THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION IN MEDIEVAL EXEMPLA

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This paper offers an account of the literary form exemplum and ways in which it may be said to have a spiritual dimension, illustrating the argument by reference to one of the most popular exemplum collections of the Middle Ages, *Gesta Romanorum*, 'Deeds (*or* Stories) of the Romans'.

In the context of classical literature, the term exemplum refers mainly to an historical or legendary person who stands as a model in a certain context, and further indicates the rhetorical figure used in drawing attention to such a model. In the context of medieval literature, the term refers mainly to a short narrative involving virtually any subject matter with the potential to yield a moral lesson, which may or may not be stated explicitly.[1] The two concepts are actually two sides of the same coin: citing the example of a person implies an action undertaken by that person, and conversely a narrative comes into being because a person (or anthropomorphized beast) is said to perform some action.

In Christian literature the two concepts meet in Christ. He himself is the personal exemplum *par excellence*, and the actions of Christ, his followers, and his and their antagonists (whether historical or pseudo-historical) are the primary subject of Christian exempla. A second kind of subject matter lies in a mass of anecdotes of diverse origin (whether historical, pseudo-historical, or overtly fictitious) in which a Christian orientation is not inherent but is imputed to them by their narrators, and Christ's own overtly fictitious parables constitute the Christian precedent for such a practice.

Christian sermons and treatises, particularly after Gregory the Great, had incorporated exempla intermittently, but the genre came into its own in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when exempla became central in the preaching of the friars and convenient collections were put together. *Gesta Romanorum* is the medieval title of an anonymous collection first compiled in the late

thirteenth or early fourteenth century, in either England or Germany. Its wide dissemination is indicated by the fact that continental versions survive in both Latin and vernacular translations (German, French, Dutch, Polish, and Russian) and in about 150 medieval manuscripts along with numerous incunabula, while a distinct insular version also survives in thirty-eight Latin manuscripts, four Middle English manuscripts plus a fragment, and several early prints in English. Nearly 300 exempla appear in *Gesta* texts overall, though every text offers an individual selection and arrangement.

The so-called 'Vulgate' continental Latin version, a consensus of three German editions 1472—1475, consists of 181 exempla, and the insular Latin seems to have had a core of a little over 100 exempla, a number of them quite different from those in the Vulgate.[2] The extant texts date from the early fourteenth century through to the modern era.[3] The explicit moral lessons, which are standard in earlier texts and at times as long as the narrative, are shortened in some later texts or omitted altogether, indicating increased interest in the sheer entertainment value of the stories. The narratives, however, are always sparse, giving minimal attention to descriptive elements such as characterization and setting. Many begin with the same formula: 'So-and-so reigned in the city of Rome, a very wise emperor, who [*story-line*]'.[4] The man named may have been an historical emperor of Rome (e.g. Caesar, Hadrian, Frederick), or someone bearing an historical name who was never emperor of Rome (e.g. Darius, Alexander, Pompey), but the story-line, in which the emperor may not in any case be a central character, is regularly fictive.

The spiritual dimension comes into play through the moral lesson. This is expressed in one of two forms. The less common form, found in exempla which have probably been added to the *Gesta* in the course of dissemination, is the ordinary moral observation that the story shows how a certain action is a good or bad way to proceed. The more common, and evidently standard, form interprets the story figuratively in the manner of Biblical exegesis at the allegorical or the tropological level.[5] The emperor himself is identified most often as God the Father or Christ, sometimes as everyman or any Christian man, occasionally as the devil, a prelate, or some other figure. Both forms had occurred in previous collections, but the *Gesta* took the latter to new heights of ingenuity.

The difference between the two forms is well illustrated in the exemplum which presents the story of King Lear. The ruler is so-named in only one manuscript of the Middle English *Gesta*, BL Additional 9066. The story details, which include the naming of the daughters and sons-in-law and the explanation that Leicester takes its name from Lear, show that this version is ultimately derived from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*.[6] The moral is less than one-twentieth the length of the narrative, and simply observes that flatterers are deceivers who cause trouble, whereas those who tell the truth are one's good friends.

