Let me begin by telling you a story that I got from a very reliable source—the man who told it to me said that he had met someone who actually knew the woman that it happened to:

There was this rich lady, see, who had a real kind heart but she was married to this mean sonofabitch and anytime she wanted to do something nice for someone, like give some change to a homeless person, say, he'd yell at her or even beat up on her when they got home. Well, one time when he'd gone off on a hunting trip, she notices a homeless person sitting on the sidewalk in front of their house, so she goes out to see if he'd like some coffee and something to eat maybe. He was real polite and well-spoken but he was in a real bad way so she asks him if he'd like to come in and get cleaned up, and she even offers to run his clothes through the washer for him. She shows him where the shower is and loans him one of her husband's bathrobes and off she goes to the laundry room with all his stuff, but when she gets back upstairs she finds the poor guy's so bushed he's fallen asleep on her bed. Now, just then she hears her husband's truck in the driveway—he's come back early, see, 'cause one of the guys had gotten sick and they'd had to call off the trip. Well, she runs downstairs and she tries to head him off but he's tired from all the driving and the first thing he wants to do is take a shower. He goes up to the bedroom, and she stays downstairs, waiting for him start yelling, but nothing happens. So, soon as she hears the shower running, she sneaks into the bedroom to see what's going on. Well, there's no sign of the homeless person, the bed's not mussed up, the bathrobe's hanging on the
back of the door, everything's just like it was. Excepting that laying there, right in the middle of the bed, is a bunch of roses.

As you have probably guessed by now, this is not an authentic modern contemporary legend—the dénouement would probably have been very much less decorous if it had been—but it is, *mutatis mutandis*, a reconstructed medieval one,¹ and I have not in any way falsified my account of the narrative chain that links me to it. My immediate source was an English Dominican friar who wrote a version of it down, probably in Cambridge, sometime around 1260, and he says that he knew a man who knew the woman that it happened to: “A religious and trustworthy man told me this story about a certain married woman, and he saw this same woman with his own eyes after her husband’s death” (*sicut narravit mihi uir religiosus fidedignus de quadam matrona, qui et ipsam matronam occulis suis post mortem mariti sui udit*).²

If anything, my modern revamping of this old exemplum as a modern contemporary legend underplays some of its original humor. Of course, stories that involve a husband’s returning unexpectedly to find a strange man alone with his wife always offer a potential source of comedy,³ and there is no reason to suppose that medieval preachers were any more resistant to such offers than anyone else.⁴ If, in this respect, our story of the vanishing leper may seem fairly tame, it is worth pointing out that in the Middle Ages, when leprosy was widely believed to be a venereal disease,⁵ lepers must have posed

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¹ Since the term “contemporary legend” seems to be the one preferred by most folklorists (though “belief tale” and “modern legend” are also found), it is the one I generally employ in this essay. I have, however, used the term “urban legend” (favored by Jan H. Brunvand) in my title, on the grounds that it is the term most likely to be familiar to the nonspecialist.


⁴ An exemplum in an early fourteenth-century Dominican collection, for instance, tells of a clerk who lodges with a knight whose wife had taken a monk as her lover. While she is entertaining him with a lavish feast, they hear her husband knocking at the door (*miles rediens ad portam pulsavit*), and promptly hide him under a bench; the quick-witted clerk, who pretends to have been studying necromancy, then facilitates his escape by “conjuring” him out of his hiding place and banishing him from the house. *La Scala Coeli de Jean Gobi*, ed. Marie-Anne Polo de Beaulieu (Paris: Édition du centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1991), p. 254, n. 207. This story has several analogues in the fabliau tradition, the best-known to English readers being *The Friars of Berwick* (see Melissa M. Furrow, ed., *Ten Fifteenth-Century Comic Poems* [New York: Garland, 1985], pp. 315–17).

⁵ See Denton Fox, ed., *The Testament of Cresseid* (London: Nelson, 1968), pp. 26–30. Adelard of Bath has an interesting discussion of why, “if a man suffering from leprosy has intercourse with a healthy woman, it is not the woman, but the man who has intercourse with
a particular threat to marital harmony (this is precisely the situation in Sir Aldingar, for example, where a villainous steward tries to discredit his queen by smuggling a leper into her bed). 6 Thus it is far from immaterial that the specific object of the wife’s charitable impulses here should be a leper.

Here, then, is the original story as it appears on fol. 92v of London, British Library MS Royal 7 D i. 7

Now there was once a certain noblewoman who had great sympathy for the poor, though she regarded lepers with particular affection, and she would assist them diligently when she dared, for her husband was extremely hard on the poor, and particularly so on lepers. Despite this, it happened that a certain leper arrived at her door when her lord was out and asked her if she would condescend to bathe him. She indeed feeling great pity for him took him secretly into her husband’s chamber and there with her maids ministered to him in the bath. Afterwards the leper asked her insistently whether, now that he had been bathed by her, he might be placed after his bath in her husband’s bed. When she had granted this, though with great reluctance, and while he was lying in the bed, her husband suddenly arrived at the door, and when she heard this she ran to him with great fear. Now he, being suspicious of her, immediately enters his chamber and goes to the bed, but, finding there an aroma of a marvelous fragrance, sought out how so great a fragrance might come to be there; going to the bed, he pulled back the covers and found there only the most beautiful roses giving off the wonderful fragrance. After this and when the truth had been revealed to him, he left to his wife the management of all that he owned, asking her that she should spend all their wealth on the poor, in whatever manner seemed best to her. 8

