

THE AUDIENCE OF *JACOB'S WELL*: PROBLEMS OF INTERPRETATION

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Jacob's Well, a sermon cycle by an anonymous author, exists in a unique manuscript copy in the library of Salisbury Cathedral, the present Salisbury Cathedral MS 103. This manuscript preserves the only extant testimony to a sustained Middle English vernacular sermon cycle probably composed around the beginning of the fifteenth century. These sermons are totally orthodox in their treatment of Church doctrine and in their adherence to the dictates of the Fourth Lateran Council. The subjects of the sermons and the exempla chosen to illustrate them are unremarkable for the most part. Given the predictability of such sermons, what can possibly distinguish them from a host of other sermons? One of the answers to this question lies within the cultural context established in the sermons.

Within these ninety-five sermons, an intimate relationship is established between the preacher and his audience, but who were these people? We may never know the answer to that question in terms of identifiable names and location; however, a close reading of these texts reveals many inadvertent clues as to the identity of both preacher and audience. Internal evidence indicates that the preacher was probably a parish priest of a rural diocese preaching to a mixed audience of both lay and clerical, both men and women.

So who was this author and his audience? The absence of clearly identifiable events, places, or time references, as is typical in many vernacular sermons, creates obstacles to the assessment of these concerns. While Arthur Brandeis, the editor of the first fifty sermons found in the Early English Text Society's Original Series 115, seemed to take for granted that the manuscript had remained in Salisbury Cathedral since its composition, Leo Carruthers, in an article entitled "Where Did *Jacob's Well* Come From? Provenance and Dialect of MS Salisbury Cathedral 103," has made a case for a provenance, at least for this copy, of a location in Suffolk somewhere between, but not including, the towns of Bury St. Edmunds and Ipswich, based on the dialect and vocabulary of the scribe, a conclusion which is corroborated by Angus McIntosh and Michael Samuels of the Middle English Dialect Survey.^[1] Carruthers perceives an underlying dialect, perhaps that of the author, which is less closely definable but is more northerly, that of the Northeast Midlands. More recently in his article " 'Know Thyself': Criticism, Reform and the Audience of *Jacob's Well*," Carruthers argues for an audience "largely composed of that pious middle class found in England at the end of the fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth centuries, a class to which Chaucer himself belonged."^[2] With all due respect to Professor Carruthers's work, I don't think the issue is quite this cut and dried.

Carruthers argues for the Suffolk provenance based on what he calls "a number of powerful diagnostic criteria" consisting mainly of distinctive word forms such as *therk* (dark), *nouyll* (navel), and *gouyll* (usury).^[3] He offers very little hard evidence for his localization other than these forms, and while one might concede the Suffolk provenance based on this evidence, it is quite difficult to be convinced of such a specific area as the region between Bury

St. Edmunds and Ipswich, occupying, as it does, a distance of 26 miles by road. This is an extremely limited boundary for the area of dialect studies in which nothing is a given or absolute. The underlying dialect, which may or may not be that of the author, is less precisely defined given what appears to be an equal number of criteria. Presumably, these criteria are not as distinctive as those of the Suffolk dialect. This underlying dialect could be that of the author, that of one of his sources, or even that of an intermediary scribe. There is no way of knowing exactly how far removed from the author's original this particular manuscript is. If the scribe was copying from the author's original, then this copy will adhere more closely to the author's original than a manuscript which is further down the evolutionary tree of scribal copies. Scribes often edited the manuscripts they were copying, both consciously and subconsciously, to reflect their own system of orthography, morphology, and syntax. More work is needed in this area in relation to *Jacob's Well* before I am totally convinced.