This exemplum does not occur in the continental *Gesta* but is found, in a somewhat different version, in texts of the Anglo-Latin and in another Middle English text, all naming the ruler in more *Gesta*-like fashion as the Roman emperor Theodosius. No other characters are named, there is no reference to Britain, and it cannot be firmly demonstrated that it is specifically a version of the Lear story. It is quite likely that the compiler originally responsible for including the story in the insular *Gesta* was indeed remodelling the British story of Lear to fit the *Gesta* mode and that the later compiler was consciously *restoring* the Britishness to it, but it is also possible that the main version is an independent version of the widespread folktale 'love like salt'.[7] The moral here is figurative, explaining tropologically that the emperor is everyman and his daughters are, respectively, the world, a man's family, and 'our Lord God', who brings us into our heritage in the kingdom of heaven when we seek his help.

Whereas the Theodosius story is recognizably fictive, the Lear story proper is pseudo-historical — that is, many would have believed Lear and his daughters to have been real people who had experiences more or less like those set out here. The form of moral presented in each case is not coincidental. If a story is perceived to be historical, its characters maintain their historical identity. An historical narrative may go on to yield a sententious observation, as in the Lear exemplum, but a figurative interpretation in the exegetical manner would deny historical reality. If a story and its characters are perceived as fictive, on other hand, as in the Theodosius exemplum, it may yield either a sententious observation or a figurative interpretation.

One exemplum with an ostensibly historical basis and a figurative interpretation recounts the legend of Gregory the Great, representing Gregory as the product of an incestuous union between

the son and daughter of an emperor and unwittingly husband to his own mother, though all three die in holiness. The complicated figurative interpretation in the Vulgate makes the emperor Christ; the brother Adam, who is deceived by the devil and corrupts his soul, then fathers humankind; the sister at first the human soul, then the flesh, and eventually the Church; and the child humankind. The difficulty of this interpretation is evident in the confusion of the derivative Middle English exemplum, found only in BL Harley MS 7333. Here the emperor is God the Father; the brother is the devil; the sister is Adam who fathers humankind, then Mary, then the Church; and the child is humankind, then Christ. That a figurative interpretation is ventured suggests that, despite the historical name of the protagonist, the narrative, with its outrageous and heavily coincidental story-line, was perceived as non-historical. Interestingly, the son is not in fact named Gregory in the Middle English, and the same story was told elsewhere of St Albinus,[8] the transferability of sustained narrative suggesting a lack of historical recognition.

Even when figurative interpretations are yielded more neatly by unambiguously fictive narratives, however, modern readers may find their arbitrary nature disconcerting, and far from connoting any spiritual property. Indeed, there are exempla with alternative readings offered. One is the account of Focus the smith in Middle English of BL Harley MS 7333: Focus fails to observe the emperor's birthday according to the law, is accused by a policing statue created by the magician Virgil (here a minor character, a barely historical name from the distant past), and stands condemned, but is saved by a wise explanation of his need to earn his living every day and made emperor when the old one dies. Both interpretations are troplogical, with Virgil the Holy Spirit, the statue a prelate, and Focus a good Christian, but one interpretation reads the emperor as Christ, hallowing the Sabbath, and the other reads him as the devil, attempting to make Focus sin. This exemplum belongs also to the Vulgate and the Anglo-Latin *Gesta*, but in those contexts has only the first interpretation. Another case in point is the exemplum entitled 'A birthday prophecy fulfilled'. In the Anglo-Latin and the Middle English *Gesta* the emperor seeks to put to death the baby son of a forester who, it is prophesied, will become emperor when he dies. The baby is saved and married to the emperor's daughter, the

emperor accepts this as the will of God, and the young man succeeds him in due course. One of the interpetations is allegorical and makes the emperor Herod the Great, the other is tropological and makes him any sinner. In the Vulgate narrative the central figure is a knight serving the emperor, and the single interpretation here makes the emperor God the Father and the knight any man who wants to be sovereign over his own life.