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8. “Fuit autem quedam domina nobilis, multum pauperibus compaciens, sed precipuam affectacionem habens ad leprosus, ipsis diligenter subveniath quando [MS; Forte: quin] audebat pro viro suo, qui fuit durus valde ad pauperes et precipue ad leprosus. Inter huc contigit quendam leprosum, dum dominus eius absens esset, foribus adesse et dominam illam rogare
While it would certainly not be true to claim that folklorists have ignored the medieval forerunners of the modern contemporary legend, an earlier generation of scholars tended to focus far more closely on content than on form: Shirley Marchalonis, for instance, compared an exemplum against vanity in women from the late thirteenth-century Speculum Laicorum with a popular sixties story of a black widow spider that makes its nest in a lacquered beehive hairdo, and Florence Ridley, among others, pointed out that anti-Semitic medieval blood-libel tales like Hugh of Lincoln have their all-too-depressing modern counterparts in stories of laundromat and washroom child-abductions. Thus, in 1985 Gillian Bennett felt herself justified in suggesting that what was really new about the genre was “not the themes nor the motifs but the way they are shaped.” She argued that, structurally, contemporary legends bear a strong resemblance to the “personal experience stories” analyzed by the linguists Labov and Waletsky, and that, unlike a saint’s legend, say, the contemporary legend “is specifically adapted to formulate, defend, and negotiate public opinion” (p. 229). Since the contemporary legend regards “the truth of the events [as being] just as important as the nature of the events” (p. 228), “instead of distancing herself from the story, [the teller] attaches it to her life and experience as closely as possible” (p. 225). One obvious way in which tellers may attach such stories to their own lives is to claim they happened to a friend of a friend of theirs (folklorists have labeled this subgenre “FOAF” tales). Despite the fact that elsewhere Bennett herself gives a pertinent early example—Richard Baxter’s introducing a ghost story in 1691 with the words quatinus ipsum balneare dignaretur. Ipsa vero ei compaciens cepit ipsum in cameram viri sui secreto et ibi cum puellis suis eidem in balneo ministrabat. Post hec rogavit eam ille leprosus, iam ab ipsa balneatus, modis omnibus ut in lecto mariti sui poneretur ipse post balneum. Quod cum concederet illa, licet cum difficultate magna, dum ipse iaceret in lecto prefato, ecce maritus eius venit subito ad portam. At illa hec audiens cum tremore magno occurrit domino suo. Ille vero suspicacionem habens de ea, cito intrat in cameram suam ad lectum suum inveniensque ibi miri odoribus fragranciam, quesivit unde ibi tanta fragrancia esse potuit, et accedens ad lectum sublevavit pannos et nil ibi invenit nisi rosas pulcherimas miro odore fragrantes. Quo facto et facti veritate comperta ipse omnia quae habuerat reliquid ordinacioni uxoris sue, rogans ut sicut ei videtur expedire, in pauperes bona ipsorum expenderet” (Forte, “Cambridge Dominican,” pp. 130–31, no. 120).

“this story I have heard related by several Persons of good Repute, that lived in the same Town with him and heard it from his own mouth. The man I have several times seen”—she leaves us with the strong impression that such a performative stance is distinctly modern.

Recently, however, as scholars have identified more and more formal parallels between modern contemporary legends and stories from the Middle Ages, this view has come under increasing attack: Elissa Henken, writing about Gerald of Wales, Elissa Henken, writing about Gerald of Wales, Elissa Henken, writing about Gerald of Wales, Elissa Henken, writing about Gerald of Wales, Carl Lindahl on Robert Mannyng of Brunne, and Bill Ellis on Poggio Bracciolini have all provided evidence of medieval authors mimicking personal oral narratives in their writing and shown them going to considerable lengths to supply authenticating information for their tales. Lindahl, for instance, stresses the importance of “the naming of and vouching for witnesses” for Robert Mannyng of Brunne, as in his tale of the mother whose thoughtless cursing of her daughter for a trivial lapse has disastrous results: “Y shal ȝow telle what me was told, / Of a prest þat saȝh and fond / Þys chaunce yn þe holy lond” (1252–54). Ellis even gives a clear instance of a FOAF narrative from Poggio: “a well-educated man, Cencio the Roman, frequently told me about something that’s difficult to reject, which a neighbor of his, a person who was by no means a fool, narrated as having happened to himself” (p. 84). Of course the mere presence of a such a FOAF claim cannot in itself be conclusive, and Ellis is surely right to add that, “before giving ‘contemporary legend’ status to this narrative, a cautious folklorist would need another text of the same story to be sure that it did in fact circulate in several variants” (p. 85). While Ellis himself is able to point to a similar story, also in Poggio, he does not take his argument further. In what follows, however, I will try to show that there is, in fact, plenty of evidence that medieval contemporary legends, including “The Tale of the Vanishing Leper” with which I began, circulated widely in variant forms. I shall further argue that, as with their modern counterparts, it is the status of the truth-claims they are making that provides such legends with their narrative impetus, and conse-

