitual reading of the Bible.
- 3) increasing obedience to Biblical principles, truths and guidance, and
- 4) motivating the individual believer to live an exemplary Christian life as proclaimed and exemplified by Jesus and as, hopefully, promoted by the church.

*G. R. Owst, Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England, (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1961).