If the conclusions about the provenance of the manuscript based on the study of the language of the surviving witness are questionable, then whatever can be gleaned about the audience must be adduced from the evidence of the sermon texts. An examination of the preacher can tell us much about his audience. As noted earlier, the preacher appears to be a parish priest in charge of a rural population, but as H. G. Richardson states in "The Parish Clergy of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries," "at no period during the Middle Ages, save in a few populous centres, were town and country sharply differentiated."^[4] The preacher is an educated man with a respectable knowledge of Latin. He quotes the Bible in Latin, as well as patristic literature, and quotes from a wide range of authorities such as Caesarius, Jacques de Vitry, Heraclides, Bartholomeus Anglicus, Albertus Magnus, and others, although his connection to these authors may well be through secondary sources rather than primary texts. He quite often misquotes his sources, including the Bible, which suggests that he is working at times from memory without the texts before him or from variant texts. He is also not above conflating passages to suit his purposes. As Joan Young Gregg has shown in "The Exempla of *Jacob's Well*: A Study in the Transmission of Medieval Sermon Stories," most of the exempla the preacher uses come from one source, the *Alphabetum Narrationum*, a compendium of exempla in Latin by Arnold of Liège, a French Dominican.^[5] Gregg argues convincingly that the author of *Jacob's Well* utilized one of the original Latin manuscripts of the *Alphabetum Narrationum* rather than a poor quality Middle English translation available in England during the 15c, the MS British Museum Additional 25719. She bases this conclusion on the absence of the kinds of errors in translation that mark the Middle English manuscript and the fact that two of the exempla found in *Jacob's Well* are in Latin.^[6] That the preacher utilizes some of the exempla in the original Latin without translating suggests, at least in part, a clerical audience.

The author's zeal and orthodoxy is beyond suspicion. He is vehement in his denunciation of Lollards, equating them with witches and heretics: "And alle wycches & heretykes & lollardys & alle þ[at] beleuyn on her[e] heresy . . . we denou[n]ce hem acursed in þe gret curs be all[e] þe auctoryte of holy cherche."^[7] He believes in and supports the doctrine of transubstantiation: "And alle þ[at] beleue no3t on þe sac[ra]ment of þe awter[e]. þ[at] it is goddys body his flesch & blood in lyknes of breed & wyne. And alle þ[at] beleue no3t in þe oþer[e] sac[ra]ment[is] & in þ[e] cherch[e] of rome beleuyth & techyth . . . we denou[n]ce hem acursed."^[8] He is solid and unshakable in his faith in the Church. However, this does not preclude him from pointing out injustices or dishonest practices that he sees in particular official members of the Church's

organization. His most vociferous attack occurs in Sermon 19 in his discussion of simony. In this sermon he details six particular instances of this abuse. He returns to this theme in Sermon 85, “þ[e] feend hath maryed . . . symonye to byschopys & p[re]latys & clerkys and ypocrysie to frerys. and lecherye to alle astatys.”^[9] The preacher is quick to condemn corruption wherever he finds it, “Gouyl is maryid to burgeysys of cytees. & to lumbardys & to marchau[n]t[ys],”^[10] yet he remains totally committed in his orthodoxy toward the tenets of the Church and the ideal of the Church.

Just as he is firmly grounded in the orthodoxy of the Church, he is firmly grounded in respect to many other things. He is not given to wild imaginings. Most of his themes and language are quite practical and commonplace. He believes in hard work and supports the work ethic. He is a “blue-collar” priest who knows the value of an honest day’s work. Indeed, he structures his entire allegory around the construction of a well, in which he shows firsthand knowledge of well construction, the implements used—the skeet and skavel, the shovel, spade, and pickax—and the various stages of construction. This man knows the procedure, knows how to stop the water, how to mix the mortar and lay the stones, how to scoop out the tainted water. He is a journeyman preacher who knows how best to reach his audience through their vocabulary and imagery.

Although as antifeminist in his views as were many preachers at this time, the preacher is equitable in dealing with both men and women in discussing the sin of lechery and the sacrament of matrimony.^[11] His antifeminist views generally take the commonplace form of depicting women as temptresses, “men may sy[n]nen ofte in sy3t of wo[m]men. as nyce wo[m]men þat dy3ten hem qweyntly to make men to mys vsyn her[e] sy3t on hem. and 3it þei wenyn þei synnen nou3t. for þei consentyn no3t to hem. but þei synne greuously. for þei ar[e] cause þ[at] þe soulys of manye men are lost.”^[12] A more insidious form of temptation takes place when a woman deliberately adorns herself to lead a man to sin, “yche wo[m]man be war[e]. þ[at] neythir be cou[n]tynau[n]ce ne be aray of body ne of heed. sche styr[e] ony man to coueytyn her[e] to syn[n]e. neythir crokyng her[e] heer ne leggyng it an hey. ne to brode. ne w[yth] huge hornys. ne þe heed arayid aboute w[yth] perlys and gold & p[re]cyous stonys. ne schewyng coryous cloþis ne of nyce schap. schewyng her[e] self to be semely to folys. for all þis aray Petyr & poule be þe holy gost. dyspysyn & forfendyn.”^[13] Many women behave this way out of pride, “þe deuyll hath maryid p[ri]de to wo[m]men. for wo[m]men settyn all her[e] stodye in p[ri]de of aray of her[e] heed & of her[e] body to lokyn in myrrourys in komyng her[e] heed.”^[14] The preacher’s views are grounded in a long-standing misogynistic tradition that Eve brought ruin to the world by succumbing to temptation.^[15]