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quently that any unthinking assumption of a credulous appetite for tall stories among medieval popular audiences may stand in need of serious qualification. In principle, there is no reason to suppose that such medieval audiences were any more gullible than modern ones, and Gillian Bennett’s notion of an unbridgeable gulf between the contemporary legend and the saint’s life may well turn out to be overstated.¹⁸

While the narrative content of “The Tale of the Vanishing Leper” might usefully be compared with that of “The Tale of the Vanishing Hitchhiker” (one of the most widespread of all modern contemporary legends, and one that, according to Gillian Bennett and Paul Smith, has often been regarded “as the standard by which to judge newly collected stories”¹⁹), its formal characteristics are what really make it a classic contemporary legend. Arguably, it fulfills every requirement of the genre. Self-evidently it is authenticated as having been told of a friend of a friend, and the first of these friends, moreover, is one in whom we are invited to place particular confidence—“vir religiosus fidedignus.” It is, at least until the dénouement, a commonplace tale involving everyday characters (as Gillian Bennett puts it, it tells “of a single event in the near past, and [features] a cast of ordinary people”²⁰). Moreover, as in many contemporary legends, the story offers a practical moral lesson: “Be kind to beggars” (cf. “Don’t hitchhike alone after dark”). Perhaps most important of all is the fact that “The Tale of the Vanishing Leper” seems to have circulated widely in the early and mid-thirteenth century and that others, apart from our English Dominican, apparently thought that they knew the woman it happened to. In other words, the story is not told as of someone in a distant time or place, but of a contemporary, and the audience is offered personal grounds for accepting its factual basis. Furthermore, though some versions of the tale seem to have circulated in written form (as indeed do many modern contemporary legends), it is clear from the range of narrative variants that its primary medium of dissemination was oral and that it spread, much as some modern contemporary legends can be shown to have done, within a well-defined group—not university students or traveling salesmen in this case, but Dominican friars. Finally (while conceding that the adjective urban in the phrase urban legend has proved particularly controversial), I might point out that such a story could not have circulated as rapidly as it did without the kind of concentration of population that only urbanization makes possible (along with a corresponding freedom of movement between urban centers); as Larry

¹⁸. Even in our own day the gulf may be smaller than she believes; see Lydia Fish, “Father Baker: Legends of a Saint in Buffalo,” New York Folklore 10:3–4 (1984): 23–33.
¹⁹. Bennett and Smith, Contemporary Legend: A Reader, p. xxix.
Scanlon has written, “the new preaching movements were tied to the newly emergent urban world.”

The earliest appearance of “The Tale of the Vanishing Leper” probably predates the founding of the Dominican Order in 1220. A version of it is told by the French Augustinian Jacques de Vitry (b. ca. 1160), one of the most famous preachers of his day and the author of four collections of sermons. In the most popular of these, the *Sermones vulgares*, he introduces the story as one that he had learned at first hand from the woman herself: “I knew a certain noblewoman who had great sympathy for the sick, and lepers most of all” (*Novi quandam nobilem dominam que valde compatiebatur infirmis et maxime leprosis*). It is easy to see why he was so successful as a preacher, for he goes on to tell one of the liveliest versions of the story. He adds small realistic details (the weather is hot, for instance, which helps explain why the leper should wish to come in out of the sun and why the returning husband should want to lie down in the middle of the day); he fleshes out the characters (the leper weeps and whines, emotionally blackmailing the woman into letting him lie down in her husband’s bedroom; the husband, returning from hunting, rants violently outside the door, making the woman fear for her life). He also makes effective use of direct speech, giving a vivid immediacy to the action. The weakest point of his version is its ending. The leper vanishes and a beautiful odor is left behind him—so beautiful, reports the husband, “that it seemed to me that I was in Paradise”—but there is nothing further; we are left feeling the need for some more tangible mark of the leper’s vanished presence, the kind of thing, in fact, that our English Dominican effectively supplies with his beautiful roses.

There is one other version of the tale preceding the English one. Etienne de Bourbon (b. ca. 1195), an early member of the Dominican order in France, knew of Jacques de Vitry’s written version (“*hoc eciam scripsit magister Jacobus de Vitri*”) but chose instead to tell the story as he had heard it from a fellow friar, Geoffroi de Blevex, a master of Theology in the schools of Paris.

This version is sparer and less ambiguous than Jacques de Vitry’s: the main


22. Most of de Vitry’s sermons are very difficult to date; though he seems to have collected them towards the end of his life (d. 1240), they were evidently written throughout his long career.


character, though sickly and ulcerous, is not explicitly said to be a leper, and the dénouement subordinates the mysterious to the miraculous. Here, if anything, there is too heavy-handed a substitution for the leper’s residual presence: “her husband, coming to the said chamber, instantly approached her bed and found the said invalid. Believing him to be an adulterer, he was about to kill him as he lay on the bed, when the naked body of our Lord appeared to him in the form in which he had hung on the cross and said, ‘Why do you persecute me, I who have suffered this for you?’ He threw himself to the ground, but when he raised his eyes he found nothing there, and was converted to the Lord.”