In the scheme of fourfold exegesis, which is the medieval norm, the term 'spiritual' is used in two ways: individually, for the second, or allegorical, level of meaning (pertaining to Christian dogma, in the care of the Church on earth), and collectively, for all three of the figurative levels, that is, the allegorical, the tropological (pertaining to the moral condidition of the individual soul), and the anagogical (pertaining to heaven, in a mystical or eschatological sense).[9] The figurative interpretations of *Gesta* exempla belong variously to the tropological and allegorical levels,[10] and can be classified as 'spiritual' in the collective sense of the technical term. Such a reading imbues a narrative with a 'spiritual' dimension in the everyday sense of the word. Ostensibly this dimension becomes evident only in retrospect, but this may not always have been the case. Medieval listeners, like the preachers themselves, probably developed generic expectations of a tale told in the context of a sermon, they would know that a moral pointing was to follow, and some at least may have become quite alert to the signals given by certain patterns of narrative.

To this basic source of a spiritual dimension another might be added. Exegetical readings of secular literature on the model of the Biblical exegesis had developed more widely as part of the medieval predilection for allegory. Not only exempla were involved: Virgil's *Æneid* was 'moralized' or 'allegorized' ca 500 by Fulgentius, as the life journey of the human soul, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was moralized several times over, most fully in the early-fourteenth-century *Ovide moralisée*.[11] The very fact that a work can sustain such a reading could be regarded as bringing it into analogy with the Bible. There are, however, other ways in which the *Gesta* can be associated with the Bible.

The Bible was both the chronological starting-point and the ultimate textual model for Christian universal or national history, effectively 'ecclesiastical history'. Just as Livy had done in his pre-Christian history of Rome, historians like Bede introduced their work by justifying its production, referring particularly to its

usefulness in setting out the lives of people for emulation or its opposite, according to their virtue or vice.[12] The *Gesta* thus shares both its Christocentric stance and its exemplary function with a literary genre based on the Bible.

Again, every part of the Bible has meaning, but the meaning of the part can be properly realized only in the context of the book as a whole. The message of the Bible is both sequential and cumulative, and the same can be said of the *Gesta*. Each exemplum in one way or another illustrates the pattern of God's dealings with humankind, the pattern of salvation history — from one point of view, the ongoing history of the world, from another, the cyclic history of every generation. The Bible moves from Creation to Apocalypse; the *Gesta*, as the moralizations make clear, articulates the same story over and over again, the overall message of the work grounded in the notion of typicality rather than individuality. The principle of typicality implies a potential for infinite repetition — indeed, the medieval compilers evidently felt quite free to add more of the same to their particular *Gesta* collection. This human textualizing of infinity, I suggest, mimes, or is as if in a Platonic relationship to, the eternal creativity of God.

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REFERENCES

1   For accounts of medieval
     exempla see, for example,
     Claude Brémond, Jacques Le
     Goff, and Jean-Claude Schmitt,
     *Typologie des sources du Moyen
     Âge   occidental,   40:
     L''exemplum'* (Turnhout, 1982);
     Jacques Le Goff, '*L'exemplum* et
     la rhétorique de la prédication
     aux XIIIe et XIVe siècles', in
     *Retorica e poetica tra i secoli XII
     e XIV*, ed. Claudio Leonardi and
     Enrico Menestò (Florence and
     Perugia, 1988), pp. 3—29; J. A.
     Mosher, *The Exemplum in the
     Early Religious and Didactic
     Literature of England* (New
     York, 1911); J-.T. Welter,
     *L'exemplum dans la littérature
     religieuse et didactique du
     moyen âge* (Paris, 1927).