The author shows a good understanding of human nature as he deals with his parishioners. He understands their failings and is quick to point them out, but he also understands the nature of his duties to them, what they will accept readily and what they will dislike hearing. During his presentation of the articles of the great curse, he recognizes the unpopularity of this set of sermons, and he exhorts his audience to be patient and endure this because he is bound by canon law to preach and they are bound to listen, “þ[ou] aw3tyst no3t to hatyn þi curate, but þ[ou] aw3tyst for to louyn hym al þi lyif And aw3tyst gretly desyr[e] to heryn his warnyng his teching þ[at] þe lyif of þi soule my3t be sauyd . . . þ[er]fore whan[n]e I schewe to 3[ou] anop[er] day. þe artycles of þe sentencys beeth no3t euyll[e] payed w[yth] me.

but beth glad to here hem.”^[16] He even goes so far as to admonish them not to walk out of church, “whan[n]e þi curat schewyth to þe þ[e] artycles of þe curse. go no3t out of þe cherche tyl þey be schewyd for no cause. but here hem w[yth] full[e] wyll.”^[17]

The author implicitly characterizes his audience further through the knowledge that he expects them to have and in the things he stresses in his sermons. Much of the internal evidence in this sermon cycle points to a rural audience composed of both lay and cleric, both men and women of mostly the peasant, farming class with a slight mixture of some of the landed gentry and merchant class. He addresses both men and women throughout, “þ[ou] man & wo[m]man þ[at] heryst þe woord of god w[yth] þin erys,”^[18] although his usual forms of address tend to be “sires”^[19] or “frendys.”^[20] He emphasizes tithing regulations for farmers, discussing these regulations in depth over four pages (fols. 16-17), but does not say much about the tithing regulations for merchants or others, discussing them only cursorily. He is careful to point out how the farmer’s tithes should be figured before expenses are taken out, and how they could be paid in goods such as wool, livestock, and cheese. He appears to have a good head for business and an eye for what is rightfully owed to the Church.

Another faction of this audience is clerical. On one occasion he directs his comments specifically to this portion of his audience. In Sermon 61, he relates a story of how an adder sheds its skin by scraping it off in a narrow hole to illustrate how penance can be the narrow hole through which we can shed our skins of sin. He continues:

3if þe hole wer[e] large & no3t streyt þe adder[e] schulde esely go
throw3 and no3t leve þ[er]e his elde skyn. And 3if þe hole wer[e] no3t
stable. ne stedfast. but / esy to flytte. & to bere away. þe adder[e]
schulde bere away w[yth] her[e] þe hole & her[e] elde skyn bothe. So þ[ou] þat wylt be
as fre at þi large in cloystre. as in þe werde. and in þi penau[n]ce as þ[ou] wer[e]
beforn. hauyng no syker purpose in þi penau[n]ce to forsake þi synne.^[21]

This reference to the cloister and its inhabitants is unmistakable. In Sermon 72, the preacher appeals to his mixed audience:

Beleue þis & on þis beleue ley þi ston of gode werkys. þ[at] is for to seyne. þ[ou]
clerk take þ[ou] þis holy ordre nou3t in irregularyte nou3t to be 3unge of age nou3t vnku[n]nyng.
ne in symonye. ne for fleschly lucre. ne for wordly worschepe. ne for ambycyoun ne in dedly
synne / Receyue þin ordre lawfully & in clene lyif kepe þin ordre in clenness of lyvyng. do þin
offyce as þin ordre askyth/ And 3e lay men worschepyth þe ordre of p[re]esthode loue it & obeye
þ[er]to. and lowly & deuowtly beth gou[er]nyd in soule be þe techyng & þe cou[n]seyl of ordre. /
And receyue of þis holy ord[r]e 3o[ur] sac[ra]mentys. And on þis wyse leyth 3our[e] ston of
gode werkys on 3our[e] curblys of 3o[ur] feyth in þeys sacramentys of penau[n]s & anoylyng

and of ordre.^[22]