One further version of “The Tale of the Vanishing Leper” is roughly contemporary with the English one and fairly close to it in content. It appears in the Bonum universale de apibus (1256–61) of the Belgian Dominican Thomas of Cantimpré.²⁵ This is a fairly brief account: the husband is a nobilissimus miles, but nothing is said of his horror of lepers nor why he is away from the house; the vanished leper leaves behind him a bed covered with the most fragrant roses (rosis fragrantissimis), they are not hidden beneath the sheets, and the couple bursts into tears, praising the Lord, when they discover them. One significant addition is that it is said to be wintertime, making the sudden appearance of the roses all the more miraculous. Like all the versions of the story we have looked at so far, this one, too, is authenticated by a contemporary reference: Thomas of Cantimpré tells us that it happened to a venerable lady known to him personally called Ada de Belomeir. It is of course just conceivable that this lady was the same one known to Jacques de Vitry earlier in the century, but it seems far more likely that we are dealing here with a phenomenon commonly to be met with in the modern contemporary legend—the variant attribution of variant versions.

“The Tale of the Vanishing Leper” lived on throughout the later Middle Ages, but by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries it has less of the feel of a contemporary legend; it has become a historical event, something that happened back in the time of Jacques de Vitry or Etienne de Bourbon, and its mode of transmission has become primarily literary. Jacques de Vitry’s version seems to have been particularly popular;²⁶ it was included in a major early-fourteenth-century collection of exempla, probably compiled by the Dominican Arnold of Liège, known as the Alphabetum Narrationum, and from there it was translated into a number of European vernaculars, includ-

²⁶. See, for example, the Speculum Laicorum, ed. Welter, p. 64 (no. 313), and the Tabula Exemplorum, ed. J. Th. Welter (Paris and Toulouse: Occitania, 1926), p. 33 (no. 101).
ing French, Spanish, and English. One later version is perhaps worth singling out, to show that the survival of the tale was not entirely due to literary transmission. Jean Gobi, a Dominican from southern France and the author of a lively collection called the Scala Coeli (1322–30), says that he got it from Jacques de Vitry, but he tells it entirely in his own words, and his ending is significantly different: “when the couple had investigated the cause [of the fragrant odor] it was found that it was Christ who had been taken in by the lady” (cumque requisivisset causam, inventum est quod Christum . . . per dominam fuerat recepit). Thus, consciously or not, Gobi combines the endings of both Jacques de Vitry and Etienne de Bourbon, suggesting strongly that his version owes more to oral reconstruction than literary preservation.

MS Royal 7 D i. contains a number of other exempla for which the author provides authenticating details. He includes eight other regular FOAF tales, and one friend-of-a-friend-of-a-friend (FOAFOAF) tale. For some of these

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27. The English example may stand for all: "Jacobus de Vetriaco tellis how som tyme þer was a worthi ladie, & sho had grete petie of seke folk, & speciallie of lepre men. And hur hus-band was a myghti man, & he had lepre folk in so grete vsomnes þat he myght not suffer to se þaim, nor lat þaim com with-in his howse. So on a day as a lepre man was cryand at his yate, þe ladie come to hym & askid hym if he wold owder eate or drynk, and he ansswerd agayn & sayd; ‘I am here hugelie turment with hete of þe son, & I will nowder eate nor drynk bod if þou take me into þi place.’ And sho ansswerd agayn & sayd; ‘knowis þou not how my husband vgis to see lepros men? & he will onone com home fro huntyng, & if he fynde þe with-in his place, happelie he will sla bothe þe and me.’ And he wepid & made sorow. So at þe laste þis ladie might no langer se hym wepe, & sho tuke hym vp in hur armys & bare hym into hur place, & þan sho prayed hym to eate. He said agayn he wald nowder eate nor drynk bod if sho bare hym vnto hur chamber & layde hym in hur awn bed, & þer he wolde riste hym awhile & þan he wold eate. And he made so mekull sorow þat sho mot not suffre itt, þat sho had hym vnto hur chamber & laid hym in hur bed, & þan he wold nott com & oppyn þe dure & he seyng þat sho tarid & wold nott com, brest oppyn þe dure & lyde hym in hur owne bed, & þer he wolde riste hym awhile & þan he wold eate. And he made so mekull sorow þat sho mot not Suffre itt, þat sho had hym vnto hur chamber & laid hym in hur bed, & & sho laid a softe cod vndernethe his head & happed hym with a gay couerlad. And þis done, onone hur husband come home fro huntyng & bad hur oppyn hym þe chambre dure, & he wold lay hym down & slepe a while; & sho was ferd þat he suld sla bothe þe lepre man & hur, & made hur to tarie a while, & wolde not com & oppyn þe dure redelic. & he seyng þat sho tarid & wold nott com, brest oppyn þe dure in a grete anger and went in-to þe chambr. And onone he come bakk agayn & mett his wyfe & sayde vnto þe hur; ‘Now þou hase done wele; for þou hase arayed our bed on þe beste wise, bod I mervayll whare þou gat so gude spicis þurgh whilk all our chambrer is fyllid so full of gude savir with, for onone as I come into þe chaw[m]ber, þer was þerin so swete a savur þat me thoght I was in paradise.’ And when sho þat befors was ferd for hur dead hard þis, sho went in-to þe chambr with hym & fand it as he sayde; & þan sho told hym all how scho had done; & þai lukid in þe bed & þis lepre man was away. And þan hur husbond þat befors was als wude as a lyon, wex als meke as a lambe, & evur afterward luftid God & lepere men better.” An Alphabet of Tales, ed. Mary Macleod Banks, 2 vols., Early English Text Society, o.s., 126 and 127 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1904–5), 1:117–18.