2   For the text of the continental
     Vulgate and a discussion of the
     genesis and dissemination of the
     Gesta which is still seminal see
     Gesta   Romanorum, ed.
     Hermann Oesterley (Berlin,
     1872). Oesterley knew 132
     manuscripts of the continental
     versions, but subsequent
     research has been unearthing
     others; about 150 is an interim
     estimate. For the Middle English
     Gesta, see *The Early English
     Versions of the 'Gesta
     Romanorum'*, ed. Sidney J.
     Herrtage, Early English Text
     Society ES 33 (London, 1879),
     and *A Middle English Version of
     the 'Gesta Romanorum'*, ed. Karl
     Inge Sandred, Acta Universitatis
     Upsaliensis: Studia Anglistica
     Upsaliensia 8 (Uppsala, 1971).
     The Middle English texts do not
     include all the Anglo-Latin
     exempla: the longest Middle
     English text, in BL Additional
     MS 9066, has ninety-six, but
     many of these are introduced
     here from other collections. For
     an account of the unedited
     Anglo-Latin   *Gesta* see
     Herrtage's Introduction and J.

     A. Herbert, *Catalogue of
     Romances in the Department of
     Manuscripts in the British
     Museum*, 3 (London, 1910), pp.
     183—229; an edition is being
     prepared by Philippa Bright and
     myself.

3   For the literary tradition of the
     Gesta in England, including its
     likely use by Shakespeare, see
     especially   Herrtage's
     introduction (n. 3 above) and
     John Weld's introduction to the
     facsimile of the 1595 edition of
     Richard Robinson's *Gesta
     Romanorum* (Delmar, NY, 1973).

4   E.g. 'Anselmus in ciuitate
     romana regnauit prudens valde
     qui portabat scutum de argento
     cum quinque rosis rubicundis'
     ('Anselm reigned in the city of
     Rome, a very wise emperor, who
     bore a shield with five red
     roses'): Anglo-Latin text, Bodl.
     Douce MS 310, f. 1ʳ. This
     beginning, with minor variation,
     appears to have been universal
     in the Anglo-Latin *Gesta*; it is
     common in the Vulgate, but it is
     not clear whether it was
     originally universal.

5   For medieval Biblical exegesis
     see, for example, R. E. McNally,
     'Exegesis, Medieval', in *The
     New Catholic Encyclopaedia*,
     ed. William J. McDonald and
     others (New York, 1967); Beryl
     Smalley, *The Study of the Bible
     in the Middle Ages*, 2nd edn
     (New York, 1952). See also n. 9
     below.

6   Ed. Acton Griscom (London,
     1927), ii.11—14. For the
     medieval transmission of this
     legend see Wilfrid Perrett, *The
     Story of King Lear from Geoffrey
     to of Monmouth to Shakespeare*,
     Palaestra 35 (Berlin, 1904).

7   In Stith Thompson's *Motif-
     Index of Folk-Literature*
     (Copenhagen, 1955—58) this is
     motif H.592.1, a type of the

'enigmatic statement made clear by experience' (H.592), blended with the motif 'clever youngest daughter' (L.61).

8   Reported by Herrtage, *Gesta Romanorum*, p. 489.

9   Up to the fifth century threefold exegesis (from Origen) was the norm, with what subsequently became the allegorical and anagogical levels being one 'spiritual' level. Fourfold exegesis (from John Cassian) may be schematized thus:

General division
     Meaning
1.   literal   1.
     historical
2.   spiritual (2/3/4 below)   2.
     figurative/allegorical (2/3/4 below)

Specific division
     Meaning   Field
1.   literal   1.
     historical   1.
     history/events
2.   spiritual/allegorical   2.
     theological   2.
     theology/dogma
3.   moral/tropological   3.

     moral   3.
     morality/ethics
4.   mystical/anagogical   4.
     eschatological   4.
     eschatology/mysticism

Example of Jerusalem Progression
1.   city of the Jews   1.
     historical knowledge, leading to
2.   Church Militant   2.
     faith, leading to
3.   individual soul   3.
     virtue, leading to
4.   Church Triumphant   4.
     eternal life

10   An interpretation may also, on occasion, combine these levels as it unfolds, and further add an anagogical statement about the after-life.

11   Fulgentius, *Opera*, ed. R. Helm (Leipzig, 1898); *Ovide moralisée*, ed. C. de Boer (Amsterdam, 1915—38).

12   Livy, *Ab urbe condita*, 1, ed. R. S. Conway and C. F. Walters (Oxford, 1914); Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969).