Here he appeals to both factions to be mindful of their duties and of each other in order to work together for the spiritual betterment of the community. One such community which could conceivably support or maintain such a mixed clerical and lay audience would be a monastery or canonry connected to a cathedral where all would come for services, a community like Bury St. Edmunds where the monastery and the town were closely connected. If Carruthers is correct in his assessment of the dialect of the manuscript, Bury St. Edmunds would have been an ideal milieu conducive to the writing of such a sermon cycle. The preacher would have had access to a quality library, one which could have contained the variety of texts from which the preacher quotes, and his audience would have been similar to the one described here.

The author also utilizes a language and syntax that is simple, straightforward, direct. When he uses it, which is not often, his imagery is a common, everyday, farm variety. An unshriven soul is like an unwashed shirt; a hypocrite is like a spider in the wind; an envious man is like a hound who barks at a man for no reason; a covetous man is a fox, a contemptuous man, a porcupine; men are sheep or wolves and, my personal favorite, a flatterer is “as an hou[n]de þ[at] lyckyth an oþ[er] hou[n]d whan[n]e he metyth hym. be hynde in þe ers.”^[23] There are no poetic outbursts in his discourse; he never gets carried away during the course of his sermon, nor does he lose sight of his purpose. He has a no-nonsense approach to his subject, and he expects his audience to respond in a similar manner.

An additional concession the author makes to his audience is his use of exempla in his sermons. As Thomas Heffernan states, “The use of the exemplum was the single most important development in the success of the *ad populum* sermon of late medieval England. The English episcopacy was soon to recognize the power of the exemplum in pursuit of its goal of implementing the canons of the Lateran Council.”^[24] W. A. Pantin suggests that the use of exempla can be seen in the desire to make the instruction more attractive, more palatable for an audience with a taste for the romance. In his *Festial*, John Mirk comments on the efficacy of the exemplum for the purpose of keeping an audience’s attention, “But 3et for þat mony wyttys ben lat and heuy forto leue þat þey may not here ny se, but þay be broght yn by ensampull. For þogh þe ensampull be not most commendabull, 3et for þe more parte hit may soo lyghten his wit, þat he may þe sondyr come to beleue.”^[25] The author of *Jacob’s Well* often makes use of two exempla, one which shows the negative result of the sin or action in the theme, and one which shows the positive result of correct and acceptable behavior.

The author gives us further insights into the lives of his audience in his discussion of sloth in Sermon 16. He tells his audience that the sin of sloth will make them soft so that they will want soft clothes and to be clean and well-groomed. It will make them not to want to go barefoot or dress in wool, nor to eat hard meats, nor to go without sheets, nor to endure the cold on their hands and feet.^[26] This kind of sloth is rife in “lordys courtys,”^[27] which his audience is obviously not a part of. He also includes a pointed reference to the gentry in his discussion of pride in Sermon 12, “þe sexte corner[e] of p[ri]de. is Indignacyon þ[at] is. whan þ[ou] hast dysdeyn of symple folk & lust no3t to speke to hem. but full[e] of scorn & of iapys. in beryng þe

foule to þ[i] sogettys. & hareiously takyst on w[yth] he[m].”^[28]

According to G. R. Owst, this type of lower-class audience would have been particularly rowdy.^[29] They would not pay attention to the service, would sleep, talk, play games, or generally do whatever they pleased while the service was going on. The author gives us much evidence that this was the case. He tells them, “þ[ou] hast no3t full[e] herd & seyð dyuyne seruyse but p[ar]cellys þ[er]of . . . þ[ou] hast slepte in holy cherche in tyme of praying of dyvyn seruyse & of p[re]chynge.”^[30] He advises them that “þe feend wryteth & nou[m]bryth þi slauthe slugnes & ydelness. Idell[e] woord[ys] ianglyng & þi rownyng. in cherche. & slepyng[ys] & ydell[e] talys. and alle þi synnes. & alle þin euyll[e] dedys. for to more þi peyne in helle.”^[31] Because he knows his audience, the preacher is better able to tailor the rhetorical context of his message to a language and style that best meets his needs.