29. Herbert, Catalogue, vol. 3, pp. 484 (no. 65), 489 (no. 124), 490 (n. 139), 493 (no. 183), 495 (no. 200), 496 (no. 216), 497 (no. 227), and 503 (no. 315).

30. Ibid., p. 502 (no. 311).
he gives additional authenticating details, specifying the time and place of the event—Bath, 1244, in one case (no. 227), and in another mentioning that he has suppressed the actual names of the people concerned since they are too well known (no. 311). There is a further subgroup of four FOAF tales, and one FOAFOAF tale, that are said to have been related to confessors. He gives the name of the confessor in one case (no. 54), and explains why he has deliberately suppressed the name of the penitent in another: “a certain religious, trustworthy, and morally admirable man told me that he knew the woman, who is still alive, and that she often confessed these things to him. . . . My informant said that for the time being he wished to conceal the place where these things happened and the name of the woman concerned” (no. 216). He tells three more stories (one of which is dated) that, he says, he heard directly from the person concerned; in one case (no. 185) he gives the name of his informant, Bartholomew de Grimestune. Finally, nine stories are introduced by some such phrase as retulit mihi quidam vir religiosus fidedignus, and for several of these he is keen to stress the local knowledge of his informants—a story about a woodcutter at Fountains Abbey, for instance, was told him “by a young man from the archdiocese of York” (no. 86), and a ghost story about a perjurer called Hugh of Norwich was told him “by a certain religious and trustworthy man from the diocese of Norwich who had been born and raised there” (no. 93). If we include two further stories concerning the recently deceased St. Edmund of Abingdon (d. 1240) that were told to him, he says, by people who had known the saint, we have at least thirty exempla (or approximately 10 percent of the total collection), that, as Gillian Bennett puts it, are “specifically adapted to formulate, defend, and negotiate public opinion.”

I would not wish to imply that MS Royal 7 D i. is unique in its collection of medieval contemporary legends—indeed, I suspect that such tales were relatively common in the thirteenth century, and I can give at least one other example of a similar collection compiled by an English friar in the second half of the century, though this time by a Franciscan: the anonymous author

31. Ibid., pp. 483 (nos. 54 and 55), 484 (no. 63), and 496 (no. 216).
32. Ibid., p. 484 (no. 62).
33. Ibid., pp. 481 (no. 32), 490 (no. 140), and 493 (no. 185); no. 32 is dated to 1250. No. 244 (p. 498) should probably also be included here (Hanc narrationem retulit Magister Robertus de Burwelle de seipso contigisse).
34. Cf. Ibid., p. 498 (no. 244).
35. Ibid., pp. 480 (no. 19), 481 (nos. 33 and 34), 485 (no. 77), 486 (nos. 86, 87 and 93), 502 (no. 313), and 503 (no. 314).
36. Cf. Ibid., pp. 418 (no. 34), 486 (no. 87), and 503 (no. 315).
37. Ibid., pp. 488–89 (no. 117) and 491 (no. 149); cf. 483 (no. 56) and 496 (no. 218).
Two Medieval Urban Legends • Green

of the work known as the Liber Exemplorum (1270–79) draws on personal experience or on conversations with his friends for twenty-six of the surviving 213 exempla in his collection (it originally contained more, but the manuscript is defective at the end).38 The following preamble is fairly typical of this subgroup: “a certain very noteworthy story about lawyers, though horrible to hear, was told me by a certain man from Normandy, and I was, and am, sure that he would not have told it to me had it not been true. There was in the city of Rouen a certain cleric called William Bodin whom the said Norman knew, in that he saw him almost every day in that said city. He was a lawyer, and . . . .”39 In the fourteenth century Jean Gobi, author of the Scala Coeli, cites personal information (e.g., audivi a quodam predicatore fide digno) for five of the stories in his collection,40 and, while generally late-medieval exempla collections have much more of the feel of literary anthologies, Bronislaw Geremek has discussed a group of exempla, “noviter conscripta,” that appears at the end of a late fifteenth-century Dutch collection, the Speculum Exemplorum, in terms very similar to those I have employed here.41 Evidently the oral exemplum remained productive, as the linguists would say, to the very end of the Middle Ages.

We have seen, then, that Royal MS 7 Di is not the only medieval preacher’s collection to contain FOAF tales, nor is “The Tale of the Vanishing Leper” the only medieval story that can be shown to exhibit the formal characteristics of the modern contemporary legend. Let me conclude by analyzing a final example, this one exhibiting an even wider range of variants and (perhaps because of its inherent improbability) an even greater tendency for its authenticating details to be reinvented. “The Tale of the Murmuring Monk” tells of a man who is afflicted with a burning (or grotesquely swollen) tongue as a punishment for backbiting (or sometimes gossiping, or litigiousness); in its most common form it is a ghost story, and it seems to have been particularly popular in England.42

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The classic form of this tale appears in an Anglo-Norman confessional handbook, the *Manuel des pechiez*, which was composed about 1260, but a roughly contemporary version also appears in our old friend MS Royal 7 D i.\(^{43}\) The *Manuel des pechiez* was subsequently translated into English by Robert Mannyng of Brunne as *Handlyng Synne* at the very beginning of the fourteenth century, and soon after that versions appear in both the *Northern Homily Cycle* and, much condensed, in the *Fasciculus Morum*.\(^{44}\) Mannyng’s version in particular vividly conveys both the eeriness and the horror of the spectacle:

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Befel þe tyme as hyt ys ryght,
Munkes to ryse at mydnyght,
And whan matynes were al done
þe conuent ȝede* to bedde sone.         went
A munk lefte behynde a trow*          a while
(251,1974),(724,2088)
Whan þys munk com before þe chapytyl,* chapter house
As ordyr askyþ he loutede* a lytyl.     bowed
And as he loutede hys eȝe gan blenche* glanced
And sagh one sytte before þe benche:
A foul þyng and a grysly,
He sagh neuer noun so lôply.
He shette* hys tung out before þe grecys* shot / steps
And gnogh* hyt ynward al to pecys.      gnawed
Hys tung was brennyng þat he so gnogh;
Yn to hys mouþ a þen he drogh*.        drew
And eft out, he dede hyt shete,
And gnogh aþen wyþ peynys grete.
Many tymes þan dede he so.\(^{45}\)
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None of these versions gives a precise source for the story, but MS Royal 7 D i. says that it occurred in a *cenobio magno Anglie*,\(^{46}\) and the authors of the *Manuel/Handlyng* version imply that they know the monastery concerned but would rather not name it: the *Manuel*, for instance, reads,

\(^{43}\) Herbert, *Catalogue*, pp. 280 (no. 23) and 496 (no. 226).


\(^{45}\) Ed. Sullens, p. 91 (lines 3567–85).

\(^{46}\) Herbert, *Catalogue*, p. 496 (no. 226).
Bien deuez ceste cunte crere,
Car il auint en Engletere,
En vn leu moult renomé,
Qe ieo lesse [var: Ke ore ne voil] nomer de gré.

[You should certainly believe this story, for it happened in England in a very well-known place that I omit [do not now wish] to name from choice.] 47

As with many modern contemporary legends, however, there exists a large number of variant forms of this story. In the very earliest, by Odo of Cheriton, the central figure is not a monk but a nun, her vice is litigiousness not back-biting, and it is not her tongue but her middle (perhaps because of the Latin term *stomachosus*) that burns. Odo gives no location, not even an approximate one, but he does add the authenticating detail that burn marks were found next day in the place where her ghost had appeared. 48 In one fifteenth-century manuscript of the *Speculum Laicorum*, the ghost, whose vocation in life is not specified, suffers its torment in the graveyard (not in church) and the other dead souls rise up to complain about its presence among them—the scene being witnessed not by a monk but by a holy anchorite. 49 In another fifteenth-century version by the Dominican Johann Herolt, the grave of a detractor is opened many years after burial and his tongue is found to be intact, rejected even by the toads that feed on the rest of his putrid corpse. 50 In still other versions, the punishment is inflicted before death: the *Vitae Fratrum* describes a backbiting Dominican friar, who is struck to the ground with a tongue so swollen that it fills his whole mouth (*lingua quam maxime ingrossata ipsum os ita videbatur implere*) and is only saved after his companion prays for help to Jordan of Saxony. 51 Another Dominican, Thomas of Cantimpré, who says that he knew the man concerned (*novi . . . sacerdotem*), describes a backbiting priest gnawing at his own tongue on his deathbed, 52 whereas the early


50. [Johann Herolt], *Liber discipuli de erudiciione Christifidelium* (Cologne, 1509), *de quinto precepto*, fin. (also Welter, ed., *Speculum Laicorum*, p. 26); a slightly different version appears in Herolt’s *Sermones discipuli de tempore* (Lyon, 1492), *sermo* 91 (Trinity 5).


52. *Bonum universale*, ed. 1627, pp. 389–90; Johann Herolt gives an abridged version of this,
fourteenth-century Speculum morale (wrongly attributed to Vincent of Beauvais) describes a similar event as having occurred in England, with the priest unable to make his final confession because of a grotesquely swollen tongue. In light of such variations, it is hardly surprising that John Bromyard in the Summa Predicantium was skeptical about the whole business, introducing the tale as a quadam historia licet aprocripha.

Against such a background, then, it is particularly striking to find the English Benedictine Thomas Walsingham in the late fourteenth century providing a detailed pedigree for this tale and furnishing it with verifiable people, places, and dates. In his Gesta Abbatum Monasterii Sancti Albani (ca. 1381), Walsingham records that the ghost of a monk of that house called Nicholas Goudeby, “a chatterer and a habitual gossip whilst he lived” (vaniloquus et detracionibus assuetus dum viveret), appeared to brother John Marines, “with a long and broad tongue, burning like a torch” (cum lingua longa et lata, ac ignit quasi facula) after his death. Not only are we told the names of the monks involved and the abbey at which the incident occurred (Marines was in actuality a cellarer at St. Albans), but Walsingham even dates the story for us. It happened, he says, during the time of Abbot Michael, 29th Abbot; that is to say, sometime between 1335 and 1349, or, the cynic might observe, more than a hundred years after the story was first recorded. Even Walsingham admits that the burning tongue stretched belief (ultra quem credi potest), and in light of John Bromyard’s earlier skepticism, one could hardly ask for a clearer example of the teller of a medieval contemporary legend going to great lengths to buttress his tale against potential skeptics.

Most medieval exempla are preserved for us in preachers’ handbooks and collections of materials, but in the case of “The Murmuring Monk” we are
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lucky enough be able to witness an exemplum being actually put to work: it is included in a surviving sermon, preached in the vernacular, probably in Worcester, at the end of the fourteenth century. This is the closest we are likely to get to a field-recording of a medieval contemporary legend in the telling. The preacher begins by informing us that he had found the tale in a written text (a claim that in a period of restricted literacy must have had quite different connotations than it would have now). “I rede þat ter was in an hows of religiun swich on as tis is—God saue—or swich a-noþer, an holi man with al þat was sexteyn of þe place” (I have read that in a religious house (just like this one—God save it!—or much the same) there was a very holy man who was sexton of the place). He then gives a vivid description of this man’s encounter with a hideous ghost, who hacks away at his burning tongue with a pair of shears, livening up his account with lots of direct speech:

Þis holi man haþ miche vunder what tis schuld mene: & ate laste a took a good herte & spak to hym: “I charge þe,” a seith, “e þe vertu of þe blessed trinite, vadir & sone & holigost, þat þe tel me, or ell, þif þe maist nat spek to me, mak me sum synye, what þe art & whi þe sist her e swich a-ray!” & he answerd & seith: “Ich was,” a seith, “sum tyme a brôher of þine, dwellyng e þe same place, and for be-cause þat ich was a misspekir, a bakbiter & sueþ ofte-tmes þe sed of detractiun a-mong mi breþerin ich am punschid e þe same membir þat i trespassid with, þat is mi tunge, and schal be þre hundrid wynter her-afterward, as sum bokes seie. þe, & ter is no vir e þis world be þe þrid part so hot as is tis þat te seist o mi tunge, & euery clip þat i clippe is now mor greuis to me þan it wold ha be sume tyme & a man had stekid me to þe herte, þat is þe grettiste peyne þat a man may haue her e þis world.”

[This holy man wondered very much what this might mean and at last he got up his courage and spoke to him: “By the power of the Blessed Trinity—Father Son, and Holy Spirit—, I demand that you tell me (or if you may not speak, make me some sign) who you are and why you sit here in this manner?” And he answered and said, “I was once one of your brothers living in this same place, and because I was a gossiper and a backbiter and often sowed the seeds of detraction among my brothers I am punished in the same member that I sinned with (my tongue), and so I shall be for three hundred years more, as some books say. And there is no fire in this world

so hot as the one you see on my tongue, and every cut that I make is now more painful to me than it would once have been had someone stabbed me in the heart, which is the greatest pain that a man may suffer on earth.”]

Reading this version, it is not difficult to understand how such medieval exempla might have been sustained by a richly oral popular tradition.

Though I have argued that the kind of medieval exempla I have been discussing exhibit all the features of a modern contemporary legend, some may still find it difficult to accept that the religious sermon was an appropriate medium for this particular folklore genre (even if some similarity clearly exists between the explicit morals they were intended to inculcate and the cautionary element that is often present in modern contemporary legends). But this, too, need not present us with an insuperable difficulty. In the early 1980s there was a story circulating in North America that the company Proctor and Gamble owed its commercial success to a pact with the devil and that if you looked carefully enough you could make out the mark of the beast in its trademark; “although no organized church group of national influence was ever identified as having spread the trademark rumors,” writes Jan Brunvand, “many versions of it did travel from person to person via individual church bulletins, letters to editors of religious publications, and especially through callers to Christian radio talk shows.”

58 And at the end of the eighties Brunvand recorded another popular American contemporary legend, “The Unsolvable Math Problem.” Dramatized in the movie Good Will Hunting, it is the story of the professor who puts an unsolvable math problem on the chalkboard and the student who, arriving late to class, thinks it is part of a test he has missed, and promptly solves it. Although the germ of this story may be based on an actual event, Brunvand shows that it was first popularized by the Reverend Robert H. Schuller, author and host of the “Hour of Power” television worship service at the Crystal Cathedral in Los Angeles, and that it appeared in a biography of Schuller published in 1983. Shortly afterward, he tells us, “The story was repeated in a resource newsletter for pastors called Parables, &c.”

Brunvand’s description of the way “The Unsolvable Math Problem” circulated offers an uncannily accurate paradigm for the circulation of such medieval exempla as “The Tale of the Vanishing Leper”: “Schuller’s version—modified in numerous ways—was retold and later reprinted, thus becoming a source drawn on by other ministers for their sermons. People who heard the sermons must have repeated the story, in turn modifying it further.”


What, for the medievalist, are the implications of identifying at least some medieval exempla as contemporary legends, prototypes of a genre still very much alive in our own time? In the first place, such an identification may allow us to recover something of the medieval exemplum’s original oral and folkloric texture. Unsurprisingly, top-down accounts of exemplum collections, like John Van Engen’s, have tended to emphasize the genre’s academic qualities: “the impulse to compile exemplary stories . . . originated with learned clerics, making these sources at best only a very indirect indicator of the strength and quality of popular folklore and a much better indicator of clerical zeal to deepen Christian faith and practice.” But even those whom Van Engen opposes, like the annalistes Jacques le Goff and Jean-Claude Schmitt, have sometimes played down the exemplum’s popular character: “with very few exceptions, the exemplum, a scholarly product, utilizes resources no less scholarly, be they written or oral. . . . On balance, it would be very rash to assert that the oral traditions which underlie very many exempla draw in any direct way upon folkloric values.” By contrast, Bronislaw Geremek, a scholar who is fully prepared to recognize the oral qualities of the exempla (“their operation in medieval culture was founded not in writing but on the spoken word”), is correspondingly more open to their folkloric dimension: “monastic environments seem indeed to have provided a melting pot for popular tales and expressions of popular culture, and at the same time a center for their distribution.” If nothing else, then, this study of contemporary-legend exempla like “The Vanishing Leper” and “The Murmuring Monk” may offer confirmation that “folklore” did not stop at the convent gate. It would certainly be rash to claim that such exempla are typical of the genre as a whole (a great many medieval exempla have very venerable literary pedigrees), but Paul Zumthor’s concept of mouvance might provide one way of exploring the degree to which their particular qualities permeate the wider corpus. Tracing signs of mouvance among different versions of the commonest exempla lies well beyond the scope of this chapter, but it would not be wholly surprising to

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61. “Sauf exceptions rares, l’exemplum, récit savant, utilise une tradition elle aussi savant, qu’elle soit écrite ou orale. . . . En définitive, il serait bien téméraire d’affirmer que les traditions orales qui sont à la base de nombreux exempla proviennent toutes directement de la culture folklorique.” Claude Bremond, Jacques Le Goff, and Jean-Claude Schmitt, L’Exemplum (Turnhout: Brepols, 1982), pp. 87–89.
62. Geremek, “L’exemplum et la circulation de la culture”: “le principal support de leur fonctionnement dans la culture medieval n’était pas l’écriture mais la parole” (p. 177); “les milieu monastiques semblent justement avoir été à la fois le creuset où se faisaient les récits populaires et les thèmes de la culture des masses, et le centre de leur rayonnement” (p. 170).
find that the transmission of Latin exempla, like that of vernacular romance, shows unmistakable evidence of a pervasive interplay between written and oral cultures.

A second point follows on from this one. There is often an unspoken tendency, even among medievalists, to assume that people in the Middle Ages were less skeptical, perhaps even more gullible, than we are today. It reflects, I believe, a common Western attitude toward the past that E. P. Thompson has memorably termed “the enormous condescension of posterity”—in this case, perhaps, an inclination to infantilize our predecessors.64 Nancy Partner, for instance, draws our attention to a proper scholarly circumspection about his sources on the part of the twelfth-century Augustinian canon William of Newburgh:

[On one occasion] he assures the reader that information of a certain event came “first from a person born in the locality, afterwards from the venerable archdeacon of the area, Stephen,” who was involved in the incident. Elsewhere we are told that reports came from a monk; “from an aged monk who was famous and influential in that area”; from “certain people of noble birth who were there”; from “men venerable and worthy of credence who claimed to have heard it from the Bishop of Le Mans himself”65

On such grounds as these, she notes that what makes William “seem accessible to modern historians is his unusual willingness to talk about testimony, plausibility, interpretation, and explanation—subjects that usually lie silent beneath the written surface of medieval books” (p. 52). But what I hope my study of the medieval contemporary legend has suggested is that William of Newburgh’s circumspection is not quite as unusual as might first appear. Like their modern counterparts, those who told medieval contemporary legends were clearly seeking to reassure their audiences, primarily because sensational stories, no matter how doctrinally correct, and regardless of whether they originated inside or outside the cloister, could still expect to encounter their due measure of skepticism. When Steven Justice, his tongue firmly in his cheek, recently asked whether the Middle Ages believed in their own miracles,66 his very question exposed our growing discomfort with the old

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view of the medieval period as an “Age of Belief” (a characterization that, as John Van Engen has observed, becomes increasingly difficult to defend).\textsuperscript{67} Perhaps we have now reached a point where we are finally ready to accept that medieval people might actually have told one another urban legends.