To summarize briefly then, the available evidence of the text indicates that the author of *Jacob's Well* was an educated preacher, perhaps associated with a monastery connected to a cathedral like Bury St. Edmunds, but likely working in a rural parish consisting mostly of farmers and lower-class inhabitants. His parishioners could be a rowdy bunch, and the preacher took his responsibility to educate them quite seriously. He was entirely orthodox in his views and quite conservative. At times his temperament is manifested in antifeminist statements within the sermons, but he recognized both the worldly and spiritual needs of his congregation and worked hard to meet those needs. The types of sermons that he preached were of the old style which utilized appropriate language and syntax in order to reach his audience. He reinforced the themes of his sermons with exempla to serve as illustrations.

Biographical Sketch

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^[1] Leo M. Carruthers, “Where Did *Jacob's Well* Come From? The Provenance and Dialect of MS Salisbury Cathedral 103,” *English Studies* LXXI (1990): 338.

^[2] Leo M. Carruthers, “‘Know Thyself’: Criticism, Reform and the Audience of *Jacob's Well*,” *Proceedings of International Symposia at Kalamazoo and New York*, ed. Jacqueline Hamesse et

al. (Louvain-la-Neuve: Fédération Internationale des Instituts d'Études Médiévales, 1998) 240.

[3] Carruthers, "Provenance and Dialect" 338.

[4] H. G. Richardson, "The Parish Clergy of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 3rd ser. 6 (1912): 90.

[5] See Joan Young Gregg, "The Exempla of 'Jacob's Well': A Study in the Transmission of Medieval Sermon Stories," *Traditio* 33 (1977): 359-80.

[6] Gregg 362.

[7] Fols. 21^v-22^v.

[8] Fols. 21^v-22^v.

[9] Fol. 197^r.

[10] Fol. 197^r.

[11] See Sermons 24 and 73, for example.

[12] Fol. 52^r.

[13] Fol. 201^v.

[14] Fol. 197^r.

[15] There was much antifeminist sentiment from patristic sources such as Augustine and Jerome through Thomas Aquinas, Alexander Neckham, and Walter Map to secular treatments of the theme such as Chaucer's treatment of it in "The Wife of Bath's Tale." See Ralph Hanna III and Traugott Lawler, eds., *Jankyn's Book of Wikked Wyves* (Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 1997); Katharina M. Wilson and Elizabeth M. Makowski, *Wykked Wyves and the Woes of Marriage: Misogamous Literature from Juvenal to Chaucer* (Albany: State U of New York P, 1990); and Andrée Kahn Blumstein, "The Literary Antifeminist Tradition in the Middle Ages," *Misogyny and Idealization in the Courtly Romance* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1977). For discussions of antifeminist views toward women preachers in the Middle Ages see H. Leith Spencer, *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993) 53; G. R. Owst, *Preaching in Medieval England: An Introduction to Sermon Manuscripts of the Period c. 1350-1450* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1926) 4-5.

[16] Fol. 8^r.

[17] Fol. 9^r.

[\[18\]](#) Fol. 9^r.

[\[19\]](#) Fol. 6^r.

[\[20\]](#) Fol. 7^r.

[\[21\]](#) Fol. 128^v.

[\[22\]](#) Fol. 167^r.

[\[23\]](#) Fol. 84^r.

[\[24\]](#) Thomas Heffernan, "Sermon Literature," *Middle English Prose: A Critical Guide to Major Authors and Genres*, ed. A.S.G. Edwards (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1984) 183.

[\[25\]](#) Theodor Erbe, ed., *Mirk's Festial: A Collection of Homilies, by Johannes Mirkus (John Mirk)* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1905) 166.

[\[26\]](#) See Fol. 35^f.

[\[27\]](#) Fol. 35^v.

[\[28\]](#) Fol. 26^v.

[\[29\]](#) G.R. Owst, *Preaching in Medieval England: An Introduction to Sermon Manuscripts of the Period c. 1350-1450* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1926) 169 ff.

[\[30\]](#) Fol. 35^r.

[\[31\]](#) Fol. 37^v.